



Wedding for My Werewolf (Fairhaven Falls #7)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: One runaway human. One frustrated werewolf sheriff. Pretending to be mates is supposed to be the easy part...

Robin never imagined she'd be on the run, but after being framed for a crime she didn't commit, her only option is to disappear. She lands in Fairhaven Falls, a quirky small town full of creatures that should terrify her—but after dealing with real-life villains, a town of monsters is almost a relief. If only she didn't keep falling into the arms of the town's huge werewolf sheriff...

Eric has had it with his pack's matchmaking schemes. They've been sending a steady stream of she-wolves to his door in an effort to tie him down, and he needs a break. The pretty little human with the frightened eyes and the most delectable scent he's ever encountered seems like the perfect solution—they'll pretend to be mates, and his pack will finally give him some breathing room.

Robin's not thrilled about cozying up to the law, especially not a bossy, protective werewolf, but when he gives her that hot, hungry look, it's easy to forget she's a fugitive. With his pack breathing down their necks and her past catching up fast, the only thing scarier than the monsters in town is the fact that their little charade is starting to feel dangerously real...

Total Pages (Source): 23

CHAPTER 1

Don't look back. Don't look back.

Robin repeated the mantra to herself over and over but it was useless. The back of her neck prickled and she whipped around, scanning the highway behind her for the tenth time in the past hour. Was that the same black pickup truck she'd seen in Asheville when she boarded the bus?

Before she could decide, the pickup truck took the exit ramp, but her heart still wouldn't slow its frantic pace. She pressed her forehead against the cool glass of the bus window, her breath fogging the pane in irregular patterns as she tried to bring it back under control.

An elderly woman three rows ahead laughed at something her husband whispered. The sound made her flinch, and she ducked lower in her seat, even though the couple hadn't glanced her way once during the entire trip.

Taking a deep breath, she hugged her worn backpack closer to her chest. Everything she owned now fit in this one bag. A few changes of clothes. A toothbrush. Some cash. Her old life stripped down to the bare essentials.

The bus left the highway and lurched around a sharp bend, giving glimpses of the valley below through the snow-covered pines. Mist clung to the mountainsides like ghostly fingers. She pulled her worn jacket tighter, though the bus's heating worked fine.

“Next stop, Fairhaven Falls,” the driver announced through crackling speakers. “Twenty-five minutes.”

She stuck her fingers in her pocket, checking once again that the printout for her appointment was still there. An appointment made through an anonymous email account for a job advertised online. Over the past six months she’d learned more about how to stay hidden.

Perhaps this time it would work. Perhaps Fairhaven Falls would be a chance to stop running, at least for a little while. If she’d been successful. If he didn’t find her this time.

A blast of music from across the aisle made her jump again. The teenage boy sitting there pulled his headphones back into place, giving her a sheepish smile. A perfectly normal teenager—except for his pale blue skin and the pointed ears beneath the headphones. An Other—one of the creatures of myth and legend who shared the world with humans. She knew about them, of course, but they tended to prefer rural areas and she’d always been a city girl. Until now anyway.

Fairhaven Falls was one of their towns, but she’d decided that a town full of monsters was better than monsters hidden in human form. And the elderly couple looked normal enough. Even the big man dozing at the front of the bus was probably human, despite his size.

It’s going to be fine , she told herself, but she still couldn’t prevent herself from taking another glance back over her shoulder.

The bus finally wheezed to a stop in front of a weathered wooden sign reading “Welcome to Fairhaven Falls.”

Keeping her backpack clutched to her chest, she waited for the other passengers to

file out first. Through the grimy window, snow-covered mountains rose into a crystal blue sky, framing the town like protective giants.

Her boots threatened to slip on the icy slush as she stepped onto the sidewalk, but she caught her balance, casting a nervous look around.

“There you are, dear! I’ve been waiting ages.”

A tiny old woman wearing a hot pink tracksuit bustled towards her, and she backed away

“I think you have the wrong?—”

“Nonsense.” The old woman grinned up at her, revealing disturbingly sharp teeth. “I’m Flora, and you’re exactly who I’m looking for. Come along now, you must be exhausted.”

“But I didn’t?—”

“The inn’s just around the corner. Best beds in town, if I do say so myself.” Flora linked arms with her, her grip surprisingly strong for someone who barely reached Robin’s shoulder. “And don’t worry about a thing, dear. You’re safe here.”

If only that were true. Her throat tightened. “How did you?—”

“Know?” Flora patted her arm. “Let’s just say I have a knack for these things. Now, come along.”

Her instincts told her to run, but something in Flora’s sparkling black eyes made her pause. The old woman radiated warmth and understanding, and that elusive promise of safety. Unexpected tears pricked her eyes and she shook her head.

“I really shouldn’t?—”

“Nonsense.” Flora started steering her across a wide street lined with old-fashioned storefronts that led down to a frozen river. “In Fairhaven Falls, we take care of our own. And you’re one of ours now, whether you like it or not.”

The words should have sounded ominous, but instead they felt oddly comforting. She’d never had a place where she belonged.

They continued along a street lined with old houses and huge ancient trees. Flora chatted merrily about the inhabitants of each house but Robin barely heard her, still dazed by the sudden turn of events. It wasn’t until she realized they were walking up a long driveway towards a huge white house with a sign that said Fairhaven Falls Inn that she balked.

“I... I can’t afford to stay here.”

“Nonsense.” Flora didn’t release her arm, still guiding her inexorably towards the wide front porch. “I have a room set aside for special visitors.”

“But—”

“The only other option is the motel back down the highway. Three miles, with night coming on.” Flora peered up at her. “Is that what you want?”

A highway motel compared to this grand old house, the windows already glowing gold against the evening shadows?

She managed to shake her head and Flora grinned again then swept her through the heavy wooden doors into a warm lobby filled with overstuffed armchairs and the scent of cinnamon. Behind a polished counter, a pretty woman bounced a chubby

baby on her hip. The baby's skin was pale blue beneath a tiny, adorable tuft of bright green hair tied with a white bow.

"Alison, dear, our new guest is here." Flora finally released her arm.

"Welcome!" Alison's smile lit up her face. She adjusted the baby, who grabbed at her long dark blonde hair. "Will, honey, can you take Emma?"

A massive figure emerged from a back room—a huge troll with blue skin and a shock of green hair. He gave her a friendly grin as he gently gathered the baby in his enormous hands.

"Welcome to Fairhaven Falls."

She managed to return the smile before casting a despairing glance around. Despite the warmth of her surroundings, the inn was far too luxurious for her limited budget.

"I'm really not sure?—"

"Don't even think about arguing with Flora," Alison interrupted. "None of us ever win that battle."

"That's because I'm always right," Flora said complacently. "Now show our girl to the blue room. The one with the mountain view."

"But—"

"Now, stop your fussing." Sharp black eyes focused on her face. "We all need a little help sometimes. And besides, it's only for one night, isn't it? You'll have another alternative tomorrow."

“If I get the job—” Her mouth dropped open. “Wait a minute. How did you know?”

But Flora was already gone. Alison gave her a sympathetic look as she grabbed a key and came around the counter.

“Don’t worry about it. Flora is a law unto herself.”

“But she’s right. I have an interview for a live-in position tomorrow. How did she know?”

The other woman laughed as she began leading her upstairs.

“That is the million dollar question. All I can say is that she knows things. She also loves to meddle, but her heart is in the right place. She’s the reason Will and I are together.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes. She loves matchmaking.” Alison opened the door to a pretty room with a polished wood floor and an embroidered blue quilt on the bed. Tall windows looked out at the mountains, still visible against the evening sky. “I hope you like the room.”

“It’s beautiful.” A lump caught in her throat as she ran her hand over the silky fabric of the quilt, and she had to fight back tears again. “But are you sure I should be here? If she’s interested in matchmaking, I’m the last person she should pick. I’m not looking for a man.”

Alison laughed.

“Neither was I.” Something in her expression must have given her away because Alison put a sympathetic hand on her arm. “You’ll be fine.”

She managed to nod, and the other woman pressed the key into her palm.

“Bathroom’s through there, extra blankets in the chest. If you need anything, just dial one. Why don’t you get some rest? You look like you need it.”

Still stunned by the rapid turn of events, she sank onto the bed after Alison left and leaned back against the pillows. Both the pillows and the mattress were deliciously soft and comfortable, and exhaustion crashed over her like a wave. She meant to only close her eyes for a moment, but the soft ticking of an old clock and distant murmur of voices downstairs lulled her into the deepest sleep she’d had in weeks.

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CHAPTER 2

Robin jolted awake, her heart racing. For a moment she couldn't remember where she was but then it all came crashing back—the bus ride, Flora, the inn. She must have crawled under the covers at some point during the night because she was tucked beneath the pretty blue quilt. How long had she slept?

Pushing herself upright, she decided it must still be early. Pale dawn light filtered through frost-covered windows, and the inn was silent around her. She hunted out her phone—the cheapest prepaid unit she could find—and peered at the time. 7:27 AM. Her interview wasn't until nine, but now that she was awake, she couldn't stay still.

She took a quick shower in the quietly luxurious bathroom, then dressed in her nicest remaining clothes – dark jeans and a cream sweater she'd managed to keep unwrinkled. She pulled her hair back into a neat braid, then peered at herself in the mirror. She looked pale and haunted, but presentable. It would have to do.

The inn's lobby sat empty and quiet. A note on the counter announced breakfast started at eight, but there was a coffee urn and a basket of muffins on a cloth covered table. She hesitated, still feeling guilty about taking advantage of Flora's kindness, but couldn't resist the delicious aroma of the coffee. The warmth of the coffee seemed to seep into her bones, giving her courage as she pulled on her coat and slipped out the front door.

The icy mountain air bit at her cheeks as she wandered down Main Street, admiring the variety of buildings from converted bungalows to a row of brick-fronted stores.

Fairhaven Falls was waking up. Shop owners flipped signs from “Closed” to “Open.” The aroma of fresh bread wafted from a bakery. Her shoulders relaxed as she took in the peaceful scene.

The street ended at the river, with a large town square to one side. A market was taking place in the square, stalls being set up for the day. She weaved between vendors arranging their wares, enjoying the variety of goods—from fresh produce to hand-crafted items. Then her sleeve caught on the edge of a table, sending a basket of apples tumbling.

“My merchandise!” A screech pierced the air, and she turned to find a harpy looming over her, wings spread wide. “Clumsy human, those are enchanted apples!”

She flinched as she realized how many people were looking at them and quickly ducked down to pick up the golden apples.

“I’m so sorry?—”

Her fingers trembled as she gathered the apples, checking each for bruises as she placed them back in the basket. The harpy’s talons clicked against the cobblestones.

“If you’ve damaged even one?—”

The harpy snatched the basket Robin handed her, examining each apple with sharp eyes. Her wings mantled, blocking out more of the early sunlight.

“That’s enough.” A deep voice cut through the harpy’s tirade.

She turned to find a tall man approaching, a distinctive presence even in the busy crowd. No, not a man. He had a rugged, handsome face, but his eyes glowed with an otherworldly golden hue and there was a hint of fangs showing when he spoke.

Werewolf.

Those golden eyes focused on her and she had to remind herself to breathe.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes.” She managed a shaky smile, trying not to stare at the claws extending from his fingertips. “It was my fault. I wasn’t watching what I was doing.”

“Clumsy human!” the harpy hissed, and the werewolf growled, a deep, inhuman sound that rumbled through the air.

“I said that’s enough. There are children watching. Unless you want a formal reprimand from the Council, you’ll apologize and leave the lady alone.”

“But Sheriff Grayson. This human?—”

“Was clearly trying to help.” His tone left no room for argument. “The market’s barely open, Clara. Let’s not start the day like this.”

“But—”

“Apologize.”

The word hung in the air, an unspoken threat underlying the soft tone.

“I apologize,” Clara said grudgingly and she managed a nod, not trusting her voice.

The harpy huffed but retreated behind her stall. The sheriff turned to Robin, and she fought the urge to step back. The last thing she needed was any attention from an officer of the law, especially since everything about him screamed danger – from his

broad shoulders to the predatory way he moved.

“I apologize for Clara. She’s protective of her produce.” His voice softened, but those wolf eyes remained sharp. “I don’t recognize you. New to Fairhaven Falls?”

Her throat tightened. The question seemed innocuous enough, but she couldn’t take any chances.

“Just passing through.”

As soon as she said it, she realized it was stupid to lie—if she got the job she’d be living here. She’d just have to avoid him.

He tilted his head slightly, studying her, and she wondered if he could hear her rapid heartbeat. Werewolves were supposed to have enhanced senses.

“Well, welcome to town.” He didn’t push, but something in his expression told her he caught the lie. “I’m Eric Grayson.”

“Robin.” She offered nothing more, already backing away. “Thanks for the help.”

She turned and walked away, keeping her pace steady despite the urge to run. She could feel him watching her, raising the tiny hairs at the back of her neck. Her cheeks burned, and she couldn’t tell if it was from embarrassment over the incident or something else entirely.

The rational part of her mind screamed to be wary of a werewolf sheriff who could expose her. But there was something in those golden eyes beyond authority – a hint of warmth. And that, more than anything else, left her unsettled.

Too unsettled to return to the inn, she decided, and pulled out the information about

her appointment. Based on the directions Mr. Stonehaven had given her, the house wasn't too far away and she made her way down along the river in that direction. This close to the river, she could see that it wasn't entirely frozen. A strip of open water ran down the middle and something suddenly broke the surface. She blinked. Was that a tentacle?

She tugged her coat closer and hurriedly turned up the next street. The directions led her to a set of enormous wrought iron gates. Beyond them loomed a Victorian mansion, its weathered stone a testament to decades of harsh mountain winters. Turrets pierced the morning sky, and carved stone creatures peered down from every corner. Not spooky at all.

There was a keypad next to the gates, but they creaked open at her touch. She shivered but followed the winding path through an overgrown garden, fresh snow crunching beneath her feet. Up close, the mansion's grandeur carried an air of neglect – paint peeling from shutters, ivy claiming entire walls.

The heavy brass door knocker fell with a thunderous clap, and then the door swung open to reveal a figure that made her breath catch. Grey, stone-like skin. Wings folded against broad shoulders. Sharp features that could have been carved from granite. A gargoyle.

“Ms. Halloway.” His voice rumbled like distant thunder. “You're early.”

“I hope that's all right. I prefer to be punctual.”

Thankfully, her voice came out remarkably composed.

“A rare quality these days. I'm Garrick Stonehaven. Come in. “

The foyer dwarfed her, the ceiling stretching up three stories. Dust motes danced in

shafts of morning light.

“You can see why I need a housekeeper,” he said dryly. “The place has been neglected while I was away.”

She made a noncommittal noise as he led her to a study where books lined every wall. He sat down behind an enormous desk and gestured her to the chair in front of it. She perched on the edge of the chair, doing her best to keep her face calm.

“Your resume is...” He glanced at the paper. “Sparse.”

Her hands clenched in her lap. “I’ve been moving around a lot, but I’m a hard worker and I’ll do a good job.”

“I see. And you’re new in town?”

She managed a nod as penetrating dark eyes studied her face. “And before that?”

“I’d rather not discuss it.”

A long pause. Then, unexpectedly, a dry chuckle. “Refreshingly honest. Most people would invent a story.”

He set the resume aside. “The position is live-in. The hours may vary from day to day, but I’ll pay you overtime if you work for more than eight hours. One afternoon off a week, and most weekends, although I may occasionally need you then. The west wing needs attention first – it’s been closed off for years.”

She blinked. “You’re offering me the job?”

“Unless you’d rather not discuss it.” His stone features cracked into what might have

been a smile.

“When can I start?”

“Today if you’d like.” He rose, wings shifting. “Let me show you your quarters. You can move in this morning and start work after lunch. How does that sound?”

“Perfect.”

A job and a place to stay, all in one morning. Perhaps luck was finally on her side.

CHAPTER 3

E ric began his morning rounds, nodding to the vendors setting up their stalls in the town square. Fairhaven Falls was a quiet town, but he liked to make sure people saw him if they needed help or just wanted to chat. The cold morning air carried a mix of scents—coffee from the coffee shop, wood smoke from chimneys, and the distinct signatures of Others and humans alike.

He chose a path that took him past Garrick’s mansion, not allowing himself to think too much about why he’d decided on that path. A scent caught his attention as he passed—vanilla and sunshine with an undercurrent of fear. Robin. One encounter and her scent had branded itself on his memory, along with the image of big amber eyes in a pale face.

His wolf stirred, pressing against his skin, urging him closer. Her scent was still strong, and he decided she must have gotten the job. Why had she lied about just passing through? Didn’t she realize that everyone in a small town knew everyone else’s business? They were all aware that Garrick had returned to town and was looking for a housekeeper.

“Morning, Sheriff.” Mrs. Chen waved from her herb shop. “Everything quiet?”

“As it should be.”

He nodded and forced himself to keep walking, though his wolf wanted to circle back, to make sure Robin was settling in safely.

He shook his head. Humans came and went in Fairhaven Falls. Some stayed, drawing comfort from the town's acceptance, while others couldn't handle the sight of trolls shopping for groceries or harpies haggling over produce prices. Robin would make her choice, same as the rest.

But something about her had set his instincts on edge the day before. The way she'd startled at his presence in the square, how those big amber eyes had darted around like prey searching for escape routes. Not the usual wariness humans showed around Others—this ran deeper.

A growl rumbled in his chest. His wolf didn't like the thought of her being afraid, didn't like not knowing what had chased her to their town.

"Keep it professional," he muttered to himself. The last thing she needed was the local sheriff hovering around, especially when his presence clearly unsettled her.

Still, as he continued his patrol, his senses remained tuned to that corner of town, tracking the subtle movements of life around the old mansion. Just to maintain order, he told himself. Nothing more.

His steps slowed as he passed a flower stall, a riot of reds and purples against the white snow. A bouquet of blood red roses caught his eye, and an image flashed through his mind of their deep hue against the cream of Robin's skin.

"You planning to buy those or just stare at them?" The stall owner glared at him, one gnarled hand tucked inside her apron pocket, and he gave her an apologetic smile.

"Just looking. You always have the most beautiful flowers, Esmeralda."

"Too charming for your own good," the dryad muttered, but she pulled one of the roses free and handed it to him.

He thanked her and tucked it inside his uniform jacket as he made his way over to the cafe at the end of Main Street. Rona waved him to a seat at the counter, filling his coffee cup before hurrying off again. She returned a short time later with a large plate of steak and eggs, and he grinned at her.

“Just what I wanted.”

“I know.” She returned the smile and he shook his head.

“You’re always looking after me, Rona. What would I do without you?”

“Starve, probably.”

He snorted and dug into his food, aware of Rona watching him.

“Anything on your mind?”

“As a matter of fact...” She tugged at the apron covering her classic pink diner uniform, and he waited patiently. Rona had never been shy.

“There’s a new girl in town. She just got the job at the mansion.”

“I’m aware.”

“Are you?”

Something in her voice made him lower his fork. “Is there a problem?”

“No. Yes.” She sighed and pushed a stray strand of blue hair out of her face. “I don’t know. There’s something about her. Something...”

“Something what?”

“Something... sad. Maybe lonely.” She shrugged. “She reminds me of a lost little bird.”

“A little bird.” His tone was skeptical, and Rona swatted at his arm.

“Oh, stop. It’s my feminine intuition.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Rona, you’re a siren.”

“Feminine intuition works on any species.” She sniffed.

“Uh huh.”

“Don’t laugh at me, Eric Grayson.”

“Me?” he asked, wide-eyed.

“I don’t know—I just think she needs help.”

His wolf immediately agreed, but he simply nodded.

“I’ll keep an eye out.”

She smiled at him and raced off again. He demolished his breakfast, then lingered over his coffee, scanning the morning paper while keeping an ear tuned to the steady rhythm of the town. The usual breakfast crowd filtered in and out—trolls ducking under the doorframe, pixies zipping between tables, humans chatting over pancakes. John, one of the yetis who lived in the peaks outside of town, lounged on the patio by the river, enjoying the sunshine.

The bell chimed as the door opened and Robin's scent drifted in from outside. His head snapped up in time to see her wrestling with an armload of grocery bags as she wove between patches of ice on the sidewalk. Paper bags stretched at their seams, threatening to split. Her auburn hair had escaped its neat braid, stray wisps catching fire in the sunlight as she tried to balance her load.

The bottom bag gave out. Oranges and apples scattered across the snow-dusted concrete.

He was out the door before his wolf could finish its urgent press against his skin.

"Here, let me help with those." He crouched down next to her, gathering the runaway fruit before it could roll into the street.

She tensed at his voice, her fingers tightening on the remaining bags. That flash of wariness in her eyes made his chest ache.

"Sheriff Grayson," she said cautiously.

"Eric," he corrected, and she gave him a tentative smile.

"Thank you, Eric."

His name had never sounded so sweet, and he had to force his hands to remain steady as he gathered the escaped fruit into the remains of the bag. Then he gestured at the remaining bags.

"Let me carry those for you."

"But—"

“I insist. Those bags won’t make it halfway to Garrick’s place.”

Her pulse jumped—he caught the flutter at her throat. She took a half-step back, amber eyes darting to the street behind him.

“How did you know where I?—”

“Small town.” He kept his voice level, matter-of-fact. “Word travels fast.”

She wavered, shifting the remaining bags. One handle stretched dangerously thin.

“Look, I’ll walk ten paces behind if it makes you more comfortable. But these groceries aren’t going to carry themselves.”

A ghost of a smile touched her lips. “Five paces.”

“Deal.” He gathered the grocery bags into his arms, supporting their weight to stop the paper from tearing. “Lead the way.”

They walked in silence up the winding road, snow crunching under their boots. He wanted to ask what had happened to make her so skittish, who had hurt her badly enough to put that haunted look in her eyes. Instead, he redistributed the groceries between his arms and followed her, staying exactly five paces behind. His wolf bristled at the distance, but he ignored it. And there were some compensations for his position, he thought, admiring the swing of her pretty little ass and the soft sway of her braid.

They reached Garrick’s iron gates. Robin punched in a code, and the gates swung open with a groan. He followed her to the porch, then she hesitated and gave him an uncertain look.

“Would you mind bringing those inside and putting them on the counter?”

“No problem.”

He followed her into the huge, old-fashioned kitchen, his boots echoing on the tile floor. The room was spotless, the marble counters gleaming in the sunlight and the brass on the big range polished to a shine. He put the bags down on the old wooden island and she immediately began unloading the groceries, shooting a look at him from under her lashes.

“Thank you for your help. You didn’t have to.”

“It was my pleasure. Let me know if you need anything.”

His wolf whined, urging him to stay, but the scent of her anxiety lingered in the air. He forced himself to give her a casual nod, but as she turned away, he removed the rose from under his jacket and tucked it in with the groceries.

Halfway down the corridor, he ran into Garrick. The gargoyle looked at him and shook his head, a smile twisting his lips.

“Well, well, well. I heard you were the new sheriff but I didn’t quite believe it. Whatever happened to the old Eric? The one who ran wild every night?”

He shifted uncomfortably, but he couldn’t deny it. He and Garrick had been good friends before the other male left town, and he’d been with them on more than one of those nights.

“He grew up after you left.”

Dark eyes studied his face. “Is that what the Pack thinks?”

“No. They haven’t changed.”

Garrick nodded, but didn’t press the subject. Instead his gaze traveled past Eric to the closed kitchen door.

“What do you think of my new housekeeper?”

His wolf growled at the possessive pronoun but he managed to keep it silent.

“She seems nice.”

“Hmm. She’s also jumpy as a rabbit.” The gargoyle’s stone features were hard to read, but Eric caught the slight narrowing of his eyes.

“How’s she working out?”

“Better than I expected.” Garrick crossed his arms, granite skin catching the light. “She’s already made a difference. The kitchen hasn’t been that clean in decades. I even found her reorganizing the library at dawn this morning.”

“Dawn?”

“Mmm. Said she couldn’t sleep.” The other male’s wings shifted, a tell he recognized from their years of friendship. “Strange hours for a human.”

“You think there’s more to her story.”

“Don’t you?” Stone lips quirked. “But she works hard and stays busy. That’s enough for me.”

He tamped down a growl. Trust Garrick to play guardian to another stray. Still, better

the gargoyle than someone less... honorable.

“Just keep an eye on her.” He turned to leave, then paused. “And Garrick? Thanks for giving her a chance.”

The gargoyle’s rumbling laugh followed him down the path. “Careful, Sheriff. Your soft spot is showing.”

As he headed back to his office he considered Robin’s reaction to him. Most humans were wary of werewolves, true. But her fear ran deeper than that instinctive uneasiness. Her scent carried too many layers of old terror, like wounds that hadn’t quite healed.

The question was whether those wounds were simply the product of human prejudice, or if she had real reasons to hide.

He was still wondering when he made his last patrol of the day, the last rays of sunlight painting the river in shades of amber and gold. His wolf caught her scent before he saw her—that sweet vanilla scent mixed with something distinctly her.

She stood at the river’s edge, arms wrapped around herself, staring at the strip of open water between the sheets of ice. The evening breeze played with loose strands of her auburn hair, and he found himself tracking the movement.

He cleared his throat and kept his steps loud enough to announce his presence. “Evening.”

She startled anyway, her hand flying to her chest as she spun round to face him.

“Sheriff.”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to interrupt.” He stayed back, giving her space. The fear in her scent lessened, but didn’t disappear entirely.

“Just... thinking.” Her eyes darted to the path behind him, checking her escape route.

“River’s peaceful this time of day.” He gestured to the water. “I used to come here myself when I needed to clear my head.”

“Used to?”

“Being sheriff doesn’t leave much time for quiet moments.”

The admission slipped out before he could stop it, and a ghost of a smile touched her lips. “Sounds lonely.”

The observation hit closer to home than he liked. His wolf pushed forward, drawn to the unexpected flash of empathy in those amber eyes.

“How are you settling in at Garrick’s?”

“Fine.” The walls slammed back up. “He’s been... kind.”

He nodded, noting how she angled her body away from him. Everything about her screamed of someone used to running. But running from what?

“If you need anything...” He left the offer hanging.

“I don’t.” The words came too quick, too sharp. She took a breath, softened her tone.

“But thank you. And... thank you for the rose.”

“You’re welcome.”

The setting sun cast shadows across her face, highlighting the wariness in her features. His wolf whined, wanting to ease that tension from her shoulders, but he knew better than to push. He bid her goodnight and went on his way.

But he couldn't stay away. Instead he found himself circling Garrick's property for the third time that night. The mansion's weathered stone walls loomed against the star-filled sky, and a warm light glowed from Robin's second-floor window.

His wolf paced beneath his skin, refusing to let him return home. The protective instinct made no sense—she wasn't Pack, wasn't even a friend. Just a stranger who flinched at sudden movements and carried secrets in her wary eyes.

But he couldn't shake the way her scent changed when she'd mentioned Garrick's kindness. That flash of genuine warmth, quickly buried under layers of careful control. It wasn't the typical human reaction to Others that made her guard herself. This went deeper.

Her shadow passed back and forth across her window, pacing. She paused at the glass, and for a moment he thought she'd spotted him in the darkness. His heart kicked against his ribs, but she turned away, the light clicking off seconds later.

He exhaled and leaned against a nearby oak tree. What was he doing out here, like some lovesick Romeo? He had responsibilities, a town to protect. He couldn't afford to fixate on one mysterious woman, no matter how much his wolf wanted to unravel her mysteries.

But as he pushed off the tree to head home, his instincts screamed that there was more to Robin's story than simple wariness. Whatever she was running from, whatever shadows dogged her steps, they'd followed her to his town. His territory.

He cast one final look at her darkened window. Whether she wanted his protection or

not, he'd make damn sure nothing threatened her here in Fairhaven Falls.

CHAPTER 4

Robin curled up in the window seat of her new room, wrapping herself in a thick wool blanket. Outside, darkness crept across Fairhaven Falls, the town's lights twinkling like fallen stars beneath a fresh blanket of snow. The peaceful scene should have soothed her, but her mind refused to quiet.

Martin's face flashed through her thoughts—his charming smile, the way his blue eyes crinkled at the corners when he laughed. He'd always seemed so trustworthy, but he must have identified her naivety from the start. The betrayal burned fresh in her chest, making her fingers dig into the blanket.

She pressed her forehead against the cool glass. Below, a shadow moved past Garrick's front lawn—probably Eric on another patrol. Her chest tightened. The sheriff's protective nature reminded her too much of how Martin had been at first, always showing up exactly when she needed help.

"Stop it," she whispered to herself, pulling away from the window, and walking restlessly over to the rose in the vase by her bed. "Not everyone is like him."

But the memories wouldn't leave. He'd seemed so kind, but all the time he'd been using her to cover his illegal activities, setting her up to take the blame.

A knock at her door made her jump, bringing her back from the past.

"Tea?" Garrick's deep voice carried through the wood. "I made a pot and thought you might want some."

She wiped her eyes, surprised to find them damp. “Come in.”

The gargoyle ducked through the doorway, a steaming mug in his massive hand. He set it on the table by the window without comment, but his stone features softened at the sight of her tear-stained face.

“Bad memories make poor company,” he said. “I find tea helps.”

The simple kindness in his gesture cracked something in her chest. She nodded, not trusting her voice, and he turned to leave, his wings folding tight against his back.

“Whatever brought you here—you’re safe now.”

The door clicked shut behind him. She wrapped her hands around the warm mug, breathing in the calming scent of chamomile. Safe. She wanted so badly to believe that.

The tea helped calm her nerves, but sleep remained elusive and she found herself pacing. What if that man found her once again? What if he dragged her back and turned her over to the police? The what-ifs piled up like the snow outside her window.

A soft scratch against the glass made her freeze. Her heart thundered in her chest as she tiptoed over to the window. Just a branch, she decided, watching the trees sway outside. The moon hung low and full, bathing the grounds in silver light. At first, she saw nothing but snow-laden trees and darkness, but then she spotted two golden eyes in the darkness beneath the trees. They gleamed with an otherworldly intelligence, watching, guarding.

Eric.

She wasn't sure how she knew but she was certain of it. The sheriff. The protector of Fairhaven Falls. And somehow, for some reason, the protector of her. Her shoulders relaxed, tension draining away as she met that steady gaze through the glass.

His presence should have scared her. After all, wolves hunted rabbits, didn't they? Instead, his silent watchfulness calmed her fears. She returned to her bed, the scent of tea and roses lingering in the air, and pulled the covers up to her chin. The memory of those golden eyes followed her into sleep, a silent promise of safety in the dark.

A week later, Robin pushed open the inn's heavy oak door, the scent of fresh-baked cookies swirling around her as Alison looked up from behind the counter.

"Robin! Come in, come in. I just pulled snickerdoodles from the oven."

"I hope I'm not interrupting," she said nervously as she followed the other woman into a cozy kitchen that opened onto a plant-filled conservatory.

"Please. You're saving me from alphabetizing guest records." Alison placed a plate of cookies on the worn kitchen table. "How's life at the gargoyle's nest?"

"Quiet. But it's good. I like seeing that I'm making a difference. And Garrick is very kind. He paid me this morning." In cash, even though she hadn't gathered up the courage to ask yet. "So I thought I'd come by and pay for the night I stayed here."

Alison immediately shook her head.

"Nonsense. Flora would never forgive me."

"Are you sure?" she asked, still hovering at the door of the kitchen.

"I'm positive. Now come and sit down. I'd love to know what you think of Fairhaven

Falls.”

She hesitated, but the other woman’s smile was so friendly that she couldn’t resist. How long had it been since she’d had a simple, friendly conversation with another person?

“Well, it’s certainly different. I saw a yeti snowboarding down Main Street yesterday.”

“That was probably John.” Alison laughed. “I admit that the town is different, but you’ll get used to it.”

“Maybe.” She concentrated on the cookie Alison handed her, avoiding the other woman’s eyes. “Though the sheriff seems to pop up everywhere I go.”

“Eric?” Alison’s eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

The kitchen door swung open and Flora bustled in wearing a lime-green tracksuit with a silver spaceship over the words, Let’s Go Probing .

“Did someone mention our delicious sheriff? I do like a man with big?—”

“Flora!”

“Shoulders,” Flora continued innocently. “He does seem to have taken a shine to you, dear.”

Her cheeks heated. “It’s not like that. He just... happens to be around.”

“Happens to be around?” Flora raised an eyebrow. “Honey, that wolf doesn’t ‘happen’ to do anything. He’s the most responsible member of this town. If you’ve

caught his attention, it's because he's chosen to keep an eye on you."

"But why?" The question slipped out before she could help herself, and Flora patted her arm.

"You'll have to ask him that yourself, dear. But it never hurts to have a wolf on your side."

If he were on her side.

"Of course he is." Flora answered her unspoken thought, then gave her an innocent look. "Trust me, dear."

Before she could think of a response, the back door opened and a tall, pretty troll entered with a baby on her shoulder.

"Your daughter's hungry," she announced. "And my babysitting skills don't extend that far."

Alison jumped up to take the baby and the troll looked over at her.

"Hi. I'm Nichola. You must be Eric's new obsession."

"Nichola," Alison chided as she unbuttoned her blouse, but Nichola ignored her, studying Robin with an intensity that brought the heat rushing to her cheeks again.

"I'm Robin." She managed a smile, despite the fluttering in her stomach. "I'm not his obsession."

"Really? Then why does he spend all his free time patrolling the same four blocks? And he hasn't been at the bar for drinks since you showed up."

“Really?” The question popped out before she could prevent it, and Nichola laughed.

“I can see we’re going to have to have a girls’ night very soon.”

Alison groaned and shook her head.

“Don’t do it! Don’t give her any ideas.”

“Too late. You and the sheriff, Robin. That’s definitely a story I need to hear.”

Nichola grinned, teeth flashing white against her pale blue skin, then sauntered out of the kitchen, leaving Robin staring after her.

“There’s nothing to tell,” she said desperately, turning to Flora but the old woman had disappeared.

She looked over at Alison and the other woman smiled at her.

“I told you this town takes some getting used to, but honestly everyone means well. But if you do go drinking with Nichola, make sure to tell her the drinks need to be a tenth as strong as her. Trust me—I learned that lesson.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

Alison studied her thoughtfully, then nodded.

“No pressure. But I hope you’ll at least come back and visit me again. We can have tea and watch the snow fall. And if you feel like talking, I’m a good listener. And a good friend.”

“Thank you.”

A lump caught in her throat. Part of her wanted to open up, wanted to tell someone, anyone, what had happened. But she didn't want anyone else involved in her mess. So she hugged Alison and made her way back down the street, her footsteps muffled by a fresh fall of snow.

The conversation at the inn left her unsettled. Eric wasn't interested in her, not the way the women had made it sound.

A burst of laughter drew her attention to the bakery. Eric was standing outside talking to several people, and she couldn't help watching him. He was just so big and tall and strong. His presence commanded attention, and even from across the street, his deep voice carried over the general chatter. Then his head turned, golden eyes meeting hers across the street. Her breath caught and a jolt of heat ran through her.

He took a step towards her and then a small boy with unruly green curls darted through the crowd and crashed into Eric's knees. Instead of the frown she half-expected, the sheriff smiled and dropped into a crouch, golden eyes softening as he met the child at eye level.

"Hey there, trouble." The warmth in his voice caught her off guard.

The boy launched into an excited story, hands waving, and Eric grinned at him, revealing dimples she hadn't noticed before. It was like glimpsing behind a curtain, seeing past the badge and uniform to someone more... human. Or rather, more wolf, she supposed.

The thought had barely formed when he looked over at her again, his eyes still soft and warm. Heat flooded her cheeks. She ducked her head and hurried away, not sure why the sight of him being kind to a child affected her so much, or why her heart refused to slow its rapid beating.

She slipped into the market to pick up something for dinner, determined to forget about one confusing werewolf. She'd just bought some homemade pasta from a charming brownie when something caught her attention at the edge of the crowd—broad shoulders wrapped in worn leather, military-straight posture, and that distinctive swagger. Rick Thatcher. Martin's henchman and the same man who'd tracked her through three states.

How the hell had he found her this time? The paper bag of groceries slipped from her grip as she ducked behind the stall, her heart racing. She took a deep breath and peeked around the edge of the stall.

Rick was standing at the edge of the marketplace, pretending to examine a vendor's wares while he scanned the crowd. He looked exactly as she remembered—the scar above his left eyebrow, a scruff of beard, the way his right hand never strayed far from his concealed holster.

Blood rushed in her ears. The mountains that had seemed so protective now felt like prison walls. The bus wouldn't run again until Monday. The hiking trails were closed for the season. Her meager savings wouldn't cover a taxi to the next town.

She was trapped.

The irony of it twisted in her stomach. She'd finally found somewhere that felt safe, somewhere she could breathe. And now...

Her fingers trembled as she pulled her hair loose, letting it fall around her face before she ducked across the street and into the alley that ran behind the row of shops on the far side of Main Street. At every moment she expected to feel a hand on her shoulder but she made it all the way back to Garrick's without anyone stopping her. She breathed a sigh of relief as the iron gates closed behind her.

Now what?

She took refuge in the familiar, scrubbing the kitchen until it was spotless, then turning to the copper pots hanging over the stove. The rhythmic motion failed to calm her racing thoughts. Rick was here. In Fairhaven Falls. Her safe haven had crumbled in an instant.

The copper pot slipped from her grip, clanging against the floor, and she flinched.

“Something troubling you?” Garrick’s deep voice made her jump, and she looked up to find him in the doorway, his stone features unreadable.

“No, just clumsy today.” She forced a smile, returning to her furious cleaning. The lie tasted bitter on her tongue. “These pots needed a good polish.”

Garrick’s wings rustled, a sound she’d learned meant he didn’t believe her. But before he could press further, footsteps echoed from the foyer.

“Garrick?”

Eric’s deep voice carried through the house, and this time the cleaning cloth dropped from her nerveless fingers. Not now. Not when she could barely hold herself together.

He appeared in the kitchen doorway, filling the space with his presence. Golden eyes locked onto her, and she felt exposed, transparent. Like he could see right through her carefully constructed walls to the terror beneath.

“Sheriff.” She ducked her head and pushed the pots aside. “I’ll leave you two to talk.”

“You don’t have to—” he started.

“Town matters, I’m sure.” She cut him off, already backing toward the door. “I need to finish upstairs anyway.”

She fled before either of them could respond, hurrying up the stairs. In the safety of her room, she pressed her forehead against the window, trying to steady her breathing. Had he sensed her fear? Did he suspect?

She couldn’t risk finding out. Couldn’t risk anyone else getting caught in the crossfire of her mistakes. She had to get out of town.

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CHAPTER 5

Eric trudged up the path to his cabin, still thinking about Robin's panicked expression earlier. Something had spooked her—more than just his presence. His wolf paced restlessly beneath his skin, urging him to track down whatever threatened her.

A heavy perfume hit his nose before he reached the porch, and he sighed.

Lila lounged in one of his rocking chairs, long bare legs propped up on the porch railing. She was the highest-ranked female in the Pack and the most persistent of his admirers. Despite the weather, her coat was open to reveal a skin tight red dress. Objectively, she was a beautiful female, but absolutely nothing about her appealed to him.

"There you are," she purred. "I was starting to think you were avoiding me."

"It's late, Lila." He stepped past her to unlock the door. "Go home."

She came up behind him and pressed herself against his back, her fingers sliding around to his stomach.

"Don't be like that. When you become Alpha, you'll need a strong alpha female, and we both know I'd be perfect for the role."

Eric shrugged her off and pushed open the door. "Not interested. In either."

“Is it because of that human girl?” she snapped. “The one staying with Garrick? She’s weak, Eric. You don’t need her.”

His wolf bristled at her dismissive tone.

“My personal life isn’t Pack business.”

“Everything about you is Pack business.” Lila blocked the doorway, her green eyes flashing. “Callan isn’t going to be Alpha forever.”

“I’m not taking over as Alpha.”

She waved his answer away impatiently.

“Of course you are, and you need to choose a mate soon. We can’t have our alpha running around alone, especially not pining after some human nobody.”

“Get out,” he growled.

“Fine.” Lila tossed her long blonde hair over her shoulders. “But this conversation isn’t over. The pack needs stability, Eric. And that means you need to stop fighting what’s expected of you.”

She sauntered off into the darkness, and he slammed the door hard enough to make the windows rattle. Why did no one believe he didn’t want to be Alpha? He had a town to protect. There wasn’t time for anything else.

He was still stewing about it the next morning as he patrolled Main Street, his wolf stirring restlessly under his skin. Pack politics. Lila. Marriage prospects. His mother’s meddling. The weight of their expectations pressed down on his shoulders.

He was staring out at the river when Flora popped up next to him. She was in bright blue today, covered with spangled snowflakes.

“Your mother called me this morning,” she said cheerfully. “Seems she’s got three more ‘suitable’ females lined up for you to meet.”

He clenched his jaw. “Not interested.”

“That’s what I told her.” Flora’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “Though I might have mentioned you’ve been spending time with someone else.”

Oh, God. He closed his eyes in despair.

“Flora—”

“Don’t growl at me, boy.” She poked his chest painfully with a skinny little finger. “Let me tell you something—nothing gets rid of persistent mamas and desperate females faster than a taken male.”

“I’m not taken?—”

“Who said you were?” she asked innocently. “But if you happened to be seen around town with a certain new resident, well...” She shrugged. “Your mother might back off. The Pack too.”

He crossed his arms and glared at her.

“You’re interfering.”

“It’s what I do best.” Flora patted his arm. “Just think about it. A little white lie to buy you some peace and quiet? Might be worth it.”

He frowned out at the water, reluctantly considering her suggestion. His wolf immediately approved of the idea but his human side suspected it wouldn't be as simple as Flora was making it sound.

“What about—” he began, but Flora had vanished as quickly as she'd appeared.

Fuck. He headed for the cafe, even though his wolf was already urging him to go to Garrick's.

He strode into the cafe, the bell's chime mixing with the clatter of plates and morning chatter. The familiar scent of coffee and bacon wrapped around him, but something else tickled his nose—an unfamiliar cologne mixed with gun oil.

Rona swooped by with his usual coffee as he reached the counter, then leaned in, her face worried.

“See the guy in the corner?” She tilted her head toward a man in a leather jacket. “Been here two mornings straight. Keeps asking questions about new folks in town.”

His wolf stirred. The stranger sat with his back to the wall, a position that gave him clear sight lines to both exits. A professional's choice.

“Thanks, Rona.”

He strode over to the corner table. Big, blond, two days' worth of stubble. Cold dark eyes studied him before a practiced smile crossed the man's face.

“Howdy, Sheriff. Nice town you've got here.”

The slight Southern accent did nothing to disguise the coldness beneath the greeting.

“We like it.” He remained standing, using his height to full advantage. “Though most visitors don’t stick around this long without introducing themselves.”

“Rick Thatcher.” He offered his hand. “Just passing through, doing some... business research.”

He ignored the handshake and the man’s jaw tightened.

“Fairhaven Falls isn’t much for outside business. Might have better luck in the city.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Thatcher drawled. “Small towns have their charms. Never know what—or who—you might find.”

“Word of advice?” He let his wolf surface just enough to flash gold in his eyes. “Our charm wears thin pretty quick when folks come looking for trouble.”

Thatcher’s hand twitched toward his jacket. “No trouble here, Sheriff. Just a friendly conversation.”

“Keep it that way.”

He turned and walked back to the counter, every sense focused on the threat behind him. He didn’t think the man would be foolish enough to take a shot in front of all these witnesses—and it took a lot to kill a werewolf—but he wasn’t taking any chances.

“He’s bad news,” Rona whispered as she put his plate in front of him. “There’s something evil about him.”

He believed her.

“Just stay away from him, Rona.”

She nodded and hurried off to deal with another customer, while he turned back to watch Thatcher.

The human calmly finished his breakfast, then pushed back from the table and left without a backwards glance.

“Don’t like the look of that one,” a gnome sitting at the counter muttered.

“Me either, Reggie. Me either. Spread the word, will you?”

“You got it, Sheriff.”

He finished his breakfast and left, then hesitated outside the door. He had plenty of work waiting at his office, but instead he found himself heading for Garrick’s. The timing was too perfect—a stranger asking questions right after Robin arrived. Her skittish behavior, the way she flinched at sudden movements. It all clicked into place.

He found her in Garrick’s library, dusting the shelves with quick, precise movements, but her shoulders tensed at his approach.

“We need to talk,” he said firmly.

She gripped her duster and gave him a suspicious look. “About what?”

“New guy in town. Blond hair, leather jacket, Southern accent. Ring any bells?”

The color drained from her face, as the acrid tang of fear overlaid her normal sweet scent.

“I don’t?—”

“Don’t lie,” he said sharply. “He’s been asking questions about newcomers. What’s he after?”

“Nothing.” She started to back towards the door. “I should get back to work.”

He stepped between her and the door, and she stared up at him, her eyes wide and scared. His wolf whined at her distress but he couldn’t protect her unless he knew what was going on.

“This isn’t just about you anymore. If he’s dangerous?—”

“Please move.”

“Not until you tell me what’s going on. Are you running from something? Someone?”

“Stop.” Her voice cracked. “You don’t get to interrogate me like I’m some kind of criminal.”

“If you’re in trouble?—”

“I said stop!” She hugged herself, trembling. “Just because you’re the sheriff doesn’t give you the right to demand answers. I don’t owe you my life story.”

The scent of her fear hit him like a punch to the gut. He’d pushed too hard, let his worry override his judgment.

“Robin—”

“Leave me alone.” She ducked past him and headed for the door.

His wolf clawed at his chest, desperate to stop her, and the words tumbled out before he could stop them.

“Be my mate.”

She froze mid-step, her hand on the doorframe. “What?”

“Not for real,” he said quickly. “A pretend relationship. It would help both of us. The Pack’s been pushing me to choose someone, and I have a feeling you need the protection.”

She turned back to him, her face so pale that he could count every freckle.

“I don’t need?—”

“That man at the diner? He’s not leaving town. But if you’re with me, he can’t touch you.”

“Why would you do that?” she whispered.

“My mother keeps parading eligible wolves in front of me. A human mate would get both her and the Pack off my back.” He kept his voice steady, matter-of-fact. “It’s practical. For both of us.”

“And what happens when people realize it’s fake?”

“How would they know? I don’t live on Pack territory so we don’t need to spend much time with them.” He took a careful step toward her. “Just think about it. No pressure, no strings. But if you’re in trouble—real trouble—this could help.”

She wrapped her arms around herself, studying the floor. The silence stretched between them.

“I’ll let you consider it.” He forced himself to move past her towards the door, catching a hint of something beyond fear in her scent. Hope, maybe. “You know where to find me when you decide.”

He spent the rest of the day fighting the urge to go back and argue his case again. By the time the setting sun cast long shadows through the window of his office, he was reduced to pacing back and forth on the worn floorboards. He was fighting the urge to shift and run until his thoughts cleared when he heard a soft knock on the door.

Robin’s sweet scent drifted through the crack beneath the door—vanilla and fear and something else he couldn’t place.

“Come in.”

She slipped inside, closing the door behind her. Her shoulders were set, chin raised despite the tremor in her hands.

“I’ve been thinking about your offer.”

His wolf growled hopefully, but he forced himself to lean against his desk, aiming for casual. “And?”

“I might consider it.” She took a deep breath. “But first I need to know exactly what pretending to be your... m-mate... would entail. What would you expect?”

The way she stumbled over the word ‘mate’ shouldn’t have affected him. He crossed his arms.

“Nothing too complicated. Being seen together. Attending some Pack functions.”

She nodded, twisting her fingers together. “I have a few conditions.”

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CHAPTER 6

“What are your conditions?” Eric asked calmly, his face impassive, but those golden eyes fixed on her with an intensity that made her shiver.

Robin pulled her list out of her pocket, hands trembling slightly. She’d spent the last hour writing and rewriting these terms. At one point they had taken up a whole page, but she’d finally cut it down to the three most important things.

“First, no unnecessary touching.” She kept her eyes fixed on the paper. “If we need contact for show, we discuss it beforehand.”

He made an odd growling sound but he didn’t speak and she kept going.

“Second, no questions about my past or why I’m here,” she said firmly. “What you see is what you get.”

The paper crinkled in her grip. “And we need an end date. Three months should be enough time for both our situations to... resolve.”

She gave him a quick glance, but his shoulders had relaxed, his golden eyes dancing with amusement.

“Those are your conditions?” he asked, his voice warm.

“Yes.”

He nodded and leaned back against his desk, big arms crossed. “Fair enough, but I have some conditions too.”

Her throat tightened. Of course he did. There was always a catch.

“If we do this, we need to be convincing,” he said. “The Pack will know if we’re faking it. That means spending time together in public, attending some Pack functions. And you’ll need to let me scent mark you.”

She frowned at him.

“Scent mark?”

“Nothing inappropriate. Just... physical contact. My scent will ward off others and make it clear you’re under my protection. It’s important,” he added gently.

She wrapped her arms around herself, considering his condition. She’d realized that some contact between them would be necessary, but this sounded more... intimate than she’d expected. But she needed his protection and she could admit to herself that the thought of him touching her was not... unpleasant.

“Okay.” The word came out barely above a whisper.

“We should probably begin immediately. The Pack’s already curious about you.”

They were? Her cheeks heated as she remembered Flora’s comments. Did everyone in town already think there was something between them?

“I’ll come by in the morning to move you to my cabin,” he added.

“Wait, what?” Her voice threatened to break. “What about my job?”

“You don’t need to work there anymore.”

Her spine stiffened. “I’m keeping my job. I’m making that one of my conditions.”

“I can provide?—”

“This isn’t about money.” Not entirely. It was about not being dependent on anyone.

“I like working. And Garrick’s been nothing but kind to me.”

His jaw tightened, a muscle ticking beneath his skin, and he seemed to loom even larger in the small office.

“It’s not appropriate for my mate to work in another male’s house.”

“Fake mate,” she corrected. “And I won’t quit just because it doesn’t fit some werewolf protocol. The job gives me purpose, independence.” She swallowed hard.

“I need that.”

The silence stretched between them. She braced herself for an argument, but his expression softened.

“You’re right.” He ran a hand through his dark hair. “Keep the job. We’ll make it work.”

The knot in her chest loosened. She hadn’t expected him to yield so easily. His willingness to bend, to consider her needs alongside his own, eased some of her doubts about their arrangement.

“Thank you,” she said. “For understanding.”

“However,” he continued. “You’ll still need to move in with me.”

“You want me to live with you?”

“The job is one thing, but a werewolf would never let his mate live apart from him, especially not with another male,” he said firmly. “Even Garrick would find it suspicious.”

The walls of his office seemed to close in around her. “But my job?—”

“I told you I wouldn’t try to stop you from working. I just want you to spend your nights with me. My cabin is safe—it’s isolated, surrounded by forest, and I’d know if anyone approached.”

The thought of living with him sent a jolt of something that wasn’t entirely panic through her system. “This wasn’t part of the deal.”

“It’s necessary for the ruse.” His eyes softened. “I have a guest room, little bird. You’ll have your own space. But if we’re going to convince people—especially my Pack—this has to look real.”

She twisted her hands together, thinking of Rick’s predatory smile. Living in Eric’s cabin did sound safer than remaining in town.

“When?” she whispered.

“First thing tomorrow. I’ll help move your belongings.”

Less than twelve hours to prepare herself for living with a werewolf. A big male werewolf who made her pulse race and awakened feelings she didn’t understand. The universe had a twisted sense of humor.

“All right. But remember our terms. No?—”

“No unnecessary contact. No personal questions. A time limit.” He repeated her conditions with that infuriating hint of amusement. “I remember.”

She drew a steadying breath. “And not tomorrow morning.”

“I can be there at dawn?—”

“Evening.” She lifted her chin. “Garrick was nice enough to give me this job and I won’t let him down. I’ll pack tonight and be ready when I finish tomorrow.”

Golden eyes studied her face. The intensity of his gaze made her want to look away, but she held firm and he nodded.

“All right, I understand the need to fulfill your responsibilities. Evening then. I’ll come by around five.”

The thought of his isolated cabin, tucked away in the forest, eased some of her anxiety. No prying eyes. No bounty hunter lurking in the shadows. Just trees and distance between her and anyone hunting her. Her relief was immediately followed by guilt. He was giving her his protection, and she was hiding the truth about why she needed it.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “I know this isn’t... ideal.”

“It’s practical.” He shrugged, but something flickered across his features—too quick to read. “For both of us.”

She extended her hand, determined to keep things professional. “So we have a deal?”

His big hand enveloped hers. The contact sent a jolt through her body, like touching a live wire. His skin burned hot against her palm, and her breath caught in her throat.

His golden eyes darkened, pupils dilating, and his grip tightened for a fraction of a second.

She yanked her hand back, fingers tingling where they'd touched. Her heart hammered against her ribs, and she fought to keep her expression neutral. The room suddenly felt too small, too warm.

"I'll see you tomorrow evening then." Her voice came out steadier than she expected.

He nodded, his face unreadable. But something in his stance had changed – a predatory stillness that made her pulse quicken.

She crossed her arms over her chest, trying to suppress the warmth blooming there. This is business, she told herself. A mutual arrangement for protection and convenience. Nothing more.

But as she turned to leave, her skin still humming from his touch, she knew she was lying to herself.

She hurried back towards Garrick's mansion, keeping to the shadows as she watched for any sign of Rick. The hair on the back of her neck suddenly prickled and she cast a nervous glance over her shoulder. Two golden eyes glowed in the darkness beneath a tree.

Eric.

He must have realized that she would have turned down an offer to escort her back, but he was still following her. Watching over her.

"Thank you," she whispered, and she could have sworn the shadow beneath the tree nodded.

When she got back to the mansion, she packed everything she owned into her small backpack. She left out a change of clothes, then carefully tucked the bag back in her closet and went downstairs.

Garrick was in the study, his massive wings folded neatly behind him as he pored over a stack of papers. He looked up at her entrance and smiled.

“You look better.”

“Thank you.” She twisted her hands together nervously. “I need to tell you something. Eric has asked me to be his m-mate.”

Dark eyes studied her face before he nodded.

“I see.”

“I want to keep working for you. I know this is a live-in position,” she added quickly. “But Eric wants me to live with him so I was wondering if maybe I could still?—”

“Work for me?” Garrick’s stony face softened. “Of course you can. I thought it would be more convenient to have someone here, but you’re doing such an excellent job that I don’t think it’s necessary.”

She sighed with relief.

“Thank you.”

“And congratulations. On your mating.”

She knew she was blushing, but she managed to stammer out another thanks. He nodded, but she couldn’t help thinking that he didn’t believe her story at all.

Pretending to be mates was going to be even harder than she'd anticipated.

CHAPTER 7

Eric sighed as he approached his mother's house, already dreading the upcoming conversation. They'd lived in a much smaller home when he was a child, but she'd convinced his father to build them a new house when his father became Alpha. Like everything else his mother touched, it gleamed pristine and perfect in the morning light, but it had never felt like home. And the conversation ahead promised to be anything but perfect.

The front door opened before he reached the porch. His mother stood there, elegant in her cream sweater and pearls, her dark hair swept into an immaculate updo.

"Eric! What a lovely surprise." She beckoned him inside with a wave of her manicured hand. "I was just about to call you."

He followed her into the sitting room, where sunlight streamed through lace curtains onto antique furniture that hadn't moved an inch since the day they moved in.

"Mother, I need to tell you something."

She perched on the edge of her favorite wingback chair, hands clasped.

"At last! I knew you and Lila would hit it off." Her face lit up. "She comes from such good breeding, you know. Her grandfather was?—"

"This isn't about Lila," he said sharply, and her smile faltered.

“But she said you two had such chemistry. And her family’s connections to the Northern packs would be invaluable for?—”

“I’ve chosen someone else.”

The temperature in the room seemed to drop ten degrees. His mother’s fingers tightened around each other until her knuckles went white.

“Someone... else?” She blinked rapidly. “But Lila said you were perfect together. She told me just yesterday that you?—”

“Lila was mistaken.” His wolf bristled at the memory of her unwanted advances. “And so were you.”

His mother’s face brightened again. “Oh! Is it Catherine from the Tennessee pack? I heard she was visiting her cousins, and she’s just as lovely as?—”

“Mother.” The word came out as a low growl. “I’ve chosen Robin. She’s human, and new in town.”

The color drained from his mother’s face, as her mouth opened and closed like a fish gasping for air. The pearls around her neck clinked as she pressed a hand to her chest.

“A human?” The words came out as a horrified whisper. “Eric, you can’t possibly—the Pack would never?—”

“The Pack will accept my choice.” His wolf surged forward, an underlying growl to his words. “Just as you will.”

“But think of your position! Your responsibility?—”

“I don’t have a position, and I don’t want a position. I’m simply a member of the Pack.” He took a step closer, towering over her chair. “Robin is my choice. My mate. And you will welcome her.”

His mother’s lips pressed into a thin line, the same expression she’d worn when he’d refused to attend law school.

“But there’s never been a human mate in the Grayson line.”

“Times change. And so will you. I’m bringing Robin to the next Pack meeting. I expect you to treat her with respect.”

Tears welled in his mother’s eyes—the same tactical display she’d used throughout his childhood.

“What will people say? What about the council?”

“They’ll say nothing because my mate is not up for discussion. Are we clear?”

His mother’s shoulders slumped as she dabbed at her eyes with a lace handkerchief. “The next Pack meeting?”

He straightened, satisfied he’d made his point.

“Yes. And Mother?” He waited until she met his gaze. “No more surprise guests. No more eligible Pack females. It’s over.”

Her eyes narrowed, the mournful expression vanishing. “Is she really your choice? Or are you just trying to avoid mating with a suitable female?”

He stared at her, anger simmering in his veins.

“She’s my choice,” he bit out. “Goodbye, Mother.”

He spun on his heel and left, her shocked face lingering behind him as he stalked back to his office. He slammed the door behind him, still irritated by his mother’s tears and her efforts to manipulate him. Why had her disbelief bothered him so much? His wolf paced restlessly beneath his skin as he yanked off his jacket and tossed it over a chair.

A sharp knock cut through the silence. His nostrils flared—Callan’s scent carried through the door, mixed with snow and disapproval.

“Come in.” He crossed his arms as Callan entered, noting the tight set of the alpha’s jaw.

Callan was a big male, not quite as tall as Eric but with a heavier build. The alpha might be twenty years older than him, but he would never make the mistake of thinking that made him weak.

“Your mother called.”

“Of course she did,” he snapped “Come to talk me out of it?”

“A human mate? You’re smarter than this, Eric.”

“If you’re here to spew prejudice?—”

“This isn’t about prejudice.” Callan’s fist struck the wall, leaving a dent in the wood paneling. “It’s about history. About what happens when humans get too close to Pack business.”

“Robin is different.”

“That’s what they all say.”

“You don’t know her.”

“Neither do you.” Callan stepped closer. “How much do you really know about this woman who appeared out of nowhere?”

His wolf surged forward, a growl building in his chest. “Enough.”

“Think about the Pack. About your position. About?—”

“I’ve thought about nothing else for years, and I still have no intention of becoming Alpha. My choice is made.”

Callan opened his mouth but before he could say anything, the door opened and Flora waltzed in. He bit back an exasperated sigh, hoping she wasn’t going to make things worse.

“Now, now, Callan,” Flora said cheerfully. “You’re not still holding onto ancient history, are you?”

Callan’s face shifted from anger to something Eric had never seen before—guilt.

“This isn’t?—”

“Isn’t what?” Flora’s eyes sparkled gleefully. “Isn’t like that summer by Miller’s Creek? When a certain someone convinced a certain alpha-to-be that humans weren’t so bad after all?”

Callan’s neck turned red.

“That was different. And you know what happened after?—”

“What happened was you let fear win.” Flora hooked a small green hand through Callan’s arm. “Now come along. I need someone tall to help me reorganize my bookshelf.”

“I don’t?—”

“Wasn’t a request, dear.” Flora winked at him as she steered a stunned-looking Callan toward the door. “Some wolves need reminding that the past is past.”

He watched them disappear down the street, Flora’s cheerful chatter fading into the distance, then shook his head, a smile tugging at his lips. Trust Flora to defuse a confrontation by dropping a bombshell of her own.

But his smile soon faded and once again he found himself pacing his office. His wolf prowled beneath his skin, anxious to collect their mate. Their fake mate, he reminded himself, but the words rang hollow.

The memory of her eyes haunted him, the way they’d widened when he’d suggested this arrangement. The slight tremor in her hands as she’d listed her conditions. His wolf had recognized something in that moment—not just fear, but a deep, raw hurt.

The same hurt he’d glimpsed that evening by the river, reflected in the water’s dark surface.

He’d told himself this was about convenience—protection for her, freedom from his mother’s matchmaking for him. Clean. Simple. But the spark that had jumped between them when they’d shaken hands... that had been anything but simple.

His wolf pushed against his control, demanding he acknowledge the truth. This

wasn't just about duty or practicality. He wanted to know her story, to understand what put that wariness in her eyes. To earn her trust, not just claim it through some arranged agreement.

His wolf rumbled in satisfaction at the admission. He sighed and returned to his chair. He had reports to complete, but instead he found himself opening the database on his computer and typing in Thatcher's name.

A match popped up immediately. Rick Thatcher, bounty hunter. Licensed, but with multiple complaints of excessive force. His jaw tightened as he scrolled through the reports. Thatcher specialized in finding people who didn't want to be found.

The pieces were beginning to make sense. Robin's fear. Her conditions. The way she startled at sudden movements.

His wolf snarled, protective instincts rising, and he sat back, rubbing his temples. Whatever Robin was running from, Thatcher had tracked her here. The thought of her being hunted made his blood boil.

He picked up his phone, dialing a contact in the state police. "Dave? Yeah, I know it's late. Need information on a bounty hunter named Rick Thatcher."

The response made his grip tighten on the receiver. Thatcher had a reputation for bringing in his targets by any means necessary. Three of them had ended up in the hospital.

"Thanks. I owe you one."

He hung up, his decision made. Thatcher needed to leave Fairhaven Falls—before his wolf decided to make the point personally.

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CHAPTER 8

Robin hesitated at the threshold of Eric's cabin, taking it in. The cabin's rustic exterior had given way to an unexpectedly spacious interior, all exposed beams and warm wood tones. A stone fireplace dominated one wall, flanked by built-in bookshelves stuffed with a motley collection of books and found objects. A worn leather jacket was draped over a chair and a collection of carved wooden figures lined the mantel.

"This way." He brushed past her, not quite touching her, the faint scent of cedar and something wild trailing in his wake. "Main bedroom's yours."

"I can't take your?—"

"You can and you will," he said firmly. "I'll use the office. Already set up a cot in there."

He pushed open a door, revealing a bedroom that practically screamed bachelor, from the simple navy bedding to the sparse decorations.

"I cleared out the top drawer, and the bathroom's through there." He hesitated for a second. "We'll have to share that."

She walked past him into the bedroom, her skin prickling at his closeness. The room smelled like him—that same cedar and wilderness scent surrounded her—and her heart skipped a beat. Sleeping in his bedroom, wrapped in his scent, felt more intimate than she'd expected.

“I really should take the office?—”

“Let me do this right.”

She turned, finding his golden eyes fixed on her with an intensity that made her breath catch.

“Right. Okay. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” His voice was huskier than usual, his eyes starting to glow, and something stirred deep inside her.

Her breath caught in her throat. His chest brushed her arm as he passed, the brief contact sending heat spiraling through her body.

She stood rooted to the floor, her body buzzing, her heart racing, as the front door closed and he disappeared outside.

Stop being foolish , she scolded herself, and opened her backpack. She pulled out a sweater, then hesitated. Unpacking her clothes felt oddly permanent. No. It’s just temporary .

She slid open the top drawer of the oak dresser, appreciating the smooth glide after months of rickety furniture in cheap hotels. Her few pieces of clothing barely filled a quarter of the space so she tucked her backpack in as well.

The backpack landed with a soft thunk and she frowned, digging into the side pocket. Her sketchbook. She’d forgotten she’d tucked it between her clothes during her hasty packing all those months ago. Her fingers shook as she flipped through the sketches. There was the old man who fed the pigeons every Tuesday in the park. The barista with the septum piercing who always remembered her order. A mother and daughter

sharing a pretzel on the subway platform. Her old life, captured in charcoal.

Her throat tightened at the half-finished portrait of Martin staring out the window behind his desk. She'd captured his sharp jawline and designer glasses, but the smile that had seemed so charming at the time looked twisted now. Had it always been like that or was she seeing it from a new perspective?

She snapped the book shut, her hands trembling, and shoved it under her backpack. That life, those people, that version of herself—they belonged to a different world. A world where she'd been naive enough to trust, to believe in people's good intentions.

The drawer closed with a soft thud, concealing the evidence of her past life.

Eric returned with an armload of wood and built a fire with the swift efficiency of long practice, then looked over at where she was hovering nervously in the doorway to the bedroom.

"Would you like some tea?"

"You have tea?"

"Just because I live alone, it doesn't mean I only drink beer and whiskey," he said dryly, smiling when she blushed. "I have both, but I also have four kinds of tea. And three kinds of coffee, but I suspect you don't need caffeine right now."

"Tea would be fine."

She followed him to the small but efficient kitchen, hesitated, then took a seat at the kitchen table, watching as he filled the kettle and placed tea bags in the teapot. When he added the boiling water, the delicious scent of mint filled the air. He brought the teapot to the table and filled two pottery mugs before taking a seat opposite her. The

table was small enough that their knees brushed under the table and her stomach did a little flip.

She took a nervous sip, then sighed with pleasure.

“This is delicious.”

“My mother has an extensive tea collection.” He gave her a crooked grin. “She’s always pushing it on me.”

“Oh.” She took another sip. “So, what does she think of our...”

“Mating?” Golden eyes watched her over the rim of his mug. “She wasn’t pleased.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. She’ll come round.”

Despite the easy assurance in his voice, she could almost hear the unspoken probably at the end. It’s only temporary , she reminded herself yet again.

“We’ll need to be seen together in town,” he added, his fingers drumming once on the wooden table. “Regular meals, walks, the usual couple things.”

She traced the rim of her mug, avoiding his eyes. “How often?”

“At least a few times a week. Enough to be believable without overdoing it.”

He leaned back, still watching her. The way he looked at her, with those golden eyes warm and soft, made her chest tighten. She forced herself to focus on her mug instead.

“I won’t pry into your business,” he continued. “And I expect the same courtesy.”

Her sigh of relief was probably a little too fervent and she rushed into speech.

“What if... what happens if your mother—your Pack—discovers this isn’t real?”

His jaw clenched, a muscle ticking beneath his skin. The easy atmosphere vanished, replaced by something heavier. “They won’t.”

“But if they do?—”

“I’ll handle it. There won’t be any consequences for you.” His tone left no room for argument, but then his expression gentled. “Trust me. The Pack is my responsibility.”

The words ‘trust me’ echoed in her mind, bringing back memories she’d rather forget. But there was something in his steady gaze that made her want to believe him, despite everything her experiences had taught her.

The air thickened as their eyes locked, and she dropped her gaze to her lap, the intensity of his gaze overwhelming her. The silence stretched between them, but when she finally dared to peek at him, he was still watching her, his face unreadable.

“You’re safe here,” he said softly.

Unexpected tears burned her eyes. She’d heard the words before, but his deep, calm voice made her want to believe them. Overcome by the rush of emotion, she jumped to her feet.

“Let me make dinner. It’s the least I can do.”

“I’ll help.”

She pulled ingredients from his well-stocked cabinets, planning a simple pasta dish. He stood behind her, radiating heat. When she turned, her shoulder brushed his chest, and her breath caught.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, stepping sideways.

“Here, let me?—”

He reached for the flour at the same moment she did. Their hands collided, sending the bag tipping. White powder exploded across his black t-shirt.

He blinked down at himself, looking so bewildered that a laugh bubbled up before she could stop it. His answering chuckle, deep and rich, wrapped around her like a warm blanket.

“Maybe I should stick to grilling,” he said, brushing at the flour unsuccessfully.

“Stop. You’re just making it worse.”

She bit her lip, fighting another smile as she watched him create floury handprints all over his shirt. His golden eyes glittered with amusement, a hint of the boy he’d been hiding behind his stern exterior.

“It’s everywhere,” he complained, and before she could think, she reached for him.

“Flour is very persistent.”

She brushed his shirt gently, trying to ignore the warmth of his chest beneath her hand, and grazed his nipple, hard beneath the thin cotton. His breath hitched, and she snatched her hand back.

“Sorry.”

“I’ll just change.” His voice came out a growl, his eyes glowing.

“Y-yes. Good idea.”

He disappeared down the hallway and returned a minute later wearing a clean t-shirt. They maneuvered around each other in the small space, their bodies performing an awkward dance. Her hip bumped the counter, his arm grazed her back, each touch sending little sparks across her skin. But the earlier tension had eased, and the familiar routine of cooking soothed her.

A little while later, they settled down at the table. She tried not to watch as he devoured the food.

“That was amazing. You’re an incredible cook.”

“My grandmother taught me,” she said, surprised by how much his praise mattered to her. “We spent a lot of time in the kitchen.”

“My mother cooked when we were kids, but when my father became Alpha, she insisted on hiring a chef.” He made a face, then sighed. “Her family had a low rank and she grew up very poor. I think that’s why those things matter to her—the appearance of wealth, status. That’s why she’s so anxious for me to become the next?—”

“The next Alpha?” she asked softly when he came to an abrupt halt.

“Yes, but it’s not something I ever wanted.”

He quickly changed the subject, then insisted on washing the dishes. She wandered

out onto the porch, enjoying the silence of the forest despite the cold. She sat on the front step, wrapping her arms around herself, and watched the shadows flicker between the trees. Everything felt different here—the air sharper, the darkness deeper, the silence more alive.

He came to join her, moving with surprising silence for a man of his size. Without a word, he draped a thick blanket across her shoulders and she snuggled into it.

He lowered himself onto the step beside her, not touching her but close enough for her to feel the heat radiating off his big body. Minutes ticked by, filled only by the whisper of wind through leaves and the distant cry of a night bird, but it wasn't an uncomfortable silence.

“Thank you. For all this,” she said finally, her words barely audible.

His gaze remained fixed on the tree line. “Everyone deserves a chance to feel safe.”

Something in his tone made her chest tighten. Not pity—she'd heard enough of that to recognize it. This was different. Understanding, maybe.

She studied him in the moonlight—the strong line of his jaw, the curve of his neck, the way the muscles in his shoulders moved as he shifted his weight. His size should have frightened her—instead she felt safer than she had in a long time. She leaned back against the step, letting the warmth from the blanket and his closeness chase away the last of her lingering chill.

Eventually she rose, her muscles stiff from the long day.

“I should get some sleep.”

“Wait. There's one more thing we need to discuss.”

He stood as well and the moonlight cast shadows across his face, making his expression even more unreadable than usual.

“You remember that I told you I needed to scent mark you?” He held up his hands at her sharp intake of breath. “It just means we need some physical contact.”

Her heart hammered against her ribs in an odd combination of excitement and trepidation. “What kind of contact?”

“Just a hug, and I’ll rub my face against your neck.”

That sounded innocent enough. So why was her heart still pounding?

“Now?”

He nodded, taking a careful step toward her. “Yes. To start building my scent. The Pack will expect it.”

She swallowed hard and nodded. He moved slowly towards her, watching her face before he wrapped his arms around her. His chest was solid against her cheek, his heart beating steady and strong. The warmth of him seeped through her clothes, chasing away the night’s chill.

He dipped his head, nose brushing her neck. His breath fanned hot against her skin as he nuzzled the spot beneath her ear. A shiver ran down her spine that had nothing to do with cold.

His scent surrounded her—cedar and leather and something wild she couldn’t name. Her fingers curled into his shirt of their own accord. A small sound escaped her throat as his fangs scraped gently across her skin.

The sound jolted her back to reality. This wasn't real. She couldn't let herself forget that.

She jerked back, nearly stumbling in her haste.

“That should be enough, right?” she asked breathlessly.

Without waiting for an answer, she fled into the house, leaving him standing alone on the porch.

CHAPTER 9

E ric paced back and forth across the living room, but for once he was the restless one. His wolf was remarkably content, pleased by Robin's scent mingling with his in their shared space. He looked over at the closed door to the bedroom, automatically noting that she was still sleeping peacefully. The thought of dragging her into Pack politics made his shoulders tense.

His mother's reaction played through his mind again. If she'd been that hostile, the Pack would be worse. Wolves weren't known for accepting change easily, especially when it came to humans. The last human who'd tried to integrate with the pack had left town within a month. Maybe it was too soon to introduce her.

He pulled his sheriff's jacket from the hook and shrugged it on. As he adjusted his collar, he could detect her scent lingering on his skin from the night before. His wolf rumbled with satisfaction, but he pushed the feeling aside. This was about protection, nothing more.

"Morning."

He was so lost in his thoughts that her voice startled him. She stood in the doorway, hair tousled from sleep, wearing an oversized sweater that made her look even smaller and more adorable than usual.

"Sleep well?" He kept his tone neutral, remaining by the door even though his wolf urged him to move closer.

“Better than I expected.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “Are you going somewhere?”

“Pack meeting.”

“Oh. Didn’t you say I should go with you?”

He went into the kitchen and poured the coffee he’d made earlier into a mug, handing it to her when she followed him.

“You don’t have to do this. I can make excuses?—”

“No.” She squared her small shoulders. “I agreed to this. I won’t hide.”

Pride and guilt warred in his chest. Here she was, showing more courage than he’d anticipated, while he plotted ways to shield her from his own pack.

“All right. Just—stay close to me and remember—you don’t owe them any explanations.”

Her eyes widened, but she nodded.

“I-I’ll go and get dressed.”

She returned a short time later, her cheeks flushed and looking far too tempting for his peace of mind. He managed to restrain the urge to touch her, other than putting a hand on her back to help her into his truck, but even that brief contact made his skin tingle. She buckled her seatbelt with shaky hands, and the smell of her anxiety made his stomach clench.

“Relax. You’re not alone,” he said, keeping his voice calm.

She didn't answer, but the tension in her shoulders eased slightly. They rode in silence deeper into the forest, into pack territory.

"What will we be doing?" she asked quietly.

"Just mingling. It's only a social function." Except every Pack function involved jockeying for position, not to mention endless gossip.

The road widened, small houses appearing on either side, and he brought the truck to a halt in the big clearing at the end of the road. The Pack hall loomed ahead, a sturdy log structure that had housed Pack meetings for generations. The alpha usually lived there, although his mother had made his father move out. The scents of the Pack swirled around him, the familiar mix of fur and skin and pack mates.

"That's the Pack hall. Most of the Pack members live out here, but we have a few stragglers scattered in town."

"Like you?"

"Like me." He hesitated, then reached over and covered her hands, twisting nervously in her lap. "I should scent mark you again. Strengthen my scent."

Her breath caught, and when she looked up at him her pupils had dilated—but she didn't smell afraid. Not entirely.

"Okay," she whispered.

He lifted her hand, inhaling the fresh scent of soap. She shivered when he pressed a soft kiss against the inside of her wrist. His wolf stirred, eager to take more, but he fought back the impulse. This wasn't about him or his wants. This was about her safety.

He pressed his face against her neck and breathed in her sweet, tempting scent, but it was mixed with fear and uncertainty. A low growl rumbled through his chest, and her hand clenched his shirt.

“They won’t hurt you,” he promised.

Her ragged breathing made his wolf growl again. He pulled back, searching her face, but she looked away.

“I’m fine.”

“We need them to believe you trust me.” He flicked his eyes to the right. “We’re being watched. I should kiss you.”

Her eyes flew to his as she wet her lips nervously.

“I... All right.”

His wolf growled its approval but he forced it back, very slowly lowering his head. His lips brushed hers, feather-soft, and her eyes fluttered closed.

“Robin,” he whispered, and her eyes opened. He waited for her permission before kissing her again, just as gentle.

She leaned closer, her lips parting. His tongue touched hers, tasting her, and a rush of desire made him deepen the kiss. She tasted of coffee and sweetness, and his hands tightened around her. He wanted more, but before he could lose control, she pulled back.

“They’ll believe us,” she whispered, her cheeks flushed.

He knew she was right—her fear had diminished to a reasonable level and it was now mingled with arousal. It took all of his considerable self-control not to turn around and take her back to his cabin to explore that tantalizing promise.

“Yes.” He could hear the strain in his voice, his wolf raging beneath his skin. “Stay close.”

He forced himself to release her and climbed out of the truck. By the time he’d reached her door, she’d already opened it and jumped down. He offered her his hand, and the moment their palms touched, he could tell the difference. Her hand no longer trembled, her grip was firm, her scent steadier.

“Remember,” he said quietly. “You don’t need to prove anything to them.”

She glanced up at him, amber eyes bright with determination despite the tension in her shoulders.

“I know.” Her smile, small but genuine, caught him off guard. “I trust you.”

His wolf preened at her trust, but guilt gnawed at his conscience. Here she was, placing her safety in his hands, and he still didn’t know what had driven her to hide in Fairhaven Falls. But that was an issue for later. Right now he had a pack to face.

Heads turned as they approached the hall. Some of the younger males stepped forward, hackles raised, but a warning look from him was enough to send them scurrying back. As soon as they stepped inside, conversation came to a halt and dozens of eyes snapped to them. The familiar scent of Pack mixed with an undercurrent of tension.

Lila detached herself from a group of wolves and slinked towards them, her predatory smile setting his teeth on edge.

“So what do we have here? Your little human mate?”

His wolf wanted to bare its teeth, to drive away this threat to his—to Robin.

“Yes,” she said quietly, putting a hand on his arm. “I’m Robin.”

Lila blinked at the calm response, then circled closer.

“I’m Lila.” She said it as if she were expecting Robin to react, but she only gave her a polite smile. Lila’s fangs appeared. “And where exactly did Eric find you? We’re all dying to know your... background.”

“All you need to know,” he growled, “is that Robin is my mate.”

The possessiveness in his tone wasn’t entirely feigned, and that realization unsettled him almost as much as Lila’s attitude. His arm slid around Robin’s waist, drawing her closer. The way she fit against him felt too natural, too right. She didn’t blink an eye, leaning into him and putting her hand on his chest in a casually possessive gesture.

Lila’s eyes narrowed, but he stared at her until she dipped her head in submission. He might not have chosen to become Alpha but it wasn’t because he lacked power.

A few muffled conversations began, but tension crackled in the air until Aidan cut through the crowd. His easy grin and relaxed posture helped break through the suffocating atmosphere Lila had created.

“About time someone put Lila in her place,” Aidan murmured, clapping him on the shoulder before smiling at Robin. “I’m Aidan. The Pack’s resident troublemaker, or so they tell me.”

“Is that an official title?” A small smile tugged at her lips.

“Self-appointed. Someone has to keep the stuffed shirts from taking themselves too seriously.”

Aidan’s eyes flicked to him with good-natured mischief. The big red-headed wolf had a casual disregard for pack hierarchy that had caused trouble in the past.

Her laugh rang out, light and genuine. His wolf preened at the sound—then bristled as Aidan’s grin widened in response. His wolf’s urge to step between them warred with his rational mind. Aidan posed no threat, and she needed allies in the pack.

Still, his hand tightened at her waist as Aidan launched into a story about the time he’d replaced all the coffee in the meeting hall with decaf. His wolf grumbled at each shared smile between them, even as the logical part of him appreciated how Aidan’s presence deflected attention from their supposedly new relationship.

When Callan came over to take him aside he hesitated, but Aidan gave him a direct look.

“She’s safe with me,” he said quietly.

He nodded reluctantly and followed Callan to a soundproofed alcove.

“Your mother’s causing problems,” Callan said, his face grim. “She refused to come today.”

He’d already noted her absence, not sure whether to be angry or grateful.

“That’s her choice.”

“It’s more than that. She’s saying that your relationship with the human isn’t real.” Callan’s eyes narrowed. “Saying it’s all a show to avoid your responsibilities.”

Heat rushed through his veins, his wolf surging with anger.

“She had no right,” he growled.

Callan grabbed his arm. “Keep your voice down. Remember that the Pack is watching your every move. If this isn’t genuine...”

He pulled free from Callan’s grip, but he understood the implied threat. If— when—his relationship with Robin came to an end, the Pack would be able to accept that it hadn’t worked with a human mate—but they would be far less forgiving if they thought he’d been lying to them all along.

As much as he chafed at the Pack’s expectations, he didn’t want to be ousted from their midst. Damn his mother. The urge to hunt her down and confront her warred with his need to stay close to Robin.

“I know what I’m doing,” he snapped.

“Do you? Because from where I stand, you’re risking everything for a human who clearly has secrets of her own.”

He stepped closer to Callan, voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. “My relationship with Robin isn’t up for discussion. Not with you, not with my mother, not with anyone.”

He stalked back over to Robin.

“We’re leaving.”

Her eyes widened but she didn’t say anything as he guided her towards the door, his hand on the small of her back. The weight of the Pack’s stares pressed against them

until they stepped out into the frosty morning air.

“Well, that was fun,” she said dryly. “Nothing like being the new attraction at the zoo.”

She looked relieved to be away from it, but the fear scent hadn’t returned. Her resilience impressed him—most humans would have crumbled under that kind of scrutiny. “You handled it very well.”

“Really? Because I’m pretty sure I saw Lila plotting my demise at least twice.”

His laugh died in his throat as a shadow moved in his peripheral vision—someone lurking in the darkness beneath the trees. Then the heavy perfume reached him. Lila.

Without breaking stride, he slid his arm around Robin’s waist and pulled her closer. Her body stiffened against his.

“Trust me,” he whispered, bending his head toward her ear. “We’re being watched.”

Before she could respond, he turned her to face him. Her eyes widened as his hand cupped her cheek. His wolf surged forward, protective and possessive. He brushed his thumb across her lower lip, giving her a moment to pull away.

She didn’t.

He closed the distance between them, pressing his lips to hers. The kiss started gentle, meant for show, but the moment she softened against him everything changed. Her mouth opened under his with a small gasp that shot straight through him. Her tongue danced with his, sweet and shy and impossibly tempting. His wolf howled in triumph as her fingers curled into his shirt, and he was suddenly, achingly erect.

The sweet taste of her, the way she melted into him—it felt real. Too real. He forced himself to break the kiss before he lost control completely. Her cheeks were flushed pink, her pulse racing under his palm.

It took him a moment to realize that Lila's scent had faded. He fought the urge to chase her down, to warn her to stay away from his mate. Instead, he kept his arm around Robin's shoulders as he took her back to the truck. Back to their home.

CHAPTER 10

Robin replayed the kiss over and over during the silent drive back to town. The first kiss in the truck had been nothing compared to the explosion of sensation the second time. She knew he'd done it for show but it had felt real. He'd been the one to draw away—she'd have happily stood there kissing him forever.

Her face heated as she remembered the hard press of his body against hers. She'd felt him growing aroused, his cock straining against his jeans. She hadn't even tried to pull away.

"Who was watching us?" she asked finally.

"Lila. I hoped kissing you would help convince her that we're mates."

"Oh. Right. Good thinking."

Her voice sounded odd even in her own ears and he sighed, and pulled over.

"Robin." His voice was low, rough. His fingers brushed her chin, tilting her face up until she had to look at him. His golden eyes glowed with an intensity that made her breath catch. "I wanted to kiss you."

Her heart stuttered. "You... you did?"

"Very much." His thumb traced along her jawline, leaving tingles in its wake. "But I won't do it again unless you want me to."

“I... I...”

He seemed to understand her inability to respond, because he cupped her cheek again, then resumed driving.

“I’ll drop you off at Garrick’s.”

“You don’t have?—”

“I’m dropping you off,” he said firmly. “Is it that hard to let someone do something for you?”

She winced at the question, but he didn’t press her.

When they arrived at Garrick’s mansion, he came round to open the door for her. She slid down, then looked up at him. Gathering her courage, she went up on tiptoes and brushed her lips against his in a quick kiss.

“In case anyone is watching,” she said, her cheeks burning, and scurried through the gates. She could feel him watching her all the way to the door.

She spent the day cleaning the old ballroom but no matter how hard she scrubbed, she couldn’t stop the images flooding her mind. Fragments of the Pack meeting kept replaying in her mind: Lila’s predatory smile, the dozens of suspicious stares, Aidan’s unexpected friendliness. She’d felt like a fraud, waiting for someone to point at her and expose her lies.

But Eric’s presence had anchored her through all of it. Even when his mother’s absence had drawn whispers, he’d kept his arm around her, steady and sure.

Then the kiss had changed everything. Or maybe nothing. She dumped out the dirty

mop water with a frustrated groan. This was supposed to be simple—a mutually beneficial arrangement to keep them both safe. Instead, her skin tingled where he'd touched her, and her lips ached for another taste.

He picked her up at the end of the day and once again they shared a meal. He kept the conversation light, talking about his day and avoiding the subject of the Pack—and the kiss. She still fled to her room as soon as dinner was over, but sleep escaped her.

As she tossed and turned, she finally realized that for the first time since she'd fled the city, she felt safe. Not just physically protected, but... seen. He didn't demand explanations or push when she withdrew. He simply offered what she needed—shelter and security.

And now, inexplicably, passion.

She pressed her fingers to her lips, remembering the fiercely possessive way he'd kissed her. And yet he'd carefully given her space afterwards. Even now, she could hear him moving around the cabin, keeping his distance while staying close enough if she needed him.

What had she gotten herself into? And why didn't that question terrify her anymore?

She finally sighed and got up, padding quietly to the kitchen. He was standing at the counter, whiskey glass dangling from his fingers, moonlight casting shadows across his face.

His eyes lifted to meet hers, golden and intense even in the darkness, then drifted down to her legs, bare beneath the hem of her oversized sleep shirt. Neither spoke, electricity humming in the air between them.

"I was just going to make some tea," she said finally.

He shifted aside, giving her space at the counter. She filled the kettle, overwhelmingly conscious of his closeness, of the lingering warmth from where their arms brushed.

“Can’t sleep?” The low rumble of his voice sent a shiver down her spine.

“No.” She dropped a tea bag into her mug. “I was thinking about the meeting...”

“You don’t need to worry about it. You did very well.”

The kettle whistled. She poured the hot water, watching steam curl up between them. She leaned against the counter beside him, their shoulders almost touching, as he took a slow sip of whiskey.

The quiet settled again, but it felt different now. Comfortable. Like they’d done this a hundred times before. The scent of whiskey and cedar mixed with the chamomile from her mug, creating something new and oddly peaceful.

“Your Pack doesn’t seem to approve of how you do things,” she said finally. “Or is that just because of me?”

“It’s not just you.” He set his glass down with a sigh. “The bond between Pack members runs deep. Like blood, but stronger. But that means they expect everyone to live by the old ways. Close-knit. Traditional.”

“And you don’t want that?”

“I respect our heritage, but I won’t let it cage me. The Pack thinks living apart makes me weak.”

She remembered the whispers at the meeting, the sideways glances. “Is that why your

mother wants you to mate? To bring you back to the fold?"

"Partly. She also wants me to take over as Alpha." His golden eyes fixed on some distant point. "The others just see my independence as a failing. They think I'm weak because I don't want to be Alpha."

The vulnerability in his words caught her off guard, and she shook her head.

"That's not true," she said firmly. He turned to look at her, something unreadable in his expression. His hand brushed against hers on the counter, sending warmth racing up her arm. "I saw how they looked at you today. They might disagree with what you're doing, but they respect you."

He didn't respond, searching her face as if trying to find any trace of insincerity.

"Callan pulled you aside because he was concerned, but he treated you like an equal. Even Aidan, who seems to question everything—did you notice how he waited for your reaction before approaching me?" She shook her head. "That's not weakness, Eric. That's earning their respect on your own terms."

"Sometimes it's hard to see past their expectations."

"Well, maybe you need an outsider's perspective." The words slipped out before she could stop them. She didn't regret her candor, but they reminded her of her position. "Will they keep watching us like that? The Pack?"

Eric set his glass down on the counter with a soft clink.

"Yes. They'll be looking for proof that this is real, especially with my mother raising doubts." He looked down at her, eyes glowing. "We'll need to be more... physically affectionate in public."

Her breath caught as the air between them thickened.

“And in private?”

He didn’t respond immediately, and a tiny flame of disappointment flickered in her chest. Then he leaned down and brushed his lips across hers.

“Anything you want, little bird.”

“What if...” She hesitated, gathering her courage. “What if I wanted to kiss you some more?”

He froze.

“Are you sure?”

“I...” She swallowed hard, then put her hand on his chest, right above his heart. It thumped rapidly beneath her palm, strong and steady. “Yes.”

She rose onto her toes, putting her hands on his shoulders, and pressed her lips to his. He froze again, then slowly returned the kiss, his big hands flexing on her hips. She tilted her head, deepening the kiss, and his tongue teased her bottom lip. The first taste made her head spin. When he pulled her against his chest, her hands slid up into his hair.

The kiss deepened and his arms came around her, lifting her off the floor and onto the table. Her body was aflame with sensation, but his touch was gentle, almost reverent, as his mouth explored hers. He raised his head for a moment, looking down at her face as his fingers skimmed beneath the hem of her shirt.

When he lowered his head again, his fangs grazed her neck and the world tilted. The

rough pads of his fingers stroked her hips, her stomach, then higher, skimming the curve of her breast. She bit her lip, muffling a moan, but he stopped anyway.

“Do you like that?” he growled. “Do you like me touching these sweet little breasts?”

Her cheeks flamed, but she nodded.

“You should always tell me what you like. What you want.”

“I—” Her voice trembled and he waited, fingers stroking her gently.

“I want you to touch me more,” she whispered.

“Where?” His breath was hot against her neck, his eyes burning.

“Everywhere.”

She barely had time to breathe before his mouth claimed hers, his big hands covering her breasts, teasing her nipples to taut aching peaks. She was drowning in sensation, every nerve ending singing.

One hand slid down between her legs and her whole body stiffened. She didn’t have time to panic because he immediately drew back, his thumb coming up to caress her jaw.

“Relax,” he murmured.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. If you want to stop, we stop.”

“I don’t want to stop, but...”

She bit her lip, unable to explain the confused mixture of arousal and nerves. His eyes softened.

“Let me take care of you,” he murmured.

He kissed her again, slow and sweet, as his hands returned to her breasts. When she was wiggling against him, he very slowly slid a hand back down over her stomach, watching her face the whole time. She bit her lip but parted her thighs and he gave her a small, pleased smile.

“So sweet,” he murmured.

His fingers brushed over her, finding the wet heat that betrayed her desire. When his fingertip grazed her clit, she jerked.

“Easy,” he murmured.

“I’ve never done this before,” she whispered, cheeks flaming.

“With someone else?”

She shook her head, mortified, and his eyes widened.

“No one’s ever done this for you, little bird?”

She shook her head again, unable to meet his eyes.

“Let me take care of you. Do you trust me?”

She looked into those golden eyes, so intent on her, and nodded.

“Yes. Yes, I trust you.”

His fingertip circled her clit and she moaned, clutching his shoulders.

“That’s it, little bird. Do you like that?”

“It feels so good,” she whispered, her cheeks burning.

“Tell me exactly what you like. Every little thing.”

The husky command sent heat rushing through her body. She could feel his gaze on her, studying her reactions.

“I don’t know.”

“Then we’ll find out together. Faster?”

“Yes, please.”

Her eyes closed, hips bucking as his fingers picked up speed. Her breathing grew ragged, the tension inside her rising.

“How about a little harder?”

She couldn’t have spoken, could only nod, but it was enough.

“Like this?” His finger rubbed firm, demanding circles around her clit. “Does that feel good?”

“Y-yes,” she gasped.

He kept circling her clit, his pace steady and relentless. It wasn't long before she was clutching at his shoulders, moaning, desperate for more.

“Please. Please, Eric.”

“Do you need to come, little bird?”

“Yes!”

“But it's not quite enough, is it?”

Before she could answer, he slid a thick finger inside her and she cried out. His thumb kept up a steady rhythm on her clit, his fingers curling to hit her sweet spot again and again, and the world blurred. He didn't hesitate, didn't stop, until she shattered against him, her cry muffled against his shoulder. He lifted her into his arms, holding her gently.

“I didn't know,” she said softly, when she could speak again. “I didn't know it could be like that.”

“Oh, little bird.”

His voice was low, hoarse. He kissed her forehead, and she curled closer, content.

“You should go to bed,” he said finally, reluctantly.

“But...”

He brushed a gentle finger along her jaw.

“I think that’s enough for tonight. Got to bed, little bird.”

He set her down, steadying her until her legs would hold her, then turned her gently towards the bedroom. She stumbled into the room and collapsed on the bed, a warm glow inside her that refused to dissipate. She was asleep within seconds.

CHAPTER 11

E ric stood outside Robin's door for a long time, listening to the sound of her steady breathing, his wolf clawing at his control. Her scent lingered in the air and he raised his hand to his mouth, tasting her sweetness on his fingers. Fuck, he wanted more. Wanted to bury his head between those delicate thighs and feast on her.

When she'd told him no one had touched her before, a wave of possessiveness had nearly drowned him. He wanted to be the only one who tasted her, the only one who saw her shatter. He wanted to spend the next month exploring her body, learning every inch of her.

But the truth was that this was just a temporary arrangement.

His wolf growled. No. Ours.

With a muttered curse, he stripped off his clothes, letting the change take him. Bones shifted and reformed, fur rippled across his skin. In moments, a massive black wolf stood where the man had been.

He nosed open the back door and burst into the night. Snow flew under his paws as he raced through the trees, drinking in the cold winter air. The forest welcomed him with its familiar symphony—the whisper of wind through branches, small creatures scurrying away from his path, the distant call of an owl.

But even the burn in his muscles and the cold night couldn't clear his head. His wolf wanted to turn back, to curl around her and keep her safe from whatever shadows

haunted her.

He pushed harder, faster, until the trees blurred past. He couldn't afford to let his feelings complicate this arrangement. She needed his protection, not his desire.

The moon rode high overhead as he ran, its silver light painting the snow-covered landscape in shades of blue and shadow. His wolf reveled in the freedom, but he couldn't escape the truth—he was in dangerous territory, and it had nothing to do with the woods around him.

He finally came to a halt next to a half-frozen waterfall and lapped up some water as he waited for his breathing to steady. A branch snapped in the darkness, too heavy to be prey. His ears swiveled toward the sound as he caught an unmistakable scent—orc, mixed with wood smoke and herbs. His hackles rose as Varek's massive form emerged from between the trees.

The orc hesitated, his green skin almost gray in the moonlight. Despite his size advantage, Varek took a step back, his eyes darting to the sides as if seeking an escape route.

“Sheriff,” Varek said, a cautious note in his deep voice. “Didn't expect anyone out here tonight.”

He shifted back to human form, unconcerned with his nudity in the frigid air.

“You're a long way from your cabin, Varek.”

Varek lived in an isolated cabin between Pack territory and Nakor Earlsworth's extensive property. Given how territorial the dragon could be, it had always surprised him that he'd allowed anyone that close.

“Just gathering some night-blooming herbs,” Varek muttered, holding up a half-full basket.

The orc’s reputation for violence preceded him, but Eric had never had any trouble with him and there was no aggression in his stance. If anything, he seemed eager to retreat.

“Are you still living out in the woods by yourself?” he asked, and Varek gave him a wary look.

“Why would I want anything else?”

“Gets lonely on your own.”

As soon as he said it, he regretted it. He had no business interfering in Varek’s life—although he had an unfortunate suspicion that he’d been thinking more about his own life.

“Fuck,” the orc growled. “You’re as bad as Flora. Why can’t everyone leave me alone?”

Varek turned and stomped off into the woods, leaving Eric to stare after him in surprise. He hadn’t known Flora had any contact with the reclusive orc. He grinned and shook his head. If Flora had plans for Varek, he might as well give in now. Thank goodness she’d never aimed her sights at him?—

Had she? She had been the one to suggest the fake mating arrangement after all.

Not fake , his wolf grumbled. Fuck.

Deciding to worry about Flora’s schemes later, he shifted back into his fur and

headed back to his cabin. He'd been self-indulgent, running to escape his thoughts when he should be guarding his cabin. His home. Robin.

The word 'home' caught him off guard. But as he loped back through the trees, he realized it felt true. The cabin had always been his refuge, but now that she was there it felt complete in a way he hadn't expected. Her scent mixed with his, the soft sounds of her breathing, even the way she smiled at him across the table...

He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. This was temporary. Just until her name was cleared.

As soon as he slipped into the house, her scent wrapped around him, warm and welcoming. He padded silently to her door and eased it open a crack, drinking in the sight of her asleep in his bed. His wolf settled as he watched her sleep, satisfied that she was safe and protected in his bed.

The next morning he escorted her to work again. As they walked down the narrow strip of cleared sidewalk, his arm brushed her shoulder and she blushed—something she had been doing almost continuously since she'd appeared in the kitchen doorway that morning, flushed and shy and absolutely adorable. He'd wanted nothing more than to sweep her into his arms and continue what they'd started the night before, but two things prevented him. First was the fact that she was under his protection. The second was an extension of that—he didn't want to take advantage of her innocence under those circumstances.

As much as his wolf urged him to claim her, to mate her, he knew she would need time. And, if he were honest, so would he. He was accustomed to keeping people at a distance, and the fact that she'd already slipped past his defenses scared him more than he wanted to admit. So instead of carrying her back to his bed, he'd made her coffee and pancakes and now he was walking her to Garrick's mansion.

When they reached the iron gates, she turned to face him, her cheeks pink from the cold—and something else. She glanced around the empty street.

“Maybe you should kiss me goodbye,” she said softly. “Someone might see. Unless you don’t want to,” she added quickly.

“I told you I wanted to kiss you,” he growled, his wolf whining at the uncertainty on her face. “I always want to kiss you.”

“Oh.”

Her pretty lips formed a tempting circle and he couldn’t resist. She’d initiated this. His wolf howled in triumph, but he kept his movements gentle as he cupped her face. Amber eyes flickered to his mouth, then back up as she wet her lips nervously.

The first brush of her lips shot fire through his veins. She tasted like the coffee they’d shared at breakfast, mixed with something uniquely her. Her fingers tightened on his jacket, pulling him closer. His wolf surged forward, demanding more, but he held back, letting her set the pace.

She made a small sound in her throat that nearly broke his control. He deepened the kiss, sliding one hand into her hair while the other slid into her coat and beneath her sweater to the sweet curve of her waist. Her heart thundered against his chest, matching his own racing pulse.

When they finally broke apart, her breath came in short gasps, those pretty lips pink and swollen. The sight made his wolf want to drag her back to the cabin and never let her leave.

“I’ll be back to walk you home tonight,” he said instead.

For once she didn't argue, just gave him another shy smile before she punched in the key code and slipped through the gates. He waited until she was inside before turning and striding back to his office.

His mother's scent hit him as soon as he opened the door and he bit back a groan. The last thing he wanted to do right now was to deal with her.

Tilly, his pixie assistant, gave him a helpless shrug.

I couldn't stop her, she mouthed, and he gave her a grim nod.

His mother was perched on the edge of his desk, her lips pressed into a thin line.

"That girl is hiding something," she said, drumming her perfectly manicured nails on the wooden surface. "Lila told me she's been behaving very suspiciously."

The mention of Lila's name made his jaw clench. "Since when do you take Lila's word as gospel?"

"Since my son started consorting with a human who appeared out of nowhere. The Pack has concerns?—"

"The Pack, or you?"

"Don't take that tone with me. I'm looking out for your interests."

"My interests are none of your business." He moved behind his desk, putting space between them. "Robin is my mate. That's all you need to know."

"But—"

The door burst open and Flora swept in, her red and white striped tracksuit making her look like a slightly demented elf.

“Marjorie! Just the wolf I was looking for.” She hooked her arm through his mother’s. “The garden club is in crisis. Someone wants to plant wolfsbane next to the petunias. Can you imagine?”

His mother tried to pull away. “Flora, I’m in the middle of?”

“Nonsense. This is an emergency.” Flora winked at him as she dragged his protesting mother toward the door. “The reputation of our entire horticultural society is at stake.”

The door clicked shut behind them, leaving blessed silence in their wake. Interfering or not, he’d never been so glad to see Flora. He sank into his chair, making a mental note to buy her a thank-you gift. Maybe some of Esmeralda’s flowers—and he could pick up some for Robin at the same time.

The prospect made him smile, but his mother’s questions renewed his concerns. He’d agreed not to question her, but how could he help her if he didn’t know what she was running from?

He stared at his computer screen, his fingers hovering over the keyboard. His wolf growled at the thought of betraying her trust, but the bounty hunter’s presence nagged at him.

He sighed and typed “Robin Halloway” into the database. He sorted through the results until he came across a picture of her taken from an employee ID. She looked so much younger, happier, that it made his chest ache. He scanned through the attached information and found it was a missing persons report, filed by her boss, Martin Kendrick. According to the report, she’d vanished, leaving everything

behind—her apartment, her bank accounts, her whole life.

His wolf snarled. It didn't make sense. Why had she run? Why was she hiding in a small town and working as a housekeeper? And why was her boss the only one to report her missing?

He pulled up Kendrick's name and frowned. The man was an upper level employee at a large import/export firm, and on the surface nothing appeared to be wrong—a couple of parking tickets and a restraining order, the latter dismissed. His eyes narrowed and he dug deeper, finding a pattern of complaints that stretched back years, all involving women. A few of them had pressed charges, but none had come forward when his lawyer had argued the case. Nothing appeared to stick to him.

One of the attached photos caught his eye. Kendrick at some kind of public function. Innocuous enough, but when he looked closer he spotted a man in a leather jacket in the background. Thatcher. He checked the date of the photo and saw it was taken five years ago which suggested that the two of them had been associated for at least that long. What was a so-called respectable businessman doing with a shady bounty hunter? And why send a bounty hunter after her at all unless she'd performed some kind of criminal act?

He closed the browser, rubbing his face. The Robin he knew—who cooked him dinner, who stood up to his pack, who melted into his kiss and came apart at his touch—wasn't a criminal. But she was definitely running from something. Or someone.

His phone buzzed. A text from one of his deputies about Thatcher asking questions again. His grip tightened on the phone. Whether she was innocent or guilty, he'd meant what he said about protecting her. And he intended to find out exactly what Rick Thatcher was doing in his territory.

CHAPTER 12

Robin inhaled the rich aroma of coffee wafting through Eric's cabin as she padded quietly across the wooden floor, each board now familiar after a week of morning routine. Sunlight streamed through the windows, catching the steam rising from two mugs on the counter. He was staring out the window, broad shoulders silhouetted against the light and, as always, the sight of him made her breath catch.

"Good morning," she said softly.

He didn't jump when she spoke but she'd quickly realized that he always seemed to know where she was. He turned and smiled at her before adding the perfect amount of cream to her mug. Their fingers touched as he passed it over, the brief contact sending electricity dancing across her skin. She pulled back too quickly, nearly spilling her coffee, and he reached out to steady her. Another spark.

She tightened her grip on the mug, fighting the impulse to lean into his warmth. This was getting dangerous. She was falling for him, breaking her own cardinal rule of keeping everyone at arm's length. Each shared breakfast, each casual touch, each soft look chipped away at her defenses.

To her disappointment they hadn't repeated the incident on the kitchen table. After two days—and nights—of him being a perfect gentleman other than those heated goodbye kisses, she'd finally gathered up the courage to ask him if he'd regretted what happened.

"Regret?" Those golden eyes glowed as he studied her over a glass of whiskey.

“Absolutely not. Watching you come apart in my arms was the most delightful thing I’ve ever seen. Under any other circumstances, I’d have carried you into the bedroom and done it again. And again.”

Her mouth went dry and she leaned towards him, but he only took her hands in his and shook his head.

“But I won’t take advantage of the situation, little bird.”

She’d tried to convince him that he wasn’t taking advantage, but he was adamant. She would have suspected that he was telling her a polite lie if it weren’t for the unmistakable evidence of his desire each time they kissed. And in spite of his restraint, her heart still skipped a beat whenever their eyes met.

The memory of him watching her, golden eyes intent on her pleasure, sent a rush of heat between her legs.

“You’re flushed,” he said, studying her with a look that made her shiver.

“It’s just the coffee.”

“Of course.” He took a slow sip of his own drink, his tongue flicking across his lip, and her knees threatened to give out.

“I should get ready for work,” she mumbled, hurrying into the bedroom and shutting the door behind her.

The problem wasn’t that he didn’t want her. He clearly did. But was something other than his sense of honor holding him back? Was it because she was human? Or was it the secrecy surrounding her past?

Her fingers curled into her palm, the old familiar guilt gnawing at her. I should tell him. But what if he didn't believe her?

No, this was supposed to be a mutually beneficial arrangement. Nothing more.

So why did her chest ache at the thought of it ending?

She was still worrying at the problem later that afternoon as she dragged the duster mechanically across the ornate mantelpiece in Garrick's sitting room. The week had passed with no sign of Rick, but experience had taught her that meant nothing. He'd vanished for three weeks in Sacramento once before showing up at her workplace. But what if he'd really gone? What if she didn't need to continue the charade of being Eric's mate?

The thought made her heart ache. He still needs me to protect him against Lila, she thought defiantly. There was no reason to suggest ending their arrangement yet.

Something scratched against the window and she spun around, heart hammering, only to find it was nothing but the breeze brushing strands of ivy against the window. Her fingers trembled on the duster handle as she tried to calm her racing pulse. Damn. Apparently part of her was still convinced that Rick was on her trail.

"Something troubling you?" Garrick's gravelly voice made her jump again before she spun back around. He stood in the doorway, stone features unreadable.

"Just startled myself." She forced a laugh, but it sounded hollow even to her. "These old houses make all sorts of noises."

His eyes narrowed. "You've been jumpy all week."

She turned back to the mantel, avoiding his gaze. He was right. Eric's cabin felt safe,

like a fortress in the woods, but every time she left his protective presence, she was braced for something bad to happen. The mansion wasn't quite the same, but it helped. She felt protected here. Hidden. But how long could she stay hidden?

She set the duster down on a side table and started untying her apron.

"If you don't mind, I'm going to leave a little early. I need to run some errands in town."

The words tumbled out before she could stop them.

"Now?" Garrick's stone eyebrows rose.

"Yes." She needed to prove to herself that she could do this, that she wasn't going to let fear rule her life forever. "I've been avoiding it long enough."

She grabbed her coat from the hook by the door, ignoring the way her hands shook as she buttoned it. Maybe Rick really had given up and moved on.

But what if he hadn't? If Rick found her, would Eric still look at her the same way? Would he believe her if she told him the truth?

No. She wasn't going to let what-ifs rule her life.

She kept a wary eye out as she walked over to Main Street, but she didn't see anyone following her. She stopped to buy some fresh fruit for Garrick to make up for her abrupt departure, then bought cupcakes for her and Eric from the rather forbidding orc at Java Joy. The sign over the cupcakes had originally said Chocolate Almond, but someone had scratched it out and put Almond Joy instead.

"That's a much better name," she told him when she paid, and he sighed.

“That’s what I said,” a cute blonde woman agreed, joining the big orc behind the counter.

“It’s not necessary,” he grumbled as he put a possessive arm around the blonde, and she grinned up at him, poking a playful finger at his chest.

“But it’s fun, Grondar. Don’t you like fun?”

“I have better ideas for having fun,” he said, pulling her closer.

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s a promise, sugar.” He started to lower his head towards the woman, then sighed again. “You’re distracting me.”

Their banter warmed her, even though it was hard not to feel a stab of envy. She started to turn away, but the woman stopped her.

“Wait a minute. You’re Robin, aren’t you?”

Her heart skipped a beat.

“Y-yes.”

“I’m Elara. Nichola said you were going to join us for a girls’ night.”

“I don’t think I actually agreed to that,” she said cautiously, but her racing heart slowed.

Elara laughed.

“Nichola only hears what she wants to hear. But I hope you will. We have a lot of fun,” she added, giving the orc another teasing look.

“So much fun I had to come and carry you home last time,” he grumbled. “I’d better warn the sheriff.”

Heat filled her cheeks as she tried to come up with a response, but Elara only grinned at her.

“Tell Eric we won’t let anything happen to you. Well, Nichola won’t. I was having a hard time walking last time—hence the need for Grondar to carry me home and have his wicked way with me.”

She watched in fascination as the tips of Grondar’s ears darkened, and then he was escorting her politely but firmly towards the door.

“Shop’s closing. If you want anything else, come back in half an hour. No, better make that an hour.”

She heard the door lock behind her, followed by a happy squeal from Elara. She smiled, but her amusement faded as she continued down the street. Elara knew who she was, and Grondar must have known as well since he’d mentioned Eric. Did everyone in town know? Why hadn’t she thought about changing her name?

Because I’ve never lived in a small town before. She was used to the anonymity of the city.

Then again, if everyone did know who she was and Rick still hadn’t tracked her down, maybe he had left after all. Maybe she could even take the chance of going out with the other women. She’d never really had the time for friends, male or female, but maybe here, in this friendly little town, she could finally enjoy some of the things

she'd missed.

CHAPTER 13

Smiling at the possibility of making friends, Robin continued down Main Street. She passed a thrift store and stopped to look in the window. She still had most of her last paycheck. If she were going to stay in town, maybe she could splurge just a little on something pretty to wear.

The bell above the door chimed softly as she entered and a curvy dark-haired woman gave her a sunny smile.

“Welcome to Whimsical Wonders. Are you looking for anything in particular?”

“Do you carry clothing?”

“Of course.” The woman ran an appraising eye over her. “I have a couple of dresses in your size, but they’re a little thin for winter. Would you like to see some sweaters?”

When she nodded, the woman took her into the back room, chatting cheerfully. By the time she left Robin to look over the choices, she’d learned that the woman’s name was Posy and she was new in town as well. She’d also learned that her favorite color was blue, she’d never had a pet, and that her favorite food was strawberry rhubarb pie.

A little dazed by the flood of conversation, she drifted down the rack of sweaters, running her fingers over the different textures. A dark green sweater with a scooped neck caught her eye. The soft, lacy knit wasn’t really practical, but it was very pretty.

“If you’re interested, there’s a sale this week,” Posy said, emerging from the back with a stack of folded sweaters.

“Oh. No. I just...”

“You should try it on,” Posy suggested, putting the sweaters down and gently urging her towards a full-length mirror. “It would look beautiful on you.”

She pulled it off the rack, biting her lip. It really was lovely. Before she could lose her nerve, she stripped off her coat and plain navy sweater, then slipped the soft green sweater over her head. It hugged her body perfectly, making her eyes sparkle and her skin glow. Will Eric like it, she wondered, and saw her reflection blush at the thought.

“Oh.” Posy clapped her hands. “I’m right. That is gorgeous. What’s your name, sweetie?”

“Robin,” she said, reluctantly removing the sweater.

“Robin,” Posy repeated, eyes widening. “You’re the one who lives with the sheriff, aren’t you?”

“Does everyone in town know about us?” she asked despairingly, and Posy grinned at her.

“That’s a small town for you.” For a second the other woman’s smile faded. “But even when everyone knows your business, it can be hard being new in town. If you need a friend, I’m available.”

“I’d like that,” she said, feeling a wave of warmth towards the other woman.

“Come by my apartment upstairs any time. It’s easy to find—it’s the one with the blue fairy lights. By the way, have you heard about the?—”

The bell over the door chimed again, and Posy gave her a rueful smile. “Back to work. If you want to think about the sweater, I can put it aside.”

“That’s not necessary. I’ll take it.”

She handed it over and Posy disappeared towards the front of the shop. She’d just pulled her old navy sweater over her head when she heard a familiar voice.

“Can you believe Eric brought her to the Pack Hall?”

Lila. The she-wolf’s voice carried from the next aisle, pitched just loud enough to reach her ears. Given how sensitive Eric’s senses were, she suspected Lila was well aware of her presence.

“She’s not even marked. No mating bite, nothing,” Lila said disparagingly, and her friend tittered. “And you should see her. She’s practically a mouse.”

Her cheeks burned, but then her embarrassment was replaced by anger. No. She wasn’t going to be a mouse anymore.

She rounded the rack, chin raised. “If you have something to say about me, Lila, say it to my face.”

Lila’s perfectly painted lips curved into a cruel smile.

“Oh look, the little human has teeth.” Lila stalked towards her but she refused to back away. “Fine. I’ll spell it out. You’re not Eric’s mate. You’re just a temporary distraction until he comes to his senses and chooses a proper wolf.”

“Even if he did want a proper wolf, he wouldn’t want you,” she bit back, unable to stop herself.

Lila snarled, her fangs showing, then regained her composure, arranging her face in a dismissive sneer.

“At least I understand what being a mate really means.” Lila’s gaze dropped to Robin’s neck. “No mark, no claim. You’re just playing pretend, human. And everyone knows it.”

Lila turned and stalked out of the shop, her friend scuttling behind her.

“What a bitch,” Posy muttered. “Are you okay?”

“N-not really.”

Her throat burned with the effort of holding back tears as Lila’s words burrowed under her skin. As much as she’d kept telling herself it was just a temporary arrangement, she’d... hoped there was something more between them. Lila had just proved her wrong.

“Why don’t I make us some tea?” Posy suggested. “You can tell me all about it and I’ll make catty remarks about the fact that her skirt was too short and her roots were showing.”

She managed to smile, but shook her head.

“I appreciate it, but I really need to get back to work. Maybe another time.”

“Any time.” Posy handed over the sweater, then squeezed her hand. “I mean it. I’m available for tea and sympathy any time.”

Unable to speak, she nodded and passed over the money for the sweater, then hurried out of the store before the tears began to fall.

No mark. No claim. Just playing pretend .

The words echoed in her mind, sharp as broken glass. She'd known this arrangement with Eric was temporary, had reminded herself of that fact every morning. So why did Lila's taunts cut so deep?

She turned down a narrow side street as her vision blurred, desperate to be out of sight as the first tear fell. She wiped furiously at her eyes. How stupid she'd been to think she could build something here, with Eric. To imagine she could?—

A shadow moved out of the alley ahead. Her head snapped up, but too late.

Rick Thatcher blocked her path, his leather jacket creaking as he crossed his arms.

Those dead eyes locked onto her face. The same eyes that had haunted her nightmares for months. His thin lips curved into that familiar smirk that made her skin crawl.

“Well, well. Been a while, Miss Holloway.” His voice carried the same oily smoothness she remembered. “You led me on quite the chase.”

The need to run surged through her, but fear rooted her feet to the ground.

“Did you really think you could hide forever?” His smile terrified her more than any of the so-called monsters in Fairhaven Falls. “In this backwater town of freaks?”

“I-I'm not going anywhere with you,” she whispered.

“Yes you are. We can do this the easy way, or we can do this the hard way. Your choice, doll.”

He moved closer, the alley’s shadows darkening his face, and her muscles finally unlocked. She spun and took off down the street, narrowly avoiding the icy patches that were scattered across the ground.

“Stop her!” he yelled, as she burst out onto Main Street.

She knocked into a cart of apples, sending them rolling across the street, but she couldn’t stop to apologize. Her lungs burned as she pushed harder, faster. Past the thrift shop, past the bookshop, weaving through the morning crowd.

His footsteps pounded behind her, hard and determined, and the sound drove spikes of terror through her chest. The last time he’d been this close, she’d barely escaped. The bruises from his grip had taken weeks to fade.

She ducked down another side street, her shoulder scraping the rough brick wall. She needed Eric, needed Garrick, needed anyone who could?—

She slammed into something solid. Strong hands steadied her before she could fall. Her head snapped up to find familiar golden eyes, now dark with concern.

“Little bird? What’s—” His words cut off as he scanned her face. His nostrils flared, catching her fear-scent.

“Please,” she gasped, fingers clutching his shirt. “He’s?—”

His entire body suddenly went rigid, a deep growl building in his chest. He placed himself in front of her, his broad shoulders forming a protective wall as Rick burst into view.

Rick's footsteps slowed, but the growl in Eric's throat grew louder, more menacing. She felt the vibration of it where her hands still gripped his shirt, and she pressed closer to his back, praying that he wouldn't believe anything Rick said.

CHAPTER 14

Eric had been oddly restless ever since he'd left Robin at Garrick's place, and he found himself pacing his office for the third time that day, unable to settle. His wolf clawed beneath his skin, demanding action. At first, he'd dismissed it as the normal protectiveness towards his mate, but this felt different. Sharper. More urgent. The scent of trouble hung in the air like smoke before a forest fire.

He paused at the window, looking out over the town square. Nothing seemed out of place. A small group of human tourists taking pictures of the minotaur statue in the center—the present mayor's great grandfather. A couple of little pixie girls playing chase with two much larger orc boys, giggling happily. Mrs. Thomas sweeping her storefront. The usual foot traffic along Main Street. Yet his hackles refused to settle.

"Damn it," he growled, and grabbed his jacket off the hook.

Even if he were being foolish, he'd feel better if he saw her.

His phone buzzed. A text from Deputy Mills about a routine noise complaint. His fingers hovered over the keys, but his wolf's agitation spiked again. The message could wait. Something was wrong. He could feel it in his bones, in the way his wolf paced circles in his mind.

Icy mountain air hit his face as he stepped outside, carrying fragments of conversation and the lingering scent of fresh bread from the bakery. Normal sounds and scents, but underneath it all, the feeling that there was something wrong.

He couldn't pinpoint that wrongness but his wolf urged him up Main Street, closer to whatever had triggered his instincts. People called out the usual greetings, but he just lifted a hand and kept going, his senses on high alert.

There. The wind shifted, carrying Robin's scent, the usual sweetness overlaid with the acrid tang of fear. He moved faster, rounding the corner of Mason Street just as small, warm body slammed into him. He steadied her, quickly checking for injuries, but she appeared unharmed.

"Little bird? What's?—"

"Please," she gasped, fingers clutching his shirt. "He's?—"

His head snapped up as Thatcher's scent reached him and he growled, his fangs extending as he placed himself between her and the bounty hunter.

"Leave. Now." The words came out in a low snarl.

Thatcher smirked at him.

"No law against standing on a public street, Sheriff." His voice dripped false innocence, but his eyes remained cold and assessing. "Just wanted to have a friendly chat with the lady here."

His wolf howled for action, urging him to eliminate the threat, but he tamped down the impulse, keeping his voice steady despite the rage burning through his veins.

"This is your only warning."

"Like I said..." Thatcher's smirk widened. "I'm not doing anything wrong."

His claws slid from their sheaths, his control slipping as his wolf tried to take over. The bounty hunter's eyes flickered between his claws and his rapidly lengthening fangs, and his smirk finally faltered. His hand moved towards the holster beneath his jacket, but Eric growled again and he stopped moving.

Thatcher looked over his shoulder at a sudden burst of laughter from the street behind him, then raised both hands as he took a step backwards.

"This isn't over," Thatcher said coldly. "She's got unfinished business waiting for her."

"It's over."

He held the man's gaze, letting his eyes flash gold. Thatcher's jaw clenched before he turned and melted into the crowd, his leather jacket disappearing among the normal flow of people. Eric continued to track his movements, muscles coiled tight, until the last trace of his scent vanished.

Behind him, Robin's breath came in short gasp, and his wolf whined, urging him to comfort her. He turned, his heart aching at the sight of her pale face and trembling hands. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders, pulling her close. She went rigid for a heartbeat, then collapsed against him, her fingers twisting into his shirt. Her racing heart thundered against his chest, as he breathed in her scent, his wolf calming a little now that she was safe in his arms.

"I've got you," he murmured, stroking her back soothingly. "You're safe."

She looked up at him, every freckle standing out against her white face, those big amber eyes haunted. The sight tore at something in his chest. His wolf paced beneath his skin, desperate to protect her.

“You don’t have to face this alone,” he said quietly. “Whatever it is, I’ll help you.”

“I... I...”

“Not here.” He picked her up, ignoring a faint muffled protest. “Home first.”

He carried her back to the cabin, taking the back streets, even though he wasn’t naive enough to believe that his actions would go unnoticed. She didn’t say anything, just huddled against him, small fingers still clutching his shirt. He kept his senses on high alert, ears and nose searching for any sign of danger. His wolf refused to relax, even though Thatcher’s scent had faded away.

Inside the cabin he placed her gently on the couch, then made her some tea, adding two dollops of honey to help with the shock.

“Drink this,” he said firmly as he handed it to her, then settled next to her on the couch. “Then tell me who that man is and why he is hunting you.”

She took a sip, then two, as he watched her face, tracking the subtle shifts in her expression. His wolf prowled beneath his skin, bristling at her obvious distress. The scent of her fear lingered, souring the air between them.

The silence stretched, broken only by the soft tick of the kitchen clock and the whisper of wind through the trees outside. She gripped the mug tighter, her knuckles white against the ceramic, then sighed.

“He works for my former boss,” she said finally, her voice so quiet he might have missed it without his enhanced hearing. “I’ve been running from him. From everything.”

His wolf surged forward, demanding he eliminate whatever threatened her, but he

tamped down the urge, forcing himself to remain still. Any sudden movement now might spook her back into silence.

“I used to work for a man named Martin Kendrick at Palmer Industries. I was his executive assistant.” Her voice cracked. “He had me sign papers all the time. Authorizations, transfers, documents for the board. I never questioned it.”

His gut clenched, already suspecting where this was going.

“One night, I stayed late to finish some reports. Martin was in his office talking to someone on the phone. The door was open just enough...” Her pulse jumped at her throat. “He was laughing about how clever he’d been. How he’d managed to funnel millions through shell companies, but the paper trails all led back to me. My signatures were on everything.”

Her hands shook, tea sloshing against the sides of the mug. “He knew exactly what he was doing, and he set me up to take the fall if anyone caught on. As soon as he hung up, I confronted him but he just sat there, smirking at me. He said no one would believe me. I threatened to go to the police and he laughed and picked up the phone. Said he’d call them first. That’s when I ran.”

“That bastard,” he growled, the sound vibrating through the space between them. He knew his eyes had flashed gold, overwhelmed by raw, protective fury, but she didn’t shrink away from him.

“I know he is, but I can’t prove anything, and he’s right—they’re my signatures, my authorizations.”

“So you had to run.”

“What choice did I have? Stay and go to prison for his crimes?” she asked bitterly. “I

thought I could just disappear, but I didn't know how to do it. I made the mistake of using one of my credit cards to put a deposit on a small apartment in another city. I just happened to see Rick talking to my neighbor and recognized him. He'd been to the office before. I'd even written checks for him. Checks with my signature. So I ran again."

He forced himself to calm, gently removing the mug from her clasp and taking her hands in his.

"What happened then?"

"I learned. I called a friend once to see if I could stay with her, and learned that he could track my phone. I got rid of it and picked up a prepaid one. I took as much money out of my account in cash as I could, then destroyed the cards when I realized he could track them too. Learned I couldn't get a regular job because he could track my social security number. I thought I might be safe this time, but he found me anyway."

There was so much despair in her voice that he couldn't stop himself from pulling her onto his lap and wrapping his arms around her. She didn't resist, but she didn't relax either.

"Listen to me, little bird," he said firmly. "You don't have to run anymore. Not while I'm here."

"You don't understand. Martin has connections, money?—"

"I don't care what he has. This is my territory. My town. And you're under my protection now, and no one is going to hurt you ever again."

CHAPTER 15

Robin found herself leaning into Eric's embrace, her body seeking comfort before her mind could catch up. His arms tightened around her, solid and warm, pulling her closer. His familiar scent surrounded her as tears finally began to spill down her cheeks.

"I'm so tired," she whispered into his shirt. Months of fear and exhaustion crashed over her like a wave. Her shoulders shook as she finally let go of the rigid control she'd maintained since that terrible day in Martin's office.

His hand rubbed gentle circles on her back, his touch anchoring her as she fell apart. His steady heartbeat thumped against her ear, its rhythm soothing her ragged breaths.

"I know, little bird, but you're safe now," he murmured into her hair, the rumble of his voice vibrating through her body. "I've got you."

She pressed closer, letting his strength hold her together. She'd been alone for so long—sleeping in cheap motels, looking over her shoulder, trusting no one. But she didn't feel alone now, and she didn't push him away.

"Can you stop him?" she asked quietly. "Rick's not going to give up."

This time a growl vibrated through his body.

"You let me worry about him," he said grimly.

The certainty in his voice helped her to breathe a little easier. She didn't want to think about how he might take care of Rick. She didn't want to think about anything other than the warmth and safety she felt in his arms.

"Will you..." She hesitated, unsure how to ask. "Will you hold me for a little while?"

"Of course."

"Thank you," she said softly, and let the warmth of his arms pull her under.

When she awoke, it was to find herself still in Eric's lap, her cheek pressed against his shoulder, his arms tight around her. She didn't think she'd been asleep long, but she felt better, calmer. She didn't move, reluctant to leave the warmth of his embrace, but a soft laugh ruffled her hair.

"Playing possum?"

She leaned back and looked up at his face. Golden eyes glowed down at her, no longer angry but warm and kind.

"Thank you for holding me," she whispered.

"Anytime. It's a mate's privilege."

He spoke lightly, but the word mate reminded her of Lila's earlier words and her heart ached. She didn't want to be a temporary distraction, just a playmate until he decided to settle down with a real wolf.

"What's a mating bite?"

His body went rigid beneath her, his eyes blazing with something she couldn't read.

“It’s a mark that shows a permanent bond between mates. When a wolf bites their true mate, they leave a mark.” His fingers brushed lightly over her neck and she shivered. “It’s our way of showing commitment. A promise to stay together, no matter what.”

Unable to look at him, she focused on the top button of his shirt, open to show the hint of golden skin underneath.

“Why haven’t you...” The words stuck. She swallowed hard and tried again. “Why haven’t you given me one? Since we’re supposed to be mates.”

He was so still he didn’t even seem to be breathing. The silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken words.

“Because a mating bite is permanent. Once it’s done, there’s no taking it back. I would never ask that of you. Not when...” He looked away, his shoulders tense. “It has to be a choice. Not a demand, not a necessity, not even a request.”

She looked up at his face, studying his profile. For the first time he seemed... vulnerable. Had he been protecting her? Or himself? Or perhaps both of them.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “For giving me a choice. For not... For not being like everyone else who tried to control my life.”

His gaze returned to her face, golden eyes as warm as sunlight through honey, and gently cupped her cheek. Something flared between them, and this time she was the one to look away.

“Is... is it a problem that I don’t have one?” she asked, remembering Lila’s words again. “Will it cast doubts about our relationship?”

He shrugged.

“Not really, not as long as you carry my scent. The neck is the traditional place, but it’s not the only place.”

She frowned up at him.

“I don’t understand. Where else would they go?”

“Places covered by clothing.” He leaned down and growled the words directly into her ear. “Private places.”

“Oh,” she breathed. Did he mean... Could he mean... She should have been shocked but instead the thought sent a curl of heat through her body.

“But the traditional mating mark is the bite on the neck, or just below it on the top of the shoulder,” he said, straightening and looking away again. “It’s a vulnerable spot. Showing a wolf’s trust and submission to their mate. And, of course, the scar is always visible, a reminder to the world that you’re taken.”

“Taken.” She tested the word, liking the sound of it. “So everyone would know that I belonged to you?”

“Yes.”

“You mean...” Her cheeks flamed. “That you... um... owned me.”

“No, not own,” he said fiercely. “No one owns you, little bird. No one. But if you wore my mark, yes, everyone would know that you were mine.”

Mine.

Another shiver of heat raced through her body. His arm tightened around her, pulling her closer, and she suddenly realized how intimate their position was.

“You’re blushing,” he said softly, and she turned her face into his shirt to hide her flaming cheeks.

“It’s hot in here,” she mumbled.

His chest shook, and then he was laughing, the rich sound washing over her. She relaxed into him, letting his laughter fill her heart.

“My shy little bird.”

He kissed her, his mouth claiming hers, and she melted into the kiss. As if that was what her body had been waiting for, the coil of heat in her belly unfurled and spread through her body. The soft cotton of his shirt rubbed against her skin as her hands explored the contours of his chest. She needed to feel the warmth of his skin, needed the contact. Needed him.

But he pulled away, then placed her gently back on the couch as he rose.

“I’m going to start on supper.”

“I can help.”

“Not tonight,” he said firmly. “You’ve had a hard day. Let me take care of you.”

The words sent a shiver of remembered arousal through her body, and when she looked over at him, his eyes were glowing gold again.

“Food. You need food.”

He headed for the kitchen with somewhat less than his usual grace, leaving her staring after him. Food wasn't what she wanted from him. But how could she convince him to take care of her again?

CHAPTER 16

E ric stood in the doorway of the living room, watching Robin eat the soup he'd made. The fire cast shadows across her face, rendering it mysterious and unreadable. His wolf paced beneath his skin, radiating waves of possessiveness that made his chest ache. The urge to cross the room and pull her into his arms, to press his face into her neck and breathe in her scent, was almost overwhelming.

He clenched his jaw and forced himself to stay put. She had trusted him with her story. The last thing she needed was him complicating things with his feelings, no matter how much his wolf howled for her.

She put the bowl down, the spoon clinking quietly, and reached up to undo her braid. The firelight caught sparks of gold in her auburn hair, and his breath hitched. Fuck, she was beautiful. Not just her face or her body, but in the strength that had kept her going all this time.

His fingers tightened on the doorframe. He wanted to be the one she turned to, the one she trusted completely. He wanted her smile, her laugh, the sharp wit she revealed in unguarded moments. He wanted all of her—not just as his mate in name, but in truth.

She looked up, catching his gaze. A small smile curved her lips, and his heart stumbled in his chest. How had this woman worked her way so deep under his skin? Their eyes locked, hers holding his with a hope that made his breath catch. The air between them grew thicker, charged with possibility. His claws dug into the wooden doorframe, anchoring himself against the pull of her.

Her scent shifted, sweetening with desire, and his nostrils flared. His wolf howled to claim her, to mark her as his own. But he couldn't do that. She'd been through too much—he wouldn't push.

“Come and join me,” she said, patting the place on the couch next to her.

He knew he shouldn't, but he was halfway across the room before his mind registered the movement.

“Why don't you have some?”

She handed him a glass of wine, her fingers brushing against his, then settled back on the couch, her knee resting against his. The heat from that small point of contact warmed his entire body.

“Thank you for telling me everything,” he said.

“Thank you for listening.” Her voice dropped. “For understanding.”

“You're welcome. If I can do anything to help?—”

“There is something,” she said softly, and he held his breath. “Sleep with me.”

His hand clenched around the glass, and she shook her head, a faint blush rising in her cheeks.

“It doesn't have to be like that. You could just... hold me. I've been so alone for so long. Ever since my grandmother died.”

“Is that why...”

He stopped, not wanting to pry, but she understood the question anyway.

“Yes. I was always kind of shy and bookish, not really interested in boys until I was, I don’t know, sixteen maybe? But that was around the same time Nana started having health problems. I had to take care of her. No, not had to. I wanted to. She’d raised me ever since my mother died. We kept hoping it would get better, but...”

A tear slipped down her cheek, and he put down the wine to take her hands.

“She managed to arrange it so I could go to college, but I still lived at home with her so I never had a chance for much in the way of a social life. Which was fine,” she added fiercely. “I’m glad we had that time together.”

He stroked his thumb across her wrist until her breathing steadied.

“She died right before I graduated so then I was dealing with that and starting my new job and I couldn’t really handle anything else. When I finally had time to breathe and started to think about dating I realized I didn’t have a clue about it. Or men. Or s-sex.”

She flushed, but didn’t look away, and his heart swelled with pride at her bravery.

“I was worried about finding someone who would understand why I couldn’t move fast, so I just... didn’t. And then I started running and now here I am. A virgin. A scared virgin,” she said sadly.

“Are you scared of me?” he asked, holding his breath as he waited for her answer.

“No, Eric. I’m not scared of you. Not even a little.”

She freed her hands from his and trailed them slowly up his arms, her touch feather-

light but searing through the fabric of his shirt. The touch sent electricity racing through his veins, igniting every nerve ending. His wolf howled in triumph.

“I want to kiss you,” she whispered.

Moving slowly, giving her every chance to back away, he cupped her face in his hands. Her skin felt like silk against his calloused palms. Instead of pulling back, she leaned into his touch, amber eyes darkening with desire. Her lips parted, her breath mingling with his, carrying the promise of everything he’d been denying himself.

When he finally claimed her mouth, the kiss blazed through him like wildfire. Gone was the careful restraint of their public displays. This was raw, real, a claiming that spoke to the primal part of his nature. Her hands slid up to grip his shoulders, her fingers digging in as if to keep him from pulling away. As if he could.

His wolf purred with satisfaction as she pressed closer, fitting perfectly against him. Her taste, her scent, the soft sounds she made—everything about her called to both man and beast. Her pulse raced beneath his fingertips as he traced the curve of her neck. The sweet scent of her desire mingled with his, driving his wolf wild with need.

He pulled back just enough to study her face—the flush in her cheeks, the trust in her eyes. Something protective and fierce swelled in his chest. This was about so much more than physical attraction. He wanted to shelter her, cherish her, show her that she deserved tenderness after everything she’d been through.

His wolf urged him to claim her fully, to mark her as his mate where everyone could see, the instinct pounding through him with each beat of his heart. But he forced that primal need back down. She’d spent too long having choices taken from her. He wouldn’t add to that, no matter how much his inner beast protested.

But he couldn’t back away, not when she was looking at him like that.

He slid his hand down to her breast, lightly tracing the stiff little peak beneath her shirt. Her eyes went hazy with pleasure. She arched towards him, pushing herself more firmly against his hand.

“Little bird, what you do to me.”

He cupped her other breast, feeling the nipple harden under his palm, and her head fell back as she moaned. The sight sent another bolt of desire straight to his cock, and he couldn't stop the answering growl. She looked up at him, her gaze heated and hungry, and his wolf preened.

“Can I... take care of you this time?” she whispered.

He groaned at the thought.

“What did you have in mind, little bird?”

Her hands moved hesitantly to the front of his shirt. She undid the first button, then the second, stroking tentative little fingers over each inch of skin she exposed. He remained perfectly still, letting her explore at her own pace. His wolf preened under her touch, savoring her every stroke.

“You're so strong,” she murmured, her hands moving lower. “So warm. So... perfect.”

“I'm glad you think so,” he managed to say, then forgot everything but the feel of her hands on him as she reached the bottom of his shirt.

She hesitated, then tugged, the buttons popping free. His breath hissed between his teeth as her fingers trailed down his abdomen. Her touch was light, a barely-there stroke, and yet it set him on fire.

“Fuck, little bird.”

His claws extended and retracted, a sign of the struggle for control. He didn't want to frighten her, not when she was doing so well, but her sweet caress was driving him wild.

“You can touch me too,” she said softly. “If you want.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Her cheeks flamed, but she didn't look away. Her fingers traced over the hard ridge of his erection, the sensation sending lightning through his veins.

“You're so big.”

She pressed down, and he swallowed a groan. His eyes closed, the world narrowing down to the feel of her hand on him. Then she began to stroke him over his jeans, her hand growing less tentative with each touch.

“Like this?”

“Exactly like that,” he managed.

He could smell her arousal, the sweetness of it clouding his mind, urging him to take what was his, what was waiting for him between her legs.

“Take off your pants,” she said softly. “Let me touch you properly.”

If he did, nothing would stop him from claiming her.

“Not yet. You said that I could touch you.”

“Yes, please.”

“Such a polite little bird,” he teased, reaching for her shirt.

He repeated her actions, taking his time undoing each button and stroking each inch of skin he exposed. Then he gently slid the sides apart to reveal her perfect little breasts, her nipples already flushed dark pink.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, cupping them in his hands, and her eyes closed in pleasure.

The sound of her sigh was the most erotic thing he’d ever heard. He played with her nipples, rubbing his thumbs over the tight little peaks until they stood out, begging for his mouth. The temptation was too great. He leaned down and closed his lips around the tempting little morsel.

“Eric.”

Her voice was husky, the needy sound making his cock jerk.

He licked and suckled, alternating his attention between her nipples. With each tug, each caress, she moaned louder, pressing her breasts closer to his face. Her fingers tangled in his hair, holding him against her. He scraped his fangs lightly across the tip of her breast and she shivered.

“That feels so good. Please. I need...”

“Tell me what you need, little bird.”

“I... I don’t know. help me.”

She sounded so desperate that his cock jerked painfully against his jeans.

“Can I take these off?” he asked gently, tracing his finger along the waistband of her jeans.

She nodded and he undid her pants, then drew them slowly out from under her, taking her panties off at the same time. He went down on his knees in front of her, and she blushed from her cheeks all the way to the top of those sweet little breasts as he parted her legs.

Fuck, she was beautiful. Her pretty little pussy already flushed a deep pink beneath the small patch of bright red curls. The heady scent of her desire filled the air, making his head spin.

“Little bird, I’m going to taste you now. Is that okay?”

“Yes, please,” she whispered.

He parted her folds, his gaze locked on her glistening pussy. The scent of her arousal was even stronger here, and his tongue lengthened in anticipation.

“Look at how wet you are,” he murmured.

“Is that good?”

“Fuck, yes, little bird. It’s fucking perfect.”

He couldn’t wait any longer. He licked her, a long, slow glide from her entrance up to her clit, and she cried out.

“Oh, God.”

“Mmm, yes, little bird.”

He did it again, and again, the taste of her coating his tongue. The soft little sounds she made, her obvious pleasure, had his cock thrusting painfully against his jeans. By the time he circled her clit, she was rocking towards him, her body begging for more. He flicked her clit and her body shuddered, her breathing hitching as her climax built.

“That’s a good girl. Let’s see if you can take a little more.”

He slowly slid a finger inside her, and her body clenched around him, as hot and tight as it had been the previous time, and she moaned.

“More, please.”

Fuck, she was sweet.

“I’ll give you anything you ask for, little bird.”

He added a second finger, her body resisting until he sucked gently on her clit. Then sweetness flooded his tongue and her body gave way. She gasped as he began to pump his fingers into her.

“Yes, oh yes, please, don’t stop.”

Her words were breathy and broken, the sound going straight to his cock. She was so close. He could taste her approaching climax. He sucked her clit harder, then swirled his tongue around it.

She came with a soft cry, her body bucking against him, her muscles spasming

around his fingers. He worked her through her orgasm, prolonging the pleasure. She cried out his name, and his wolf howled.

This was the way she should always sound, coming apart for him, his name on her lips.

Her breathing gradually slowed, and her body relaxed, the sweet scent of her satisfaction filling the air. She blinked up at him, her eyes still dazed.

“Is... is that one of the private places to put a mating bite?”

“Yes, little bird.”

His fangs lengthened at the thought and her eyes widened.

“Then why didn’t you... I thought...”

He pulled her closer, breathing in their mingled scents.

“Because it has to be your choice. Not something that happens in the heat of the moment.” He brushed a strand of hair from her face. “When you’re ready—if you’re ever ready—I’ll be here.”

She shifted to look up at him, big amber eyes searching his face. Whatever she found there made her smile, soft and genuine. She curled into him again, fitting perfectly against his body.

A profound sense of peace washed over him. His wolf, usually so restless, settled contentedly. For the first time in his life, everything felt right. Complete. As if the missing piece he’d never known he needed had finally clicked into place.

CHAPTER 17

Robin stood by the doorway of the cabin the next morning, watching Eric shrug on his leather jacket. Sunlight streamed through the window, catching the gold in his eyes as he turned to her.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can. I need to arrange for coverage and make some inquiries.” He cupped her face, stroking his thumb across her cheek. “Keep the doors locked and don’t let anyone in.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said, but leaned into his warmth anyway.

“I know you will.”

His smile held that mix of confidence and tenderness that made her heart skip. He leaned down and kissed her and arousal immediately hummed through her veins. When he pulled back, she tried not to pout.

“You’ll get more kisses when I come back.” His golden eyes were laughing. “And maybe something else if you’re a good girl.”

“I can’t wait,” she whispered, and the laughter died from his eyes.

“Me neither.”

Another kiss, and then he was gone. He’d slept in the big bed with her last night, but although he’d held her all night long, he’d kept his jeans firmly in place despite her

offer to take care of him. Hopefully that was going to change tonight.

After he left, she paced the cabin's main room. The silence pressed in around her, broken only by the tick of the wall clock and the distant cry of a bird. She'd spent so long watching her own back, trusting no one, that this enforced idleness felt wrong.

She grabbed a dust cloth and started wiping surfaces that didn't need cleaning. The kitchen counter gleamed, but she scrubbed it anyway. Her hands needed something to do, something to keep her from wondering if Rick was still lurking somewhere in town. Or thinking about last night, when Eric's touch had set her skin on fire.

The cabin felt different in daylight. Smaller. More intimate. Her gaze caught on the couch where they'd... She quickly turned away, heat rising in her cheeks.

She moved to the window, peering through the curtains at the empty yard. The forest beyond looked peaceful, but she knew better than to trust appearances. She pressed her forehead against the cool glass, wrestling with the unfamiliar feeling of having someone to rely on.

Sighing, she went over to the bookcases next to the fireplace, searching through the titles until she found one of her favorite fantasies. She curled up in the big armchair with the book, not quite ready to face the couch, and was busy fighting the goblins under the castle when someone knocked on the door, sharp and demanding.

Her heart hammering against her ribs, she crept to the window, keeping close to the wall as she peeked through a gap in the curtains. An elegant woman stood on the porch, her tailored suit a sharp contrast to the snowy forest beyond. Black hair streaked with silver was pulled into a severe bun that emphasized her high cheekbones—cheekbones that looked uncomfortably familiar.

Her fingers trembled as she reached for the door handle. Eric had told her not to let

anyone in, but she had an uneasy suspicion about the woman outside. She opened the door a crack, leaving the chain in place.

“Can I help you?” Her voice came out steadier than she felt.

“I’m Marjorie—Eric’s mother.” The woman’s eyes swept over Robin with the icy precision of a surgeon’s scalpel. “We need to talk.”

Her stomach churned. She remembered Eric’s tense expression when he’d mentioned his mother’s reaction to their relationship. The way his jaw had tightened when he spoke of her disapproval. This was the woman who’d tried to push him toward proper werewolf mates, who’d been conspicuously absent from the Pack gathering.

The silence stretched between them like a rubber band ready to snap. Her palms grew damp against the doorframe as Marjorie’s gaze pinned her in place. She felt exposed, vulnerable—a mouse caught in a hawk’s sights.

No. She wasn’t a mouse, no matter what Lila had said. She drew herself up straighter, meeting Marjorie’s stare.

“Very well.”

She unlatched the chain, proud that her hands didn’t tremble, and Marjorie swept into the cabin. The older woman’s presence immediately dominated the space, but perhaps that wasn’t surprising considering Eric’s powerful aura.

“I’ll be direct.” Marjorie turned, her golden eyes—so like Eric’s—fixed on Robin’s face. “My son should be leading the Pack. It’s his birthright, his destiny.”

In one sense Marjorie was probably right—she’d seen how naturally leadership came to him. But she’d also witnessed his struggle against the expectations of the Pack. She

opened her mouth to say just that, but Marjorie cut her off.

“The Pack will never accept a human mate,” Marjorie said sharply. “Especially not one who brings danger to our door. Did you think we wouldn’t know that there’s a bounty hunter after you?”

She blinked rapidly, fighting back the sting of tears. Everything she’d feared about her presence in Eric’s life, laid bare by his mother’s cutting words.

“He could have been a strong leader, if he hadn’t broken away from the Pack.” Marjorie’s voice grew cold. “But he was too weak to see what had to be done.”

“Don’t,” she said fiercely. “Don’t call him weak. He’s not. Don’t you realize how much strength it takes to go your own way? To resist the expectations that everyone else has placed on him?”

For the first time Marjorie’s arrogance wavered, a flash of something like pain crossing her features.

“It’s too late, isn’t it? I thought it was an act but I can scent the bond between you. It’s already there, whether either of you meant it to be or not.”

She couldn’t deny it—didn’t want to deny it.

“So what if it is? Don’t you want him to be happy?”

The older woman reared back.

“He’s my son. Of course I want him to be happy. That’s why I want him to be Alpha.”

“But what if that doesn’t make him happy? He told me how everyone expected him to follow in his father’s footsteps. But that’s not what he wants.”

“You don’t understand our ways—” Marjorie started.

“Maybe not. But I know he loves being sheriff. He protects this town, all of its people—not just the Pack. That’s who he is.”

Color rose in Marjorie’s cheeks. “The Pack needs?—”

“The Pack needs to let him choose. He doesn’t want to be bound by traditions that don’t fit who he’s become. Who he chose to become.”

Marjorie sank into a chair, the rigid set of her shoulders softening. For the first time, she glimpsed vulnerability in the older woman’s face.

“He’s not rejecting the Pack, or you,” she said softly. “He’s just trying to find his own way.”

A number of emotions played across Marjorie’s face—pride warring with tradition, love battling duty.

“He was always so stubborn,” Marjorie said finally. “Even as a pup. His father used to say it would make him a strong Alpha one day.”

“It makes him a good sheriff now. The way he puts everyone else first, how he protects the whole town—that comes from both of you.”

Marjorie examined her perfect fingernails.

“Perhaps I’ve been... too rigid in my expectations.”

“I think you’ve underestimated him.”

Their eyes met, and something shifted in the other woman’s expression. She gave a reluctant nod.

“Maybe I have.” Marjorie stood, smoothing her skirt with trembling hands. “I should?—”

A harsh knock cut through the air, three hard thuds that made her heart stutter. Rick’s voice carried through the wood, hard and menacing.

“Open up, Robin. We need to have a chat about what you stole.”

“I didn’t steal anything,” she whispered, more to herself than anyone else as she tried frantically to think of a way out. But before she could move, Marjorie’s arm shot out, pushing her behind the older woman’s back.

“Go away,” Marjorie snapped. The elegant woman who’d arrived to judge her was gone, replaced by something fierce and primal as she positioned herself between Robin and the door.

“Last chance,” Rick yelled. “Don’t make this harder than it needs to be.”

The door handle rattled violently and Marjorie’s lips pulled back in a snarl.

“You won’t touch her,” Marjorie growled, her hands curling into claws at her sides.

She stared at Eric’s mother, stunned by this unexpected defense. The woman who moments ago had questioned her place in Eric’s life now stood as her shield, wolf instincts overriding any previous doubts. Rick didn’t know what he was facing.

CHAPTER 18

Eric padded quietly through the fresh snow as he made his way back from town, his thoughts focused on the information he'd uncovered about Martin and Palmer Industries. The sun filtered through bare branches, casting long shadows across his path. His wolf prowled beneath his skin, anxious to get back to Robin.

The hair on the back of his neck suddenly stood up, and his wolf surged forward, slamming against his control. He froze mid-step, every muscle tensing as he lifted his head to scent the air. The wind carried traces of Robin's fear, mixed with Marjorie's anger and—his blood ran cold—the acrid stench of the bounty hunter.

"No." The word came out as a snarl. His wolf burst free, lending him supernatural speed as he sprinted through the forest. Tree branches whipped past his face, but he barely felt them. His heart thundered in his chest, not from exertion but from raw panic.

He'd left her alone. He'd promised to protect her, and he'd left her vulnerable.

The rational part of his mind tried to reassure him that his mother's presence meant Robin wasn't completely defenseless, but his wolf wouldn't listen to reason. All he could think about was reaching her, claiming her, keeping her safe.

The forest blurred around him as he pushed himself faster, following the scent trail that grew stronger with each stride. His claws emerged, his bones aching with the need to shift fully, but he fought it back. Not yet. He had to know what was happening first.

He was almost there. Her scent filled his nostrils, laced with fear. The cabin was close now, just past the next stand of trees. He leapt over a fallen log, landing lightly on the balls of his feet, and the cabin came into view through the trees, the door hanging on one hinge. Thatcher's scent hit him full force, and his vision tinged red, his wolf howling for blood.

He charged inside, claws still extended, ready to tear apart anyone who'd dared threaten what was his, and came to an abrupt halt. Robin and his mother stood in the living room, both alive and whole. Relief flooded through him, but his wolf refused to settle until he'd checked every inch of them for harm.

Robin's face was pale, her small fists clutching the broken remains of a lamp, but she looked... triumphant.

His mother stood beside her in a protective stance, and he blinked. Gone was her usual imperial bearing—her jacket was torn and her claws dripped blood—and she looked like the fierce wolf-mother he remembered from his childhood.

"Thatcher?" he growled. His wolf demanded blood, needed to hunt down the threat and eliminate it.

"Gone," his mother answered, and his world tilted slightly when she turned to Robin with an approving smile. "He showed up, but we sent him running."

His claws retracted slowly as he forced down his rage, listening to Robin recount what happened.

"He kicked down the door and said I was coming with him. I told him I wasn't going anywhere."

"You should have seen her, Eric." His mother's voice held unexpected warmth.

“Standing there like she owned the place. A true alpha’s mate. A true sheriff’s mate,” she added slowly and his world tilted again.

It almost sounded as if his mother had finally accepted his choice.

“But then that evil bastard tried to grab her anyway. I clawed him and when he turned on me, Robin smashed the lamp over his head. That took the fight right out of him.” His mother beamed at Robin, then looked down at her hand as her claws retracted. “I do hope I didn’t break a nail.”

“But you’re all right?” he demanded as he grabbed Robin’s shoulders, checking for injuries.

“I’m fine.”

Her voice was a little shaky but she gave him a radiant smile. She was so much stronger than she knew—surviving on her own for so long, and now facing Thatcher without backing down. His wolf preened at having chosen such a worthy mate, even as he reminded himself that they weren’t truly mated.

His mother’s eyes gleamed as she watched them. “Well, I suppose I should go. But don’t wait too long to give me grandchildren. I want at least three.”

He choked on air while Robin’s face flamed red. His mother swept towards the door with a satisfied smirk, leaving them in stunned silence. But she paused next to him for a moment, her hand settling on his shoulder.

“Keep her safe, son,” she said quietly.

His wolf basked in the moment. His mother, who’d spent years pushing suitable Pack females at him, who’d insisted on maintaining every ancient tradition, had just

embraced a human as his mate.

The door clicked shut behind his other, and he turned back to his mate. Her smile had faded and she swayed slightly. He suspected the adrenaline from the fight was wearing off, and he quickly put his arms around her.

“Little bird, you scared the shit out of me.”

“I was terrified, but I wasn’t going to let him take me. And your mother was amazing.”

He stroked her hair.

“I’m so proud of you for standing up to him.”

“I’m kind of proud of myself too. Although he did get away.”

“That’s fine.” He nuzzled her cheek, breathing in her sweet scent. “As long as you’re safe.”

She leaned into his touch.

“I’m glad you came back early.”

“Me too.” He kissed the top of her head, breathing her in again.

“Did you find out anything useful?”

“I’m afraid not, but I’ll keep digging. I’ll also have Judge Baker issue a warrant for Thatcher’s arrest.”

“You can do that/”

He grinned and gestured at the broken door.

“I most certainly can. That’s breaking and entering. If you and my mother haven’t already scared him off, I’m pretty sure the thought of being arrested will. He must have known he was taking a chance.”

“He didn’t expect me to fight back.”

“But you did. You’re not a mouse, are you, little bird?”

She smiled, her whole face lighting up, and his heart stuttered in his chest. She was so brave and beautiful.

“No, I’m not. Not anymore.”

“Never again.”

“Thanks to you,” she whispered, and went up on her toes to kiss him.

Desire roared through him, strengthened by the thought of how easily he might have lost her.

“Eric,” she breathed, and the sound of his name on her lips undid him.

“We can’t do this here,” he muttered.

“Do what?”

He scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bedroom, kicking the door closed

behind him.

“I need you,” he said hoarsely.

“Please,” she whispered. “I need you too.”

Her hands fumbled at his pants and his wolf howled with need. He wanted her so badly, but he needed her to want this, not just out of gratitude or a sense of obligation.

“Are you sure?” he asked, his voice coming out as a growl.

“I’m sure.”

She managed to free his erection, then gasped as it sprang into her hand.

“It’s so big,” she whispered, and he groaned, forcing himself to hold still as she explored. “And smooth. Except for this part.”

He clamped his hand over hers when those curious little fingers found the ring of rougher skin at the base of his cock.

“That’s where my knot is. It will expand and lock us together when I come.”

“Oh. You get even bigger?” Her eyes widened again, but the scent of her arousal deepened. “Are you sure that’s going to work?”

“It will fit, little bird. If you’re ready.”

“I want to be ready,” she whispered. “Show me.”

“We’ll go slow.”

“Not too slow, I hope.” She gave him a shy little smile that sent his pulse skyrocketing.

“Impatient little bird,” he teased.

“Only because I can’t wait for you to take care of me again. But first...”

She bent over and licked the tip of his cock and he almost exploded right then and there.

“Fuck, little bird. You keep that up and I’m not going to last.”

“I can’t help it. I want to taste you.”

“Not this time.”

“But—”

He pulled her upright, silencing her with a kiss.

“I won’t last, not when I’ve wanted you for so long. Next time, I promise.”

“But—”

He kissed her again, and this time he didn’t stop until she was quivering in his arms. He tried to undress her slowly but his need was too great and he ended up using his claws to slice them away. He cupped her breasts reverently, thumbs tracing slow circles over her nipples, then lowered his head to take one stiff peak into his mouth. She moaned, arching towards him, her fingers threading through his hair.

His hands skimmed down her sides, sliding between her legs, and felt her tense. He

paused, then lifted his head.

“Too much?”

“N-no. I want to do this.” She took a deep breath. “Just—go slowly.”

“Of course. We can stop any time.”

Even though it might kill him.

He lifted her onto the bed and kissed her until she sighed against his mouth, then stroked his hand gently down her body again. This time her legs parted readily and he growled his approval as he found her center.

“So fucking wet.”

He teased her until she arched into his hand.

“Please.”

He pressed his thumb gently against her clit and her whole body quivered.

“I think you’re ready for a little more, don’t you?”

She nodded frantically, and he slid a finger into her tight little pussy, pleased at how easily she accepted it. Her nail dug into his shoulders when he added a second finger but she rocked towards him.

“That’s a good girl. Are you ready for more?”

“Yes, please.”

So fucking sweet.

Despite her eagerness, it took longer for her untried body to take a third finger, but he persisted until she opened for him, then pumped his fingers slowly in and out.

“You’re doing so well, little bird. You can take a little more, can’t you?”

“More?”

Her voice was a breathy moan, but she nodded.

“A little more,” he promised. “So you’re ready for me.”

He added a fourth finger and her muscles clenched, resisting the intrusion.

“It’s too much,” she panted.

“Relax, little bird. Your body knows what to do.”

He kissed her gently, teasing her nipple until she squirmed beneath him, then lowered his mouth and sucked hard. Her head fell back, her body arching. At the same time, he curled his fingers up, stroking her sweet spot.

She came with a shocked cry, her body pulsing around his fingers. He worked her through her orgasm, his cock throbbing as she rocked against him.

When her body finally stilled, he gently removed his fingers and moved between her legs.

“Eric.”

His name was a husky sigh, filled with need, and he couldn't hold back any longer.

"I need you, little bird. Are you ready for me?"

"Yes. Please."

He pushed her legs further apart and positioned himself against her opening. She was so small he almost stopped, but her desire scented the air and her arousal coated his cock, reassuring him.

"Slowly," he reminded himself.

He slid inside her, a slow, inexorable thrust that sent pleasure rippling down his spine. Her nails dug into his shoulders, but her eyes were wide and trusting. When he met resistance, he lifted her hips and plunged into her, burying himself to the hilt.

"Oh." Her eyes flew even wider, but the smell of her arousal grew stronger.

"Are you okay?"

"I think so. You're so big. So thick."

She shifted slightly and her breath caught.

"Does it hurt?"

"Only a little. It feels better when you move."

He'd promised her slow, but his control was a thread about to snap.

"Hold on, little bird."

He withdrew, then thrust again.

She cried out again, and this time there was nothing but pleasure in her cry. She arched up towards him, her nails digging into his shoulders, and he nearly lost his mind. He drove into her, faster, harder, her small moans urging him on. His balls slapped against her ass, the base of his cock swelling rapidly, stretching her even wider as he plunged into her. She cried out, and he forced himself to pause, his muscles straining, every instinct urging him to take her.

“Fuck,” he ground out. “Little bird, tell me if I need to stop.”

“Don’t stop. Please.”

Her inner walls quivered around him, her body welcoming him, and his control snapped. He began to thrust, a rough, primitive rhythm, the pleasure of her body consuming him. He gripped her hips, holding her in place as he pounded into her. She was so wet, so hot, his mate, his woman. He’d never last.

“You’re mine, little bird.”

“Yes.”

“Say it.”

“I’m yours, Eric. All yours.”

He roared his triumph, burying his cock to the hilt as his knot swelled and he began to come, pulsing inside her and marking her with his seed. Her pussy rippled around him, milking the last of his climax from his cock as he collapsed down over her in an exhausted, satisfied heap.

CHAPTER 19

Robin couldn't breathe, couldn't think. All she could do was feel. Feel the heavy weight of Eric's body pressing down on her, his knot locking them together, stretching her deliciously. The thick shaft buried deep inside her, filling her completely. His hot seed pulsing into her.

She'd never imagined anything could feel like this. Never imagined that her body could take him, could accept his knot.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his voice hoarse, golden eyes blazing down at her.

"Yes. Oh, yes."

She was more than all right. She was perfect, floating in a sea of bliss, her body humming with satisfaction.

"Good. You're mine now."

"I'm yours," she agreed, smiling up at him.

His knot was still locked inside her, and they were connected in the most intimate way possible. She couldn't imagine ever wanting anything else.

"You're a brave, amazing little bird."

"You make me brave," she whispered, and he smiled down at her, his eyes soft.

“We’ll be like this for a few minutes,” he murmured. “Let me know if it gets uncomfortable.”

“Okay.”

“It won’t always be this fast and frantic. Next time, I’ll go slow. Tease you for hours.”

“Hours?”

The thought made her pussy clench, and he groaned.

“You’re going to be the death of me.”

He shifted a little, and his cock twitched inside her. A jolt of pleasure shot through her, and she arched up towards him, already hungry for more.

“I’m glad this isn’t next time,” she said breathlessly, “because I can’t imagine waiting for hours.”

“Insatiable little bird.”

His hands tightened on her hips, his smile turning wicked, and he began to thrust, a long, slow glide. Pleasure hummed through her, every stroke fanning the flame burning inside her.

“You are mine now,” he growled again, and she shivered.

“Yes. All yours. Just don’t stop.”

“Never,” he promised.

“Will your knot always be this big?”

“Only when I’m close to coming. It’s nature’s way of ensuring my seed takes hold.”

“And you... enjoy that too?”

“Fuck, yes. The feeling of being inside you, claiming you. It’s the most intense pleasure I’ve ever felt.”

His golden eyes held such intensity, such raw emotion, that it made her chest ache.

“I want to give you my mark,” he growled, his thumb brushing across her lower lip. “Make you truly mine.”

The thought of wearing his mark, of belonging to him completely, sent shivers down her spine. But the shadow of her past still loomed over her—pressing against the edges of this perfect moment.

“I want that too,” she whispered, reaching up to cup his face. His stubble scratched against her palm as he leaned into her touch. “But I need to clear my name first. I don’t want our bond to start with lies and shadows hanging over us.”

She saw the flash of disappointment cross his face, his eyes darkening for a moment, and her heart ached. She hated causing him pain, even this small amount. But before she could say anything else, his mouth crashed down on hers.

The kiss stole her breath away. It was fierce, possessive, filled with promise and need. His hands tangled in her hair, holding her close as if afraid she might slip away. The raw passion behind it made her tremble, and she gripped his shoulders to steady herself.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing hard, his eyes blazed with determination.

“We’ll wait,” he growled. “But make no mistake—you’re mine, Robin. Bite or no bite.”

The conviction in his voice sent warmth spreading through her chest. She’d spent so long running, so long being nobody to anyone, that his words felt like an anchor in a storm. His certainty wrapped around her like a shield, making her feel protected and cherished in a way she’d never experienced before.

His knot finally eased and he slipped free of her. They both groaned as her pussy clenched, as if trying to hold him inside. She couldn’t help feeling a little sad as he moved off her. She didn’t want to be apart from him, not even for a second.

“Shhh, little bird.”

He curled around her, pulling her against his warm chest, one arm draped across her waist.

“I’ll be right here,” he whispered, nuzzling her cheek.

His breath was warm against her skin, and the heat of his body lulled her. Exhaustion pressed down on her and her eyelids drifted closed. She snuggled back against him, safe and happy.

She woke to an empty bed and the smell of something delicious. She climbed out of bed, wincing a little at the soreness between her legs, and took a quick trip to the bathroom to clean up.

As she walked out into the living room to investigate that tantalizing smell, she

noticed that he'd fixed the door while she slept. She found him in the kitchen, a wooden spoon in his hand. He smiled as she walked in, the same smile that lit up his face and made his eyes glow and she smiled back, ridiculously happy. She walked over and leaned against him as he put his arms around her.

"Are you sore?" he asked softly.

"Maybe just a little."

"Then I cooked the right thing."

"What is it? It smells delicious."

"It's an old family recipe. My grandmother swore it could cure any ailment."

"What's in it?"

"I can't tell you. Then it wouldn't work."

He winked at her and her heart skipped a beat. She couldn't get enough of his playful side, which only seemed to come out for her.

"Well, I trust you. What can I do to help?"

"Nothing. Just sit down."

He'd made soup, rich and warming and redolent with spices, warming her all the way down.

"This is amazing," she said, devouring it hungrily.

“I’m glad you like it. It contains ginger and turmeric, both good for healing.”

“You’re very thoughtful.”

She blushed as his golden eyes gleamed.

“Maybe it’s because I can’t wait for you to heal. I don’t want to keep my hands off you, little bird.”

“Maybe I don’t want you too.”

He started to lean towards her, then sighed and sat back.

“We need to give you time to recover.”

She gave him a playful pout, and he grinned and changed the subject.

“I do have some good news. I checked and whatever Kendrick might have threatened, he never reported you. There aren’t any outstanding arrest warrants for you.”

Her stomach churned.

“You did what?”

“I had to make sure you were safe?—”

“You investigated me? Behind my back?”

“Robin—”

“I trusted you,” she said, her voice trembling. After everything they’d shared, he’d

gone digging into her past without even asking. “I told you what happened. Wasn’t that enough?”

“I was just trying to protect you.”

“By sneaking around? By checking up on me like I’m some kind of criminal?”

The flash of guilt on his face only made it worse.

“I—”

“I needed you to trust me.”

“I do trust you.”

“No, you don’t. If you did, you would have asked me first.” The hurt in her chest twisted into anger. “You would have talked to me instead of going behind my back.”

She pushed the chair back, legs scraping against the floor.

“I’m going for a walk. Alone.”

She couldn’t look at him, couldn’t bear to see the concern in his eyes that only made the betrayal sting worse. He followed her out on the porch after she grabbed her coat. He started to say something, then sighed and raised his head, nostrils flaring. After a long moment, his shoulders relaxed slightly.

“I don’t smell any danger.” He stepped aside, though she could see the tension in his jaw. “Be careful.”

She gave him a stiff nod and descended the porch steps. The frozen ground crunched

beneath her feet as she headed toward the tree line. Each step put more distance between them, but did nothing to ease the ache in her chest. The icy air stole her breath, the cold a welcome distraction from the storm of emotions threatening to overwhelm her.

The forest surrounded her with silence, bare branches stretching overhead like skeletal fingers. The snow muffled her footsteps, adding to the quiet. Her breath puffed out in white clouds as she walked deeper into the woods.

How could he have done that? Even if it made sense for him to check, why hadn't he asked her first? Because he didn't trust her? The betrayal stung worse than the cold air against her cheeks.

A sharp crack suddenly pierced the silence, and she whirled around, her heart slamming against her ribs. A massive figure lurked beneath the trees—but it wasn't Rick. An orc stood half-hidden behind a bush, his tusks gleaming in the filtered sunlight.

Her heart rate spiked again, but then she remembered what she'd once said to Eric about outer appearances not matching what was inside.

"Hello?" she said cautiously.

For a moment she thought the orc wasn't going to answer her, but then he came towards her. He towered over her, his huge body making her feel small and vulnerable. Her instincts screamed at her to run, but she wasn't that person any more.

Dark eyes studied her with an intensity that made her skin prickle. Despite his intimidating presence, she detected no malice in his gaze—only a deep, knowing look that unsettled her more than any threat could have.

“You look lost,” he rumbled, his voice as deep as thunder.

“I’m fine,” she snapped, then winced at how defensive she sounded.

A soft snort escaped him as he crossed thick arms over a broad chest.

“Doesn’t look like it. Running never fixes anything, you know.”

The words hit too close to home, and anger flared in her chest.

“What do you know about it?”

“I know what it’s like to run away. To hide,” he said simply, and the understanding in his voice caught her off guard.

“You don’t know why I ran.”

Dark eyes studied her again.

“Because of something you did? Or something you didn’t do?”

“Something I didn’t do.”

“Then clear your name. Don’t live in fear. It’s no way to exist.”

She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly aware of the biting cold.

“Do you know how to get back?” he asked gruffly.

When she nodded, he turned and disappeared back into the woods without another word. Did he live out here? Was he hiding too?

But he was right. She didn't want to hide any more. Taking a deep breath, she turned back towards the cabin, following her own tracks until she spotted the smoke coming from the chimney. Time to set things right.

CHAPTER 20

E ric stalked across the wooden floor of the cabin, his wolf's anxiety making each step more aggressive than necessary. The memory of Robin's hurt expression played on repeat in his mind.

He paused at the window, scanning the tree line yet again. No sign of her. His fingers curled into fists at his sides. His wolf demanded action—find her, protect her, keep her close. The rational part of his brain knew she needed time to process, but his instincts screamed otherwise.

“Fuck,” he muttered, running a hand through his hair. He should have handled the investigation differently. Should have told her what he was doing instead of going behind her back. But the need to keep her safe had overridden everything else.

The cabin felt empty without her. Her scent lingered but it wasn't enough. Not when his wolf knew she was out there alone, vulnerable. He'd checked the scent trail multiple times, but there was no trace of Thatcher. Apparently his mother and Robin had been successful in driving the man away. Unlike him.

He turned for another lap across the floor and picked up a new scent. He rushed over to the door, opening it just as Garrick arrived in the clearing. The gargoyle's stone-like features were set in a frown, his usual stoic demeanor tinged with concern.

“Where's Robin? She didn't come to work this morning.”

His wolf settled slightly at the familiar presence, though irritation still prickled under

his skin. “She needed some time alone. Went for a walk in the woods.”

“Alone?” Garrick’s frown deepened. “With that bounty hunter skulking around?”

“I don’t think he’s still around, but I checked the area before she left.” He scowled at the other male. He didn’t need anyone else questioning his ability to protect her. “No unfamiliar scents.”

Garrick crossed his arms, his shoulders scraping the doorframe. “She’s upset about something.”

“We had a... disagreement.” He fought back a growl at having to explain himself. “I looked into her past without telling her.”

“Ah.” Garrick’s expression shifted to understanding. “She values her privacy.”

“She’s had reason to. It was a stupid thing to do.” He raked a hand through his hair. “She’s fine, Garrick. Just needs space to think.”

The gargoyle nodded slowly. “Tell her not to worry about work today. But I expect her back tomorrow—the library’s getting dusty.”

He studied Garrick’s impassive face, for a moment, weighing his options. His wolf trusted the gargoyle, and after everything that had happened, he needed someone else in their corner.

“She was framed.” The words came out in a low growl. “Her former boss set her up to take the fall for his embezzlement scheme. Made her sign documents, buried the evidence in her name.”

Garrick’s stone features hardened even further. “And the bounty hunter?”

“Working for the bastard who framed her.” His claws threatened to emerge at the thought. “She’s been running ever since she discovered what he’d done.”

“That explains her wariness when she first arrived.” Garrick leaned against the doorframe, causing the wood to creak. “Good thing she found you.”

“Found me?” He snorted. “More like I couldn’t stay away. My wolf knew something was different about her from the start.”

“I noticed.” A hint of amusement crept into Garrick’s gravelly voice. “Never seen you so protective of anyone before.”

“This whole mess...” He shook his head. “At least she’s not alone anymore.”

“No, she’s not.” Garrick straightened. “You did right by her, Eric. Not many would take on someone else’s troubles like that.”

The gargoyle’s approval eased something in his chest. Having another ally, especially one as formidable as Garrick, could only help keep Robin safe.

“What’s the name of the company she worked for?” Garrick added. “I still have some connections in the city. People who owe me favors. Let me have a quiet word.”

“I’d appreciate that.” He meant it. His usual instinct to handle everything alone wasn’t as strong as his need to protect her. “But it could be dangerous.”

“Please.” Garrick’s laugh rumbled like rocks in a tumbler. “I didn’t get to where I am by being careless. Besides, no one should live looking over their shoulder.”

He nodded, his tension easing slightly. Having Garrick’s help could make a real difference.

The gargoyle's expression softened.

"I can sense the mate bond between you."

His wolf preened at the words, though he tried to maintain his composure. "That obvious?"

"To those who know what to look for." Garrick's eyes gleamed. "I'm surprised it formed so quickly, especially with a human. But then again, Robin's not exactly typical, is she?"

No, she definitely wasn't typical. She was fierce and brave, even when terrified. His wolf hummed with satisfaction at the thought. As if his thoughts had conjured her, her scent suddenly drifted towards him and a few seconds later she stepped out of the trees. His wolf settled instantly at her return.

"What's going on?" she asked as she came to join them, her cheeks flushed from the cold.

"You didn't show up for work," Garrick said calmly. "I was worried."

"Oh." Her shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry, I should have?—"

"No need to apologize." Garrick waved off her words. "Eric explained the situation."

He watched her face carefully, ready to step in if she showed any sign of distress at his revelation. But she just nodded, wrapping her arms around herself.

"Garrick's offered to help," he said, moving closer to her. The urge to touch her, to reassure both himself and his wolf that she was safe, nearly overwhelmed him. "He has connections in the city who might be able to help."

Her eyes widened as she looked over at the gargoyle. “You’d do that?”

“Of course.” Garrick’s stone features softened. “You’re one of mine now, even if you’re living with this mutt.”

He snorted at the jab, but kept his eyes on her. Her body relaxed a little and something that might have been hope crossed her face.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“You’re welcome. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Garrick shot him a quick look and the knowing look in his eyes made him wonder just how much his old friend understood about the situation. But Garrick only nodded and left, the door closing quietly behind him and leaving them alone. Her scent filled the cabin—anxiety mixed with something warmer, sweeter. His wolf stirred, wanting to erase the distance between them.

She shifted her weight, still standing near the door as if unsure whether to bolt again.

“I’m sorry,” they both said at once.

Her lips curved up slightly, and his chest tightened. He took a step toward her, then stopped, giving her space to retreat if she needed it. But she didn’t move away. Instead, she raised her chin, meeting his gaze with those clear amber eyes.

“I believe you meant well,” she said softly, smoothing her hands over her jeans. “It’s just... hard to trust.”

“I understand, but you can trust me. I’m on your side. Always. I won’t walk away.”

“I believe you.” She crossed the remaining distance between them. “Should we kiss and make up?”

Her shy smile sent his pulse racing.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded, and he pulled her against him, the feel of her soft body filling his wolf with contentment.

“Then let me show you just how sorry I am.”

He scooped her up, loving the way her arms wrapped around his neck, and carried her to the bedroom.

The next morning he walked her to work as usual, his senses alert for any sign of danger. The morning air carried the usual mix of scents—fresh bread from the bakery, wood smoke from chimneys, the crisp bite of mountain snow—but he searched for anything out of place. His wolf prowled beneath his skin, equally vigilant.

Her shoulder brushed against his arm as they walked, and the casual contact grounded him, even as his protective instincts had him scanning every shadow and alleyway they passed. He didn’t really expect any more trouble from Thatcher, but something was still nagging at him.

As they approached Garrick’s mansion, his steps slowed. The thought of leaving her, even in his friend’s capable protection, made his wolf restless. The gargoyle stood in the doorway, his stone-like features impassive as ever.

“She’ll be safe here, Eric,” Garrick said quietly, reading his hesitation. “No one gets

past me uninvited.”

He nodded, knowing Garrick’s reputation for protecting what was his.

“I’ll be back to walk you home later.”

She nodded and his wolf settled slightly at her acceptance of his protection, at the way she didn’t question or push back against his need to keep her safe.

After the doors closed behind her, he hesitated, then made his way to Callan’s workshop. The small building sat at the edge of town, smoke curling from its chimney. His wolf bristled at seeking help from the Alpha, but protecting Robin mattered more than his pride.

The workshop door creaked as he entered, the scent of wood shavings and metal thick in the air. Callan stood at his workbench. The Alpha looked up when he entered, his expression unreadable.

“Can we talk?” he asked quietly.

Callan put down his tools and crossed his arms, waiting. The silence stretched between them, heavy with the history between them.

“The bounty hunter who was after my mate—I’m concerned he won’t be the only one.” He managed to keep his voice steady despite the anger simmering beneath the surface. “Others may come looking for her.”

Callan’s neutral expression didn’t waver, but he caught the slight shift in his scent—concern, perhaps? The Alpha remained silent, letting him continue.

“I can protect her from one hunter. But if more show up...” His claws popped out.

The thought of Robin being hunted made his wolf snarl. “I need to know if the Pack will stand with us.”

The stern line of Callan’s mouth softened. “The Pack protects its own.”

He blinked, caught off guard by the simple declaration. His wolf, which had been bristling for a fight, settled.

“You’ve always fought against tradition,” Callan said, leaning back against his workbench. “But being part of the Pack isn’t about following rules blindly. It’s about having people at your back when you need them.”

He winced. He’d spent so long pushing against Pack bonds, that he’d forgotten they could be connections as well as chains.

“I wasn’t sure at first—I thought you were playing games—but now I know that Robin is truly your mate and that makes her Pack. We’ll keep watch. If anyone comes looking for her, they’ll find more than they bargained for.”

A knot loosened in his chest—one he hadn’t even realized was there. Despite years of maintaining his independence, of keeping the Pack at arm’s length, their support settled something deep inside him.

“Thank you,” he managed, the words rough but sincere.

He was about to leave when the Alpha shook his head, his lips quirking.

“Your mother’s been talking about your mate, you know.” A hint of amusement colored Callan’s words. “Going on about how the girl stood her ground against that bounty hunter.”

He froze, his hand on the doorknob. “My mother said that?”

“Wouldn’t shut up about it at the Pack meeting. Said Robin had more backbone than half the wolves she knows.”

His mother, who’d fought their relationship at every turn, was now bragging about Robin’s courage? The knowledge filled him with satisfaction—and a degree of amusement.

But something else nagged at him. She had faced down that threat while he wasn’t there. She’d proven herself capable, strong. Here he was, arranging Pack protection, when she’d already shown she could hold her own.

His grip on the doorknob loosened. He’d been so focused on keeping her safe, on protecting her, that he’d forgotten she wasn’t some fragile thing that needed constant guarding. Even his mother—stubborn, traditional Marjorie—had seen that strength in her.

Maybe it was time he trusted in that strength too. Trusted that supporting her didn’t mean hovering over her every moment. His wolf grumbled at the thought, but he knew it was the right thing to do.

As he stepped out of Callan’s workshop he realized that the weight that had been pressing on his chest since her encounter with Thatcher had eased. Not that he intended to let down his guard.

As he walked back towards his office, his mind clicked through the other precautions he could take. He’d need to alert the shopkeepers, especially those with a clear view of the street. Set up regular patrols around Garrick’s house during her work hours. Maybe even reach out to some of his contacts in neighboring towns.

The familiar weight of his sheriff's badge pressed against his chest as he climbed the steps to his office. This wasn't just about protecting Robin anymore—though that would always be his priority. This was about keeping his town safe, about showing anyone who thought they could threaten his people that Fairhaven Falls wasn't an easy target.

If another bounty hunter showed up, they'd find a united front of Others who protected their own.

CHAPTER 21

Robin took a deep breath, smiling at the scent of cider and candy apples and fried food. The Winter Festival was in full swing and strings of twinkling lights crisscrossed overhead, casting a warm glow on the snow-dusted streets. A group of children darted past, their faces painted with whimsical designs, while vendors called out their wares from wooden stalls decorated with evergreen boughs. She spotted Elara serving up coffee confections with Grondar looming behind her. Tourists mingled with Others, everyone relaxed and smiling.

A week had passed since they'd chased off Rick and she was beginning to believe she'd finally found the peace she'd been looking for. She smiled again, snuggling deeper into Eric's jacket, which he'd draped over her shoulders when she'd shivered earlier. His scent enveloped her, both comforting and exciting, and his arm was a reassuring weight around her waist as they navigated through the crowd.

"Look at that," she pointed to an ice sculpture of a wolf, its details so precise it seemed ready to leap from its frozen form. "It's beautiful."

"Not as beautiful as you," he growled in her ear. The sound sent a pleasant shiver down her spine that had nothing to do with the cold. A month ago, such casual intimacy would have terrified her. Now it felt as natural as breathing.

"Want some of that cider?" he added.

She nodded, already missing his warmth as he stepped away. "With extra cinnamon, please."

She watched as he made his way through the crowd. Even in this relaxed setting, he carried himself with that quiet authority that had first caught her attention. But now she knew the gentleness behind that strength, the way his eyes glowed when he looked at her, the fierce passion with which he made love to her, and the careful way he held her at night.

The winter air nipped at her cheeks, but for once she didn't feel the need to look over her shoulder or scan faces in the crowd. She caught a glimpse of Alison and Will on the other side of the square, their daughter bundled in white fur, and waved. While she hadn't quite had the nerve for the proposed girls' night, she'd spent several afternoons with her new friend. She was even thinking of suggesting to Erik that they have the other couple over for dinner.

She was happily contemplating the possibility when the sound of her name cut through the festive sounds and she froze. The festive atmosphere shattered like glass as she turned, already knowing who she'd find.

Martin stood there, his expensive wool coat and leather shoes a jarring contrast to the casual winter wear of the other festival-goers. His face held that same smug expression she remembered from countless office meetings, but now there was something harder in his eyes.

"Time to face the music, Robin." His voice carried across the space between them, drawing curious stares from the people nearby. "Come quietly, or I'll have no choice but to make a scene. The police are already on their way."

Her throat closed up, panic clawing at her chest as she felt dozens of eyes turn toward her. The cheerful festival lights now felt harsh and exposing. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think. The mulled cider scent that had been so comforting moments ago now made her feel sick.

Whispers rippled through the gathering crowd, and her legs trembled, her instincts screaming at her to run, but she remained frozen in place. Martin took a step closer, the smile that had once seemed so charming now turned malicious.

“Did you really think you could hide forever?” He lifted his chin, addressing the onlookers as much as her. “This woman is wanted for embezzlement. She stole millions of dollars from our company.”

“Well, well.” Lila’s voice cut through the tense silence as she stepped out of the crowd. The wolf’s painted lips curled into a vicious smile that made her stomach turn. “I knew there was something off about you. You’re just a common criminal trying to worm your way into our pack.”

Her cheeks burned as she heard mutters from the crowd. Everything was crumbling around her, but she wasn’t going to run.

“That’s enough,” Eric growled, suddenly appearing in front of her, his broad back blocking her view of Lila, his stance protective and fierce.

Through a blur of tears, she saw Callan emerge from the crowd as well, his expression grim as he positioned himself beside Eric. Then Aidan appeared on her other side, followed by more Pack members she recognized from meetings and gatherings. They formed a protective circle around her, their eyes fixed on Martin and Lila with unmistakable hostility.

A shadow fell over her as Garrick joined them, his stone features cold and intimidating as he moved to stand by Eric. Then Will was there as well, his normally cheerful expression replaced by a fierce scowl.

“Robin is one of us now,” Garrick said firmly, his deep voice carrying across the square. “And we protect our own.”

The crowd murmured agreement. Even the harpy vendor who'd once screeched at her was nodding.

"I suggest you leave." Callan's quiet words carried more menace than any shout. "Now."

Martin's confident facade cracked as he glanced around at the gathering. The man who had haunted her nightmares suddenly seemed smaller, less threatening, when faced with the strength of her new family.

"This isn't over," Martin spat. "I'll be back with proper authorities."

She put her hand on Eric's arm, then stepped up next to him. She knew he'd have preferred her safely behind him, but he let her through. Her legs trembled as she stepped forward, but her voice rang clear and steady.

"You won't have to come back with the authorities, Martin. I'm going to the police myself. I'll tell them everything—about the documents, about how you set me up, about your bragging."

The color drained from Martin's face, replaced by an ugly flush of rage. His perfectly manicured hands clenched into fists at his sides.

"You're making a mistake," he hissed through gritted teeth, his composure cracking.

The fear that had chased her across state lines seemed to evaporate in the face of Martin's impotent fury. She raised her chin, meeting his gaze directly.

"The only mistake I made was trusting you," she said, and the words felt like she was breaking free of the chains that had bound her for so long.

He glared at her but she was no longer afraid of him. Eric's hand was on her arm, supporting her. Her friends and new packmates stood by her side. Will gave her a thumbs-up sign as Eric tugged her gently back into the circle of his arms, his strength enveloping her.

"I'm so proud of you."

She turned into his embrace, burying her head against his chest as the impact of what was to come swept over her.

"I feel like I can finally breathe," she whispered. "But God, I'm terrified of what comes next. Making statements, possibly testifying..."

"Hey." He tilted her chin up until she met his golden gaze. "You won't face any of it alone. I'll be right beside you, every step of the way."

The absolute certainty in his voice calmed the sudden rush of panic and she managed to smile up at him.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. That's what mates do—support each other. You're the bravest person I know, little bird. And the strongest." His thumb traced her cheekbone. "But you don't have to carry everything by yourself. Not anymore."

She rose on her tiptoes and brushed her lips against his.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"No thanks needed. This is where I want to be. At your side."

“Actually, that may not be necessary—at least not for this.”

She looked up as Garrick joined them, a rare smile on his hard face.

“What do you mean?”

“I told you I’d investigate. I made some calls and found out why Martin never actually went to the authorities.”

Eric’s arm tightened around her as she stiffened.

“The money’s still sitting in those accounts,” Garrick continued. “He can’t touch it without your signature. That’s why he sent the bounty hunter—he needed you, not the police.”

She heard Eric growl as the pieces clicked into place—Martin’s desperation, Rick’s persistence. No wonder they wouldn’t let her go.

“There’s more. The company owner is an old business contact of mine. He’s willing to forget the whole thing if the money’s returned. No charges, no record. Not for you anyway.”

“Just like that?” Eric asked and Garrick nodded.

“Just like that. The owner cares more about recovering the funds than pursuing legal action. Says he’d rather handle it quietly.”

“Oh, thank God.” Relief filled her as she sagged against Eric. Over. It was all over.

“You little bitch,” Martin snarled from behind her, and she realized she’d forgotten all about him. “I’ll make sure you never work again. I’ll?”

Eric growled and stepped in front of her again, and she made no attempt to stop him.
Time for Martin to understand what it was like to meet a real predator.

CHAPTER 22

E ric's wolf surged to the surface as Kendrick's face contorted with rage, his carefully constructed facade crumbling. The acrid scent of desperation and fury rolled off the man in waves as he glared at Robin.

"I'm going to make you pay?—"

His vision tinged red, his muscles tensing as his wolf pushed against his control. No one threatened his mate. A deep growl rumbled from his chest as he took a step forward, but Robin's gentle hand on his arm kept him from doing something he might regret.

Garrick came to his side again, his stone-like form imposing as he crossed his massive arms. The rest of the Pack shifted closer, creating a wall of supernatural strength and barely contained aggression.

Martin's eyes darted between them, the blood draining from his face as he finally seemed to grasp his situation. Still, his ego wouldn't let him back down.

"This isn't over," he spat, though his voice wavered.

"It is for you." The alpha power in Callan's voice carried absolute authority. He gave a slight nod, and two of his most intimidating Pack members—both well over six feet tall and built like linebackers—stepped forward to flank Martin.

He felt a savage satisfaction as Martin's attempt at bravado finally crumbled. The

man who had caused his mate so much pain now looked small and pathetic, surrounded by beings who could tear him apart without breaking a sweat. He watched as his pack members escorted Martin away, his wolf still bristling beneath his skin.

But then his mate turned to him, her eyes bright with unshed tears, and his focus immediately shifted. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close against his chest, her familiar scent helping to calm his wolf.

“Are you okay?” he murmured, running a hand down her back.

She trembled slightly in his embrace, but her voice was steady.

“I am now.” She pressed her face into his shirt, her arms tight around his waist. “I can’t believe it’s over.”

His wolf preened at how naturally she sought comfort in his arms. He was holding her close, savoring her warmth against him, when his enhanced hearing picked up voices at the edge of the square. He tensed as he recognized Callan’s low growl and Lila’s sharp tone.

“You told the bounty hunter where to find her,” Callan growled.

His wolf surged with rage, and he tightened his grip on his mate. Lila had put her in danger because of her petty jealousy. His first instinct was to confront her himself, but he forced himself to stay put. Callan was handling it, and Robin needed him more.

“She doesn’t belong here.” Lila’s voice dripped with disdain. “She’s just a human?—”

“She belongs if Eric says she belongs.” Callan’s tone held the full weight of his

power as Alpha. “And if you can’t accept that, you’re the one who doesn’t belong in this pack.”

His wolf settled at Callan’s words, satisfied that justice would be served. He’d been right to trust the Alpha with this. He bent down and pressed a kiss to Robin’s temple.

“Let’s go home, little bird.”

She nodded and they walked back to the cabin in comfortable silence, his arm around her waist. The forest welcomed them with its familiar symphony of rustling leaves and distant owl calls. His wolf felt settled in a way it never had before, content with both his mate and his Pack.

They walked into the cabin and she turned to look up at him. Something in that amber gaze made his heart start to pound.

“I’m ready,” she said quietly.

“Ready for what?”

“Ready for everything.” She tilted her head, exposing the vulnerable curve of her neck. “I want your mark. I want you. I love you, Eric.”

The last bit of tension drained out of him. Her scent filled the room, rich with a sweetness that spoke of her desire and affection. Her love. She trusted him enough to offer herself. His wolf howled in triumph and his heart felt full to bursting.

“I love you, Robin. You’re my heart, my everything.”

He swept her up and carried her to the bedroom, their bedroom, where she belonged. He stripped her bare, his cock throbbing at the sight of her pale skin and slender

curves, her nipples hard and pink, the red curls between her thighs already glistening.

“Hands and knees,” he growled and she gave him a confused look.

Take it slow , he reminded himself, and positioned her on the bed. She looked back at him over her shoulder, her cheeks pink with embarrassment, and the sight of her naked ass pushed his wolf into a frenzy, urging him to mount her. To sink deep inside her and make her his forever.

Instead, he knelt behind her, stroking his hands up and down her sides. The position displayed her wet, pink sex perfectly. So wet, so tempting.

“I’m going to taste you,” he growled.

“Oh god, yes.”

She pushed back towards him, and he had to grip her hips and hold her steady. He nipped her right cheek, soothing the slight sting with his tongue, then placed a gentle kiss on the opposite side. She wiggled, but didn’t try to pull away, so he moved to the sensitive spot where her thigh met her hip. Another kiss, then another, trailing ever closer.

“Oh,” she gasped, arching her back as he ran his tongue between her slick folds, tasting her, savoring her. Her arousal was heavy in the air, and his cock strained against his pants, but he ignored his own needs, focusing on hers.

“Please,” she whimpered.

“Tell me what you need.”

“Your mouth.”

Her breathless words were music to his ears. He licked along her slit, flicking his tongue over her swollen clit. The sweet sounds coming from her only encouraged him, and he slipped his tongue inside her, fucking her with it until she cried out.

She tasted like heaven, and his wolf purred in contentment. His little bird, spread open and wet, just for him.

“Please,” she gasped again, pushing back against him, her thighs trembling.

He gripped her hips tighter, keeping her steady, and closed his lips around her clit, sucking lightly. She cried out and he knew she was close.

“Come for me, little bird,” he growled against her, and she did. Her thighs quivered and her pussy clenched around his tongue as he drank in her climax.

“Yes, yes,” she gasped.

He kept his mouth on her until her moans of pleasure softened into sighs. Then he stood, quickly stripping off his clothes.

“Mine,” he growled, unable to wait a second longer.

“Yours,” she echoed.

His cock was hard and aching, but he was still careful as he pushed inside her. She was so tight and wet, and she cried out again, the sound strained. He forced himself to keep moving slowly until he was buried deep inside her, his body draped over hers.

“Tell me if it’s too much,” he gritted out, his voice barely recognizable, even to himself.

She whimpered, and he stroked a hand down her back.

“Relax, little bird. Let me in.”

He held her gently as she relaxed around him. Then he began to move, pulling almost all the way out before thrusting back inside. She moaned, a soft sound of pure pleasure. His hips snapped forward again and she gasped.

“You feel so good,” he growled.

“Harder,” she begged, pushing back against him. “I want it harder.”

His wolf howled at her surrender. He wrapped his hand around her hip, holding her steady as he began to fuck her harder. She whimpered and writhed, but not in pain.

“That’s it,” he growled. “Take me.”

“Oh, God. Eric...”

“I love you,” he said. “My beautiful, brave little bird.”

Her muscles clenched around him and he knew she was close. The pressure of his own orgasm was building, his balls tightening, but he held back. Not yet.

He bent closer, scraping his fangs across the sensitive curve of her neck, and she shivered.

“Do you want my mark, Robin?”

“Yes, please.”

He bit down and she came with a long, wailing cry, her cunt clasp ing him so tightly he could barely move. His self-control shattered and he came in long liquid pulses as his knot swelled, tying them together. The bond snapped into place between them—an unbreakable connection that made him feel whole in a way he'd never experienced before. She was his, and he was hers, forever.

He was still catching his breath, his face pressed against her shoulder, when her stomach growled. He huffed out a laugh.

“Hungry, little bird?”

“Mmm. I could eat.” She squirmed a little and his cock immediately started to stiffen inside her, causing her to gasp. “Or maybe not. That’s...”

“That’s just the beginning,” he murmured, lapping at the already healing mating bite.

She shivered, her walls clenching around his cock. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“No joke.”

“How long does it last?”

“A while.”

“And what happens after that?”

“After that?” He slid his hands down her body, and found the swollen little nub of her clit, stroking it gently. “After that I get to knot you again and again.”

“I’m not going to be able to walk,” she protested, but she was already rocking against his hand, her tight little channel massaging his embedded shaft.

“Maybe.” He scraped his fangs across the mating mark. “But it will be worth it.”

“It will be.”

She grinned over her shoulder at him, radiant in the moonlight, his gorgeous, brave little bird, and he vowed to spend the rest of his life making her happy.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:48 am

One month later...

Nichola dragged Robin over to the dance floor again, but this time she didn't waste her breath arguing. She'd already learned that she was no match for a determined female troll. And it was fun to dance—another one of the things she'd missed out on when her childhood had been cut short. At least it was fun until a satyr danced up to her and tried to put his hand on her ass. Two seconds later he was slammed up against the wall, surrounded by four very angry werewolves.

"Oh my," Nichola muttered. "Is it just me or is that the hottest thing ever? All those bulging muscles and threatening growls."

"My Pack is very protective," she giggled. "They think I need looking after, just because I'm human."

"You all right, Robin?" Baldwin asked as the satyr edged nervously out the door, only a little the worse for wear.

"I'm fine, fine." She waved a dismissive hand, floating on a cloud of fuzzy pink margaritas. "You don't have to tell Eric, do you?"

The flash of Baldwin's fangs was answer enough, and she groaned. Her mate had not been happy about the girls' night at the Moonshine Tavern and he would be even less happy if Baldwin told him someone had tried to touch her. She darted a quick look at the door, half-expecting, half-hoping to see Eric come storming in. She told herself she wasn't disappointed when the door remained firmly closed.

“Let’s get you out of the danger zone,” Nichola said, guiding her back to their table.

Alison was still nursing her one glass of wine, Elara was giggling to herself, and Posy had her head on her hand, a dreamy smile on her face. Nichola looked at the four of them and shook her head.

“I think my work here is done. Time to start delivering you home to your mates.”

“But you don’t have a mate,” she protested. “Thash so sad. You should talk to Flora.”

Nichola shuddered.

“No, thank you. Although I might need to spend a little time with a werewolf. Or two.”

She followed the troll’s gaze and saw Baldwin giving her friend a hungry look. She giggled again.

“Are you going to let the wolf eat you up? Did you know they can make their tongueth longer? “

“Really?” Nichola gave her a wicked smile. “That sounds promising, but home first. Up you get.”

At least all of them were capable of walking this time, which was an improvement over the previous time, but they didn’t have far to go.

Eric was pacing outside the door while their other mates were on the deck by the river, talking to someone in the water.

“Ooh, is that Sam?” she asked as a tentacle flashed in the moonlight. She’d yet to meet the mysterious kraken who lived in the river.

“Yes, it is and no, you’re not going over there,” he said sternly. “In your condition you’re likely to fall in the river and you’re my little bird, not my little fish.”

“I’m fine,” she said, and promptly tripped over her feet.

He caught her of course, then picked her up and cradled her against his chest. She nuzzled his neck, nipping at his skin, and he groaned.

“If you keep that up, we won’t even make it home.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I do. It’s too cold for you. We’ll save outdoor fun for the summertime.”

“Are you going to chathe me?” she giggled.

“Absolutely.”

He started to kiss her, then growled.

“Did someone touch you?”

“Nope. Pack hangout, remember?”

He opened his mouth, then shook his head. “I’d probably rather not know.”

The rest of her friends and their mates had already dispersed, and Nichola gave her a cheery wave before heading back into the Tavern.

“I told her she should let a wolf eat her up,” she giggled as they started back towards the cabin, and his eyes started to glow.

“That sounds like an excellent idea.”

“What if I want to eat you up inshtead?” she whispered and her sure-footed mate almost stumbled.

“You are going to be the death of me,” he growled, but he didn’t sound upset about the prospect.

“You’ll like it.”

“Oh, little bird. I already do.”

He kissed her and his kiss tasted like forever.

Two weeks later...

Robin woke slowly, her body deliciously sore and aching in all the right places. Even after all their nights together, the knot still surprised her every time.

She reached for Eric, but found the bed empty and opened her eyes.

“I’m already up, little bird. How do you feel?”

He grinned at her as he carried in a tray of coffee and pancakes and set it on the nightstand.

“Wonderful.” She blushed as she noticed all the little bite marks on his neck. “I guess I got a little carried away last night.”

“You can get carried away like that any time. I love having your mouth on me. Everywhere,” he added, his eyes glowing.

“You did seem to enjoy it.” She blushed again, remembering the way he’d groaned when she wrapped her lips around him.

“Very much. And I’m more than happy to return the favor. Anytime.”

He bent down and nuzzled her mating bite. She shivered happily, then shot a quick glance at the clock and winced.

“I guess that’s going to have to wait or I’ll be late for work.”

“Don’t worry. I talked to Garrick and he was fine with switching to Thursday this week.”

She still worked for the big gargoyle but the mansion was finally in good enough condition that she only needed to spend a few days a week there. She’d started sketching again on her free days and spent a surprising amount of time with Marjorie, involved in Pack matters. Ever since the night of the Winter Festival, they had accepted her as one of the Pack. It certainly helped that Lila had slunk out of town.

“That’s nice, but why? Is this some kind of special occasion?”

He paced over to the window and back, and she frowned. He was rarely that restless any more. But then he flashed her his devastating smile and her worries disappeared.

“Well, let’s see. It’s been six weeks since you agreed to be my mate.”

“A wonderful six weeks,” she interrupted and he grinned.

“Agreed. You’ve transferred all of Martin’s stolen money back to the company.”

Since her signature was on everything, it had turned out to be surprisingly easy.

“Kendrick is on the run,” he continued and she couldn’t help smiling. There was a certain poetic justice to the fact that now he was the hunted criminal.

“Those are all good reasons to celebrate,” she agreed.

“But that’s not all.”

He climbed onto the bed next to her and drew her into his arms. She snuggled happily against him, stroking her fingers down his chest and toying with the waistband of his jeans. He immediately started to stiffen beneath the denim, but he captured her hand in his.

“Stop distracting me.”

She waited, but he didn’t say anything else, just played with her fingers.

“Eric, what’s going on?”

“I have a confession to make,” he said slowly, darting a quick glance at her with those golden eyes, but for once she couldn’t read his expression.

“What is it?”

“A wolf can always tell when his mate is ovulating. Her scent changes, becomes more tempting.”

“Okay?”

“But your scent is always so tempting and our bond is still so new and I... I wasn’t as careful as I should have been.”

“You’re not making any sense,” she said, her pulse starting to speed up.

“I think you might be pregnant, little bird. In fact, I’m pretty sure you are.”

She jerked back and stared at him, trying to process what he’d said. A baby? She hadn’t even considered the possibility with so many other changes in her life.

“How do you know?”

“Your scent is different.”

“But you’re sure?”

He gave her a sheepish look and shrugged a shoulder.

“Wolves. We just know.”

“A baby,” she murmured, a sudden surge of longing sweeping over her. A family.

“I’ll understand if you think it’s too soon,” he added quickly.

“No.” She smiled up at him. “I think it’s perfect.”

“You’re sure?”

“Very sure.”

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. She started to respond, then pulled back and gave him a worried look.

“Do you think your mother knows?”

“I think that if my mother knew the entire town would be on our doorstep,” he said dryly. “But it won’t take her long to figure it out.”

“In that case, we’d better celebrate while we can.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and straddled him. He growled softly, his big hands settling on her hips.

“That’s the best idea I’ve heard all day.”

She rocked back and forth on his erection and he pulled her head down so he could nuzzle her mating bite, sending little sparks of excitement through her body.

“Little bird,” he murmured, cupping her ass to help her move against him. “I don’t think you’re going to be able to leave this room today.”

“I’m okay with that.”

And as he rolled her over and started kissing his way down her body, she couldn’t help but smile. She had found a place to belong and a mate who loved her and now their family was growing. And she couldn’t wait.

Flora smiled and took a congratulatory sip of whiskey. Another successful mating. But then again, Eric and Robin hadn’t been too much of a challenge—all they’d needed was a little push. She suspected the next couple she’d set her sights on was going to require a little more assistance.