

The background of the book cover is a composite image. It features a close-up of two hands, one with a ring, gently holding the other. This is overlaid with a soft, ethereal image of a person's face. The bottom of the cover shows a dark, silhouetted landscape with trees and a body of water under a twilight sky. The title is written in a large, elegant, serif font with a light, glowing effect, and the author's name is in a similar but slightly smaller font at the bottom.

A Winter Tale With Marshmallows

Stephanie Beck

Back Cover Copy

No winter night is complete without marshmallows.

Pregnant and on the run, Mona Renalds is a werewolf with trouble nipping at her heels. She wants a new life for herself and the twins she's carrying. Embracing the future can't happen until she finds an alpha male strong enough to take on her former pack leader.

Chris Meyters is alpha of Haven Pack. Mild mannered and progressive, he tries to reverse the archaic methods of his pack's previous leaders. When Mona comes into his diner requesting sanctuary, his primitive instinct to claim her nearly consumes him, but he fights himself to give her the choices she was denied in her former pack.

Surrounded by the Pennsylvania winter of snow, sledding parties and creamy cups of hot chocolate, Chris and Mona are prepared to do whatever it takes in order to maintain the domestic bliss they've found with each other.

Highlight

“Sorry,” Mona mumbled and wiped her tears on his shoulder. He felt them wet the thin cotton of his t-shirt and he held her closer.

“Don’t be. Tears are acceptable in this situation, I believe. What set you off?” Behind him, the kettle whistled on the stove. Chris reached back and turned it off without breaking his hold on her.

“I couldn’t reach the cocoa.”

He knew better than to laugh, so he nodded instead and, again, reached blindly, this time to the cabinet beside him. His kitchen was tiny, but he wasn’t cursing its size at the moment. He pulled down a box of cocoa mix and grabbed the bag of marshmallows he kept on hand for when pups visited.

“Well, I guess I’ll have to rearrange so that doesn’t happen again,” he said practically.

Her laugh was weak, but still a laugh, and he pulled back a bit to smile. She didn’t let go, leaving her arms looped around his waist, and that pleased him very much.

“How about I make your cocoa, and you can tell me what else is on your mind?”

A Winter Tale: With Marshmallows

by

Stephanie Beck

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Dedication

For the mothers who work their bottoms off for a salary of sticky kisses, frustrated tears and crayon art. The two main women in my life taught me how to be a mother from an early age. Thanks, Mom, for listening and for teaching me the tiny things as well as the big ones, like how to think for myself and how to ask questions. Thanks, Jeanie, for showing me what patience really is and for loving me, and countless other kids, like we were your own.

Chapter 1

“Blueberry too? When do you sleep, girlie?”

Mona Renalds smiled at her best friend and mentor as she inspected the baked goods on the counter. Amy pulled her graying brunette hair back from her full face as she looked at them closely. She’d never been shy as long as Mona had known her and grabbed two pastries before settling in front of her at the island table.

“Oh my gosh.” Amy moaned around a mouthful of muffin. “So good. You’ll have to make these for my office’s Christmas party. Did you get the internet working for the recipes?”

“Nope. I looked through your cupboards and found...” She slid the cookbook around the coffee pot. “...this.”

“Our old nursery cookbook? Awesome. I didn’t even think of it or I’d have gotten it down for you.” Amy’s expression turned stern. “You didn’t climb up there, did you? Darn it, Mona. You could have fallen.”

“Darn it, Amy, I’m a badass werewolf assassin. I’m not afraid of standing on a chair.”

“Wrong, young lady. You’re a retired badass werewolf assassin who looks about fourteen months pregnant—”

“Hey, you said I wasn’t that big.”

The look her dear friend gave her assured her she’d lied, but Mona already knew that. She was three weeks from delivering twin pups, and she was as big as a house. There was no denying it, though she’d liked believing Amy. It was so nice to ignore the ugly things in life once in a while. The truth was, so far she’d spent her week in Pennsylvania living in limbo, avoiding real life in favor of cleaning, knitting, and now, baking. The respite would have to end sometime, but she was going to enjoy every second she could before the world crept in.

“How are the mini-Monas doing today?” Amy asked.

Mona laughed, the other woman’s affectionate term for the twins always tickling her funny bone. Like all werewolf mothers, Mona had been able to detect the sex of the two little ones early on and she couldn’t be happier to have girls. She put her hand over the big bump of her stomach and smiled.

“Both are getting stronger every day. I wish they’d start moving around more, but I know they’re healthy.”

“They’ll be like you,” Amy predicted. “Stealthy and always on the lookout.”

Mona nodded, but she hoped Amy was wrong. Her daughters would be nothing like her if she had a choice. Her mother had died when she was a baby and though the pack females had tried to help, they'd never filled the void that Mona felt. She'd always been an outsider, never sure how to be true to herself, and that had led her to following her pack blindly. No, Mona thought, her daughters would never feel any of those things.

"So, Aaron called me again."

Mona sighed at the simple announcement. Her vacation was coming to an end. "Oh?"

"Yep. He wants to come over tomorrow night. I can't put him off any longer, honey. I wish I could to give you a little more time. I know I just said you were wall-sized, but you're finally starting to look healthy. Even your hair is looking blonder since you've been eating better. Chris really is a sweet guy. Just watch, by Christmas you'll be all settled into a new pack and all this ugliness will be behind you."

Mona toyed with the cookbook Amy had slid back. It was a Christmas gift from their students back when she and Amy had worked in a church nursery in Vancouver. Back then she'd been a freckled-faced girl in pigtails, just venturing into adolescence. It had been one year, but the time had been magical for Mona. Playing with the children and being a part of something with Amy, who she respected so much, had been the real gift. The cookbooks had been a bonus as far as she'd been concerned. A bonus her father had destroyed after he decided she was better suited being an enforcer for the pack. Apparently, in her father's eyes, her desire to protect the children had translated into having a taste for blood and justice. If Mona had just let the man who'd tried to sneak into the nursery go with a warning instead of ripping out his throat, the past ten years would have been so different.

When Mona had finally broken away from her pack there had been only one place she wanted to go, only one person she wanted to see. Showing up at Amy's door after a decade had made Mona a bit hesitant, but she did it anyway. The second she'd been in Amy's embrace, the years fell away as if they hadn't happened.

But the time had passed and she couldn't forget it. Not when the last six months in particular had changed the path of her existence. She'd met a male she cared for very deeply, lost him, and fled her pack while embarking on the most terrifying of all the changes: pregnancy.

Amy had been happy to take her in, but when Mona had explained her problem and the fact that she was being chased by her father's enforcers, Amy—still fiercely protective—had insisted they inform the local werewolf pack. Amy was full human, but she'd grown up with a Were stepfather and she was dating the alpha's uncle, so Mona trusted her judgment. Something had to change, but Mona just wanted to rest. She was so tired of fighting.

"Mona?"

She looked up at Amy, who smiled in concern. Sweet Amy, she was the mother Mona had always wanted.

“Honey, let me call Aaron. He’ll come over right now and he’ll go with you to talk with Chris. I told you he’s Chris’s uncle, right?”

“Yes, and thanks for the offer, but I need to do this myself,” Mona said with a long sigh. “I’ll go tonight after dinner.”

“Probably a good idea. The diner closes at eight, so you’ll catch Chris on his way home.”

Mona nodded and must have gotten lost in her mind again, because Amy’s hand on her arm brought her back into reality. She bit back the kneejerk growl at having been snuck up on, even though it was her own fault. Pregnancy was playing havoc on her senses, too strong here, completely absent there. It made being an efficient enforcer impossible, which was why her father had discouraged her, violently, from mating in the first place.

“It’ll be fine, sweetie.” Amy was calm and quiet. She’d been raised surrounded by werewolves and knew how to handle them. “And if it’s not, you and I will move to the Caribbean and raise those babies in the sand and sun instead of this horrible winter. If there’s no one to cuddle with, I say there’s no reason to be in negative-thirty-degree temperatures. Now, what else should we have with dinner?”

Mona’s heart lightened at Amy’s reassurances, and along with her confidence, her appetite returned. “I’ve got a breakfast hot dish in the oven. Extra sausage and bacon.”

Amy sighed happily. “Part of me almost hopes the alpha is stupid so we can run away together. You clean, you sew, you bake, and you can kick ass. My perfect wife.”

Chapter 2

He needed to hire another busboy. Chris Meyters scowled at the twin bags of garbage he was toting to the back dumpster. He was pretty sure someone had dumped a pot of coffee in one just to piss him off. Probably Rhonda after he'd turned down her invitation to "dinner". That was one shewolf who wasn't enjoying "no" for an answer.

He wasn't about to settle for anyone less than the right mate, especially not when he still had plenty of time to find her. He was only thirty-five. That left him at least a decade to find his mate and breed some pups. Settling for a female who smelled good but who also personified "bitch" wasn't in the plan. He'd grown up with sisters and knew how to put up with petty revenge, so hauling sloshy trash didn't faze him.

The parking lot was dark, not that he minded. But the waitress and busboy still on shift were young humans and didn't need to be out alone. Haven was one of the safest places in the States as far as Chris was concerned, but they'd been having a few issues lately.

Unemployment had spiked hard, leaving many in tight spots, and it made a few desperate enough to steal. There hadn't been many problems yet, but Chris was keeping his eyes open.

He threw the bags in the dumpsters and had turned back to the diner when the bell above the door rang. What he saw turned his blood cold. The big lug of human at the counter was a local, and he held a gun on Sadie and her brother. Chris sprinted for the door.

Conversation inside was clear, and he heard Sadie doing exactly what she was told. He was going to have to do something drastic with the thief. To hold a gun to a kid...that wasn't something he could let anyone in his territory do, human or Were. He didn't want to startle the dumbass into firing his weapon, so Chris made the hard choice to let Sadie and Ethan out of his sight while he moved to the side door that would put him parallel to the attacker upon entry. He opened the door silently, completely focused on his prey. He ignored the unfamiliar scent that floated on the air in his path.

The sight when he opened the door shocked him to a halt. The big man was on the floor, a petite pregnant woman stood over him, and Sadie and Ethan were both completely fine.

"Chris!" Sadie cried, but Ethan looked impressed as he stared at the newcomer as if she were a goddess. "He had a gun, and this lady came in and knocked him right out."

She'd done more than knock him out, but Chris wasn't going to say that to Sadie.

"Are you two okay?" he asked, stepping over the body, putting himself between the kids and the very big problem.

"We're fine," Ethan assured him. "This chick just touched him and bam, down. It was like a comic book."

Headlights flashed in front of the dinner and Chris bit back a curse. He wanted the kids out instead of having another human come in who might recognize a dead body when they saw one. “Okay, guys. Here’s your dad. I’ll walk you out and tell him what happened. Miss, can you stay here, please?”

The stranger nodded and also kept herself between the body and the kids. Whoever she was, she was not only lethal, she knew what she was doing. A disconcerting combination.

It only took a few minutes to reassure their father. Most of the humans in town didn’t know about the werewolves, but they trusted Chris and his family as longstanding members of the community. Sadie and Ethan’s dad had to know the kids had been safe despite the situation because the Meyters had shown for years that they took care of their town. Since the kids were going home with nothing more than a wild story, Chris hoped there wouldn’t be a problem.

“Oh, looks like he’s waking up,” Ethan said.

Chris looked over through the Christmas light adorned window and saw the tiny-framed female lifting the corpse like she was helping him stand. Damn, she was good.

“I’d better get in there.” Chris waved the family away before sprinting to the diner. Good or not, the little pregnant Were didn’t need to be hefting that much weight in her condition.

He walked through the door and closed it behind him.

“Please lock that,” she said, keeping an arm around the corpse as she forced it to sit on a stool.

He flipped the lock and went to her side, ready to take the burden.

“Nope, not yet. Do you have a back room I can carry him to? Once he’s out of sight he’s all yours, but across the street there are plenty of apartments and those people could be watching.”

Chris was surprised she’d noticed with all that was happening.

“Who are you?”

She grunted and kept walking toward the back room. He held the door open for her, and once it was closed behind them she dropped the body.

“What a piece of scum.” Obviously disgusted, she gave the dead man a kick. “Holding kids at gunpoint. Who the hell does that? I’m Mona Renalds, by the way.”

Chris looked up from the body, unsure he’d heard her correctly. “Pardon?”

“You asked my name. It’s Mona. Does anyone in the pack know how to deal with this or do you want me to take care of him?”

What was it about this female that stumped him? Was it her practical take on the death of a predator? Or the way she held her slim shoulders straight and her delicate features passive, yet with deference as if waiting for an order she would grudgingly follow? Contemplating the possibilities, he decided it was the scent he was finally processing that was distracting him. The unassuming scent matched her look. Tiny freckles dotted her high cheekbones and narrow nose and made her look more impish than wolf. She smelled like sunshine and snowflakes—innocent, pure

and incredibly sweet. Even with a dead body between them and work to be done in protecting his pack from backlash Chris had a second scenario running in his mind. It was a much more pleasant picture. He had to shake it away to focus.

“What would you suggest?” he asked instead of answering her question.

She sighed heavily and put both hands on her big stomach. “Well, in this case, since I’m thinking he’s a local, the best way is to put him in his car and smack the hell out of a tree just outside of town. He’s not going to show any cause of death from me, so it might be best to let him be found instead of burying him out back.”

Chris nodded. That had been his thought. Unfortunately, Chris knew that the bastard lying between them didn’t own a car. When he said as much, she winced. His interest piqued, wondering if the expression was of irritation or genuine pain. When she stretched a little, he realized carrying the body had probably strained her. He felt his wolf try to pounce to her aid from inside him at the small sign of her discomfort.

She rubbed absent circles on her black top, and he wondered if the babies were kicking and causing her problems. “I have a piece of junk that’s on its last leg. I can load him up and take care of it.”

“Of course you won’t do that,” Chris said with a snort. “I’ll call my enforcer and let him know what we need to have done.”

“You aren’t going to do it yourself?” She sounded pissed but really it wasn’t her business. His wolf snarled, and Chris the man reassessed. Maybe it *was* her business.

“I would, but I’m going to take care of you instead. Another male in my pack can get rid of a body, but none of them can step in as alpha and offer you the help you must have come here for.”

While she mulled that over, he pulled out his cellphone and called his cousin. They split the ugly duties when they arose. Not often did the Meyters pack have to deal with violence of such proportion in human form, but they did know how to handle it.

“All right, Ms. Renalds. Owen will be here to take care of this. Would you like to discuss what you came for here or at my home?”

“Your home?”

“That’s where I handle pack business so the humans around here don’t get suspicious. The perks of meeting there include better coffee and not having a dead body between us.”

Her lips kicked up a little at his joke, and he felt incredibly pleased with himself. When she nodded in acceptance, Chris knew his life had just changed forever.

Chapter 3

He was watching her again and Mona didn't know what to do about it. She'd told him her whole sordid story. Chris had nodded as he listened to her tell about being her father's henchwoman and all the kills she'd made in the last decade. It wouldn't be fair to not let him know exactly what kind of Were she was, or had been. He'd reached across the table and held her hand when she told him about her mate's murder. When she'd asked for sanctuary, he froze.

Minutes had passed, and still he continued to look at her with the intense focus he'd had throughout the conversation. It was disconcerting for her to be the center of attention, any attention. She'd never experienced that with her home pack. As the enforcer, she'd been silent and invisible. The job required it.

"Mona. I recognize you by reputation now. It's very impressive if I remember correctly. Your father has had searches out for you in the last few months." His voice was deep and melodic like so many alphas' were. But something about him made her want to tell him even more. She'd given him the facts and tried to stick with the important things, but his chocolate brown eyes were warm and friendly and she wanted to cry her heart out and let him fix it all.

"Yes. I know he's been looking for me, which is why I'm asking for sanctuary now. I can't fight them anymore."

"They attacked a pregnant female?" His tone was hard, cold, just like that of enforcers she'd crossed paths with in the past. It sent a shiver of dread down her back. She was sick to death of violence. She'd taken no joy in killing the human, but he'd signed his death warrant when he pointed a gun at children. Her sense of right and wrong wasn't skewed, and she would always protect. She just didn't want to be the first in line to fight anymore.

"Yes. I've fought them off so far, but my pups will be born soon and I just can't keep doing it. My friend Amy is friendly with the pack here. She offered to let me stay with her years ago, but I can't endanger her like this."

"Amy Gunner?" When Mona nodded, he grinned. "She's a good person to know. If you're a friend of hers, then there is no reason not to offer you pack status. I don't do sanctuary, but I will welcome you as a full member. You and your pups."

She never dreamed it would be so easy. Her father hadn't welcomed new blood into the pack for decades, which was why they were dying out in rapid numbers. Part of her had been sure her reputation as a killer would prevent the invitation despite her dead mate being a former member of the Meyters pack. Charlie had left in good standing, but she wasn't sure if that would be enough.

Relief filled her and she sagged in her chair, exhaustion and emotion overwhelming her until tears burned her eyes. A warm hand settled on her shoulder, but she didn't start in surprise or attack as she normally would have. She relaxed and welcomed the first friendly touch she'd felt from a Were since before her mate was murdered.

"Are your things with Amy?"

She shook her head. All she'd managed to bring with her from Vancouver was a single bag, and that was in her car. There wasn't much in it, and there wouldn't be until she could ask him to fight her father for the money he'd frozen in pack accounts. It was an ugly situation, and she knew she couldn't do it alone. On her way here, she'd nearly joined a pack in Michigan, but the alpha hadn't been strong enough to fight the battles ahead. She didn't have that doubt with Chris, not even a tiny bit.

"Okay, I'll get you a change of clothes. You can shower and sleep in the guestroom here until we figure out the best place for you, Mona. You're safe here, safe with my pack. I'll call your father tonight and get the ball rolling on membership and get him to call off his dogs."

He gently squeezed her shoulder, and she almost lost the last hold on her emotions. Because she knew she'd cry if she spoke, she just nodded. She was done running.

* * * *

His house was full of males he'd known his entire life, and for the first time in all those years, he wanted them out. Now.

"It's really Mona Renalds? *The* Mona Renalds from Canada?"

Chris frowned at his cousin who had taken care of the dead body. He'd never seen his cousin pant over a female. The little bastard was damned near giddy at the mention of Mona's name, and Chris didn't like it.

"Is she hot? Jeez, listen to me, how could she not be hot? I heard she's blond. Is she blond?"

"She's blond, yes, and she's a few weeks from giving birth. She's tired, and I won't have any of you assholes messing with her or making her uncomfortable."

The room was blanketed by silence at his announcement, and Chris once again kicked himself for even bringing in his informal advisors. Half of them were single, and an unclaimed, legendary female had just joined their pack. He should have known to keep his mouth shut until he'd established a claim.

"All right, guys. I can see bringing everyone over tonight was a mistake," he said, running his fingers through his hair. It was still greasy from working at the diner all day, and he needed a shower. "She's sleeping now and needs to stay that way."

He might as well have tattooed her name on his forehead and vice versa. He and Mona were of an age where such a claim mattered. If he hadn't had intentions toward her, he would have sent her home with one of the older males who had a female at home, just waiting to fuss over her.

But they would probably have grown sons looking for mates too, and that wasn't a chance Chris was willing to take. So instead, she was asleep in the guestroom wearing his sweats and he was warning others away.

Most of the males smirked on their way out, the mated ones giving him empathetic cuffs to his arm as they passed. His three uncles were all grinning when they left. They'd pestered him half his life it seemed to find a mate. If their smiles meant anything then his choice pleased them.

Finally, only one cousin remained. Owen stared down the hall where Mona slept with longing and fascination in equal parts on his face. "Wow. I still can't believe she's here."

"You can meet her tomorrow if she's up to it."

"Of course she will be," Owen scoffed. "She's super wolf. Did you know she's credited with more than forty-seven kills in the last ten years? She's taken out some serious baddies. I can't even imagine why she'd get pregnant with those kinds of skills, but I bet she'll be a hell of a mom. No one will ever touch her pups."

"Yeah." Pride welled as the compliment for his future mate settled in. With every passing moment she was in his space, he felt it was an inevitable conclusion. He'd found the one for him.

"You'll have to get her working for the pack. With all that experience...hell, I bet she could rework our security to be the best in the nation."

"She needs to rest."

Owen scoffed again. "A female like that doesn't want to be coddled. Haven't you heard about strong females? If they train for a job, they're going to do it until they pop out their kid. Then put it in daycare and go back to work in a month. Females do it all and get pissed when their males try to get in their way. Bet you'll be doing daddy daycare a lot after the pup's here."

That sounded nearly reasonable and on par with what he saw in human settings. Two-income households were very common and necessary in the human world, but usually Weres made other arrangements. Many couples he knew worked opposite shifts to care for their pups or both worked part-time. They couldn't exactly bring werewolves to a human daycare. They were too aggressive and didn't know to hide their secret.

If he was going to be a father to Mona's babies, he'd have to know how she planned to mother. Owen might be right. His younger cousin was an enforcer, after all, and had spent many years active in the dating and mate-searching department. If anyone knew, it would be him.

"So what would you suggest?"

* * * *

She wanted to sleep. Mona looked around the snowy woods and sighed. Chris had intercepted her on the way to the bathroom, mistakenly thinking she was up for the day. He'd fed her an incredible breakfast, and then instead of going back to bed as her body demanded they'd headed outside. Pack security needed to be updated and Chris asked her to help.

It wasn't like she could deny her new alpha anything and she found she enjoyed spending time with him. She just would have enjoyed it more if they'd both been naked in bed, sleep mandatory, other, messier, roll-around things optional. A stump about the right size waited a few yards to her left, so she sat and put her feet up on the fallen log beside it. They'd only been out three hours, but she was ready to quit.

"Doing all right, Mona?"

She sighed again and turned to smile at Chris. He was obviously a good alpha, taking advantage of his members' strengths. She just wished he'd taken a shine to her baking instead of her security expertise. Burnout and fatigue were high in her line of work, and she'd burned out long before her twenty-sixth birthday. With twenty-seven coming up, she wanted her enforcer history as far behind her as possible when she started a new year.

"I'm okay, just tired," she admitted. She wouldn't have dreamed of confessing it to anyone else. Maybe Amy, but she would have noticed anyway.

"We'll get back to the house for lunch." He smiled, and her heart gave a little flutter. He was a pretty male, though he made no effort to enhance his good looks. Dark hair and eyes gave his face a very normal, trustworthy quality. His eyes held a twinkle and kindness that couldn't be quantified. His nose was straight and just the right size. Everything about him felt just right.

"Oh, we can finish if you'd like." She hoped he didn't take her up on it, and for a moment she thought he was about to assure her they were done, but instead he nodded and helped her to her feet.

"We only have another mile or two," he said, flashing a smile that put orthodontia to shame with its natural perfection. "Have you had a chance to look around town? There's a small company that does security and background checks. I'm sure we could get you employed there by next week."

Next week? Her heart sank. She didn't want to start a full-time job now. She wasn't looking for a mate to take care of all her troubles, but she'd hoped she would find one before the babies were born. She had no doubt that, with time, a new mating would turn into more. Charlie, her mate in Vancouver, had loved her. He'd been excited about becoming a father, and she'd been thrilled to have one more thing to share with him. She couldn't say she'd loved him, but she'd wanted to and with time, everything would have worked.

There were possibilities galore in the mate department. It was just a matter of scents lining up and compatibility between partners, and she was hopeful she could find someone who she could be happy with. She wanted to focus on her babies and her mate, not working forty hours a week.

She and Chris were ignoring the elephant in the woods. They were extraordinarily well-matched but since he hadn't brought it up or made a move, she wasn't going to either. Nature was on their side, but with Charlie she'd learned how important personalities were and maybe Chris was waiting to see if they got along. In her experience, when two scent-compatible wolves found each other and didn't want to strangle the other after their first conversation, they mated, and it almost always lasted until death. She didn't know if things were different in Chris's pack and didn't want to rock the boat.

It was all getting too confusing. Her emotions and thought processes were garbled with fatigue and baby hormones. She hoped to God no one forced her to make any life-or-death decisions in the next few weeks. The night before had been a fluke. That she'd even been able to maintain the death hold was a miracle. Luckily the attacker had been human. Huge, but still only human.

"Unless you want a change of scenery," Chris continued, and she shook herself to pay attention to his words. "Then you could work with me at the diner. The hours aren't bad, and I can always use another waitress."

She'd been curious about the diner and didn't think she'd mind waiting tables or cooking. But the thought of being on her feet for hours made her want to cry.

"Of course there's no reason you must work either place. It's perfectly fine with me if you want to den down and get ready for your pups. Since you're part of the pack now, any choice you make will be supported, and I'll do everything I can to make it happen the way you'd like." He smiled and held out his hand. She took it, but was more overwhelmed than ever. "Come on, honey. Let's finish this up and get you back home."

An hour later, relaxing in the steaming bath he'd run for her while she'd eaten lunch, Mona thought about how conflicting things were. With one breath, Chris was keeping her in her old life, yet in the next he was offering her exactly what she wanted. She wasn't sure if it was a trick. Her father had done that to her before. Only a year earlier she'd hunted a teenaged serial killer to Alaska and found herself covered in his blood. She'd blacked out part of the episode and it terrified her.

Her father had promised her a respite. It hadn't happened and she hadn't protested because a break meant, according to her father, leaving the pack without protection. She was sick of making decisions based on guilt and misplaced duty.

"Mona?"

She grabbed a hand towel and draped it over her breasts and belly; the sugar cookie-scented bubble bath Chris had poured covered the rest of her. Nudity wasn't a big deal for Weres as they were often naked together before and after changes. But she already felt vulnerable enough around Chris. Not in a bad way, but it was noticeable and the thin, damp barrier helped.

"Come in."

The door opened, and he froze before he made it all the way inside. She smiled at the sudden burst of desire in the air. It was a little room, and there was no missing what she'd thought she'd scented since she met him. He found her attractive, and to her he smelled like steak wrapped in bacon covered in maple syrup. Sweet, savory, and she wanted to take a bite out of him in the best way. He finally came the rest of the way inside the room, sat on the clothes hamper and rested his head on the tiled wall.

"Doing all right in here?"

She settled deeper into the water, which pressed her belly and washcloth down, but somehow kept her nipples covered. His eyes focused on her face. What a gentleman.

"I'm fine. Have you been able to contact my father?"

He sighed deeply, and she knew it wouldn't be good news. She hadn't expected miracles, but she'd hoped.

"Yes. Unfortunately, Conrad is pissed about me accepting you into my pack, but there's not a damn thing he can do about that," Chris said with a fierceness that made her feel safe. None of the males in her pack had ever felt the need to protect her. She could have killed any of them, she had no doubt about that, but she would have appreciated a little chivalry. Charlie had been a beta wolf, but he'd tried. He'd also been killed for his efforts, but she didn't worry about Chris that way. He was much different.

"Did he make threats?" she asked.

He snorted. "What the hell can he threaten me with? He's all the way across the continent, and his main enforcer is sitting in my bathtub covered in cookie-scented bubbles. He can't touch me. Unfortunately, he can hurt you in some ways. He's refusing to release your back wages and has taken over your house for pack purposes."

Her heart sank. She'd hoped her father would follow the rules of their world. Money was a necessity but not the goal for most Weres. Status wasn't determined by cash or cars. It was still done by shows of strength and cunning. All the rank in the pack wasn't going to buy diapers, though.

"So..." He ran his fingers through his hair in irritation. "In this case the distance works against me too. The timing as well. Any other time of the year, I'd be on a plane out there to kick his ass and get your stuff, plus twenty percent, because he's a dick. But the holiday season is starting and there are too many strangers around to leave my pack."

"I understand," she assured him, and she did. She'd handled holiday seasons before. It was a prime time for hunters to sneak in while visiting a second cousin they hadn't seen in years. The safety of the pack as a whole was much more important than her possessions.

"Okay, and in the meantime I've given the working thing some thought. I think you'd be most useful working for the pack. Not as an active enforcer, but as more of a researcher and planner. I spend hours every night doing background checks on the new people who arrive in town. If you're willing, I would happily pass that job off to you for salary."

It wasn't perfect, but it was better than being on her feet or running through the woods working security. It might even leave her time to do the things she wanted, like finish the quilts she'd started for the babies.

"Where will I stay?"

He hesitated a long moment before he answered, and her curiosity piqued. If he wasn't ready to mate, she could understand. A ready-made family with a female he barely knew might not be appealing to his brain, even if his wolf and body wanted to jump her.

He sighed again and she smiled, knowing he was about to do the honorable thing. She really liked her new alpha. “You’re welcome here and anywhere with the pack. I’ve already made some calls and several families have offered you their homes until you get on your feet. Also, there’s an apartment building in town that Weres have used in the past while in transition into the pack. It’s up to you.”

“So, theoretically, if I decided to stay here, that would be okay with you?” she asked timidly. He was giving her too many options and not being clear about what he wanted her to do. It was nice, but it was also difficult to ascertain where she stood with him.

“If it’s what you want,” he allowed. “You’re welcome as long as you want to stay.”

He seemed pleased with himself, but she was more frustrated than ever.

Twenty minutes later Mona braided her damp hair. She was tucked in bed. Alone. Again. He’d lined the sheets with electric blankets so it felt like a cocoon of softness, but she was still without companionship. Charlie hadn’t been much in the strength department, but he’d been smart, and he’d held her every night they were together. To him, she hadn’t been an enforcer, she’d been a sweet female, and they’d loved each other the best they could. With time, she had no doubt they would have been deeply in love and happy. But they just hadn’t had the time to really be consumed by one another.

She wanted the feelings she’d gotten a glimpse of in Charlie’s arms. If she couldn’t have them, well, she’d be happy being a mommy to her girls. The thought made her smile, and she stroked her big stomach. It was rock hard and not moving much. She’d overheard females talking about pregnancy and knew it was normal not to have much movement until the last month. She was just entering that time and looked forward to getting to know the little lives more. They’d be out by Christmas and they’d celebrate together.

Thoughts of Christmas made her stomach rumble. She was hungry again and could really go for some sugar cookies and icing. She’d been steadily eating since she’d arrived in Pennsylvania, and it felt fantastic, but now without her tolerance built up against fighting hunger the emptiness bothered her too much to ignore. She hadn’t seen cookies, but she’d spotted cocoa in Chris’s cupboards when she’d helped him make dinner. Comfy or not, the chocolate temptation called too strong to let it pass.

* * * *

“So am I being replaced?”

Chris rolled his eyes at Owen’s question. He should have known the phone call to his cousin would turn dramatic. For all his stoic moments, he was also a bit of a drama queen.

“No, you’re not being replaced. Mona is going to work from my house doing some background checks. She’s uncomfortable in the field now.” The walk they’d gone on that morning was more than enough for her. He should have cut it in half when he’d the chance. She was a proud one as Owen had warned, but he had a feeling his cousin’s advice hadn’t been as spot-on as he’d thought.

“Damn. I’d have liked to see her in action,” Owen lamented. “Okay, so the boys and I were planning to come for poker in a few days.”

Chris’s heart hardened and irritation grew. They were coming to check and see if he’d claimed her, under the guise of a boys’ night. He’d revised his plans to give her a few weeks to decide what she wanted to do with her future, especially after learning about her mate’s death at the hand of her own father. She had things she had to get through before adding a new male to her life. Of course, most males wouldn’t think so, which was why they would be over to sniff her out and if there were any matches, they’d do their damndest to catch her attention. That wasn’t going to happen.

“We can meet at your place,” Chris ground out.

A long silence met his response, and Chris waited for Owen to process what the words implied.

“Wow, claimed her already? Way to move, cousin.”

“No, I haven’t made a claim. She just needs a break before you assholes descend on her,” he snapped.

More silence, and Chris knew even before Owen said anything that he wasn’t going to like the response. He liked being the easygoing alpha. The last leader had made life a nightmare for anyone with an opposing opinion or even suggestion. Chris was launching them into the next century simply by not being an unreasonable prick. Unfortunately, sometimes that led to hearing things he didn’t want to hear. It hadn’t come up much in the past, but this time his own more lax rules were going to bite him in the ass.

“Well, I guess we’re just going to have to hear her say that for herself, huh, Alpha?”

Chris bit back a growl. It was his policy to let females make their own decisions. It was one of the first rules he’d changed after beating out one of his cousins for the top place in the pack. The alpha wasn’t the one who should be making mating decisions, he’d always believed. Now it was going to be used against him.

“Of course. But it won’t be here.”

“But—”

“If you assholes think I’m going to just hand her over, you’re insane. I know the rules. I made them. Nowhere does it say I have to give you boneheads equal chances, just that I can’t take the decision from her. Remember that.”

“Oh, I’ll remember and pass it along.” He sounded amused and Chris’s neck burned. He’d shown all his cards with his last remark. He still wasn’t going to press Mona, but damn, he hated when things happened too fast. “I’ll let you know where and when we’re planning the poker game.”

“Thanks. Sounds good.” Movement in the main rooms caught his attention. Mona’s soft curse assured him it was her, but he didn’t like the swear. His heart stopped when sounds of her sobs followed. “I have to go, Owen.”

Chris hung up without saying more and launched out of his chair. By the time he got to the kitchen Mona's sobs were frantic. She was sitting on the floor, her legs curled up as high as her tummy would allow, and desolation poured from her.

"Mona?" He kept the worry out of his voice, but he felt helpless. Such extreme tears terrified his wolf, who immediately assumed she was hurt. Chris was able to be a bit calmer because he didn't smell pain, not physical anyway. Something had upset her though, and with the way her life had progressed lately, he couldn't blame her for a meltdown. "Honey? What's the matter?"

She mumbled incoherently into her arms. Chris squatted beside her and rubbed his hand over her shoulder. She immediately leaned into his touch, and he tugged her closer. The squat was burning his legs, so he lifted her in his arms and onto the counter. She stayed latched on to him, still mumbling and crying and making no sense. He'd dealt with pregnant Weres in the past. Both of his older sisters had several pups, so he knew about waiting out tears. They would stop eventually, even if they broke his heart in the process.

He nuzzled her neck and ear and continued rubbing her everywhere he could reach. She felt soft, especially in the old sweats he'd found for her. Despite washings, they held his scent all the way to their fibers, and he liked that on her. Their pheromones lined up, but holding her told him more than that. It felt good to hold her. She fit just right in his arms, even with her big tummy. And the life snuggled between them felt nice, too. Wolves didn't purr but if they did, he'd swear his was, in contentment. The tears were ebbing, albeit slowly, until they finally trickled down to sighs and hiccups.

"Okay now?"

She nodded into his shoulder, but made no move to pull away. Not that he wanted her to. Owen's words about her being a badass assassin whispered in his mind, but he was questioning them again. She was tough, there was no doubt about it, but he thought Owen was perhaps seeing things a bit flatly. There were many sides of Mona. Chris just had to discover each one, and then learn how to see to the needs of them all.

"Sorry," she mumbled and wiped her tears on his shoulder. He felt them wet the thin cotton of his t-shirt and he held her closer.

"Don't be. Tears are acceptable in this situation, I believe. What set you off?" Behind him, the kettle whistled on the stove. He reached back and turned it off without breaking his hold on her.

"I couldn't reach the cocoa."

He knew better than to laugh, so he nodded instead and, again, reached blindly, this time to the cabinet beside him. His kitchen was tiny, but he wasn't cursing its size at the moment. He pulled down a box of cocoa mix and grabbed the bag of marshmallows he kept on hand for when pups visited.

"Well, I guess I'll have to rearrange so that doesn't happen again," he said practically.

Her laugh was weak, but still a laugh, and he pulled back a bit to smile. She didn't let go, leaving her arms looped around his waist, and that pleased him very much.

“How about I make your cocoa, and you can tell me what else is on your mind?”

* * * *

Mona uncurled her fingers so she could feel Chris beneath her palms. She continued to avoid eye contact. She didn't want to tell him that the cocoa really was the only reason she was crying. She'd tried to reach it and Amy's concern about falling had rung too strongly for her to pull up a chair as she had before. The unmet desire, like so many others during the past few months, had been the very last straw. Now that the mix was on the counter, with mini marshmallows beside it, her spirits were miraculously bolstered.

“Mona?”

Her gaze locked on the cup he was stirring. The kitchen would be a nightmare to bake or cook in but he'd managed to make a cup of cocoa without moving, which was fantastic. It would be better if he would stop talking and focus on mixing.

“Hmm, maybe it was just the cocoa, huh? Would you like me to carry you to bed so the two of you can be alone?”

She snorted and was glad she hadn't taken a sip yet. He had a sense of humor. She'd wondered about that. Nothing about the past few days had been playful or fun so she hadn't been sure. Since smiling was something she wanted in her household for her babies, it was a relief to know he could play. She tugged him closer and laid her head against his chest when he made no effort to resist.

“The cocoa's too hot at the moment,” she said, tongue in cheek. “So I suppose we could get to know one another while it cools some.”

“After which I return to being completely uninteresting until the next time you need chocolate.”

“Oh, I wouldn't say that. You do pretty well in the petting department.”

His hand froze, like he hadn't realized it had undone her braid and was stroking through her loose hair in long, even motions. It felt fantastic, so she nudged his arm to get him petting again.

“I, I wasn't going to do this,” he admitted after he started stroking again. He sounded resigned and apologetic, neither of which made sense.

“Do what?”

“This. I was going to give you more time to find your feet and be comfortable with your new pack. I even thought briefly about giving you a chance to get to know the other males, but I don't think any of those things are going to be possible.”

Understanding finally dawned. He'd been trying to give her options.

“Chris, I never thought for a moment you would try to force me into anything,” she said slowly, not sure of his thoughts or motivation. If she'd had her way, she would have had him beside her in bed the first night. Ignoring nature only led to frustration. She wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Not when the universe had given her an awesome chance with a werewolf who not only smelled right, but acted with honor and decency at every turn they'd come to.

“Yeah, well, the previous alpha around here had very archaic thoughts on mating. Quite a few couples who had different options ended up together because he commanded it. I’m not willing to do that, even though I want you very much. Hell, I can’t believe I’m saying this. I’ll have a party or pre-Christmas get-together soon so you can get to know everyone. I’m not going to be like that asshole, no matter how much I want you to stay right where you are.”

“You like me sitting on your counter?” His words were touching her very deeply. After so many years of feeling she had to blindly follow her alpha’s orders, Chris was giving her amazing options. Hope filled her that she might finally get to be the person she’d always wanted to be.

“I like you in my arms,” he growled beside her ear, sending shivers up her spine. “I like your head on my shoulder. I like your sweet voice saying my name.”

“Chris.” She’d never heard her words sound so breathless, but he only growled in pleasure, thrilling her more and taking her breath away.

“Again.”

“Chris.”

She thought he would kiss her. She thought the confession and play would surely lead him to lift her, carry her to bed and prove he was the mate she wanted. Instead, he shook his head hard and regained control. Part of her cried out in distress. She waited to feel any relief that she wasn’t going to be put in the position to choose yet, but it didn’t come. She was just unhappy, because even though he’d found control, he was still fired up. His strength and restraint made her hot, but the resolve in him was so strong she knew they weren’t going to mate. Not tonight.

“Let’s get you back to bed, Mona. You need to have some cocoa and get some rest. You start work tomorrow on the background checks, remember?” He was trying to be upbeat and practical, but all she heard was the desire he was pressing down.

“You should come with me,” she said, surprising herself only a little. She wasn’t shy about what she wanted anymore, and Chris...she wanted him. Time didn’t seem to matter so much. If he wasn’t the right Were for her, she would have known it. Instead, she felt complete and sweet and feminine in his arms. She also felt weak and strong at the same time. It was a completely erotic and enticing combination.

He leaned close and nuzzled the side of her face. She could feel him breathe her in, and she did the same and smiled.

“That’s not a good idea.”

She thought he might say that. “It’s a very good idea,” she replied. “I won’t beg, though, not for what you need to want as much as I do. A family, pups, I don’t blame you at all for hesitating. It’s a big order you weren’t expecting. And my family...well, I understand. I’m sorry I asked.”

She started to pull away, the heady feeling of lust and comfort ebbing, when she realized what it was she’d asked of him. He’d actually let her down very sweetly. The hormones and cocoa had gone to her head and made her much too loose.

Mona scooted to the edge of the counter, but before her feet touched the floor his lips were on hers, consuming them with a passion she'd never experienced. She dove right in, delving deeper into his mouth as he tried to do the same. Her belly was much too big to press as close as she wanted, but it wasn't stopping either of them from doing their best to crawl beneath the other's skin.

"Stop, stop," she gasped, the willpower to pull away coming from a place she didn't know existed. She couldn't breathe, and more importantly, she didn't want him guilt-tripped into something he didn't really want.

"You don't understand," he growled and snuggled her hips to his erection, the heat and hardness penetrating through both of their layers of sweats. "I'm not hesitating. You don't—I do want you. Everything feels right, but it's not fair to you, so I'm going to let this be for now. I'm not pushing you away or saying 'no.' Oh, hell no. I'm just giving you time to decide what you want."

He started to pull away, and this time she grabbed him, tugging him back until they were face-to-face. She was strong, but she also knew he allowed it. "Then no sex, no mating. But please come with me to bed."

"And do what?" he asked suspiciously.

Her lips kicked up in a small grin. "Snuggle?"

"Snuggle?"

He sounded incredulous, and she figured it probably wasn't the offer he usually got. But then he smiled, and she didn't need him to speak when he lifted her in his arms, taking her weight with ease. He started for the bedroom, then doubled back to the kitchen. Mona frowned at him when he motioned to the counter with his head.

"Your cocoa, Miss Renalds."

She smiled and, still in Chris's arms, took the warm cup of chocolate from the counter and held it between her palms. His grin as he carried her down the hall made her think he might be anticipating some of her treat—silly wolf.

Cocoa and a snuggle. She sighed with the first complete pleasure she'd felt in much too long.

Chapter 4

Chris wondered if licking could fall under the heading of snuggling.

He'd wrapped around Mona for several nights and they'd cuddled innocently. Mostly innocently, he thought with a little smile. She was all over the place in her desires and that made sense. As a new mate, she wanted to get closer to him and have sex. As a soon to be mother, she wanted to den down and have peace. The two warred with each other, and he'd decided to make it easy on her and fulfill her snuggle request and not demand or allude to more.

That had been the plan until he'd woke to find the collar of her nightshirt had slipped. The long line of her milky white neck was offered up for him along with the top half of her generous breast. With one side so exposed, the other was completely covered, but what he could see, what was so close, was tempting beyond anything he'd ever known.

She sighed and resettled in her sleep and the nightshirt, one of his very old t-shirts, slipped further. Her nipple was exposed, and that was the last straw on his control. His wolf growled, insisting they were welcome, and with that last bit of assurance he let himself go.

She was so soft, so sweet. When his lips met the warm flesh he bit back a moan, but she didn't have the warning to do so. She'd been sleeping, but at first contact she woke. He proceeded slowly, keeping the pressure of his mouth light so she could push him away if she wanted. Instead she arched her back, offering him more.

Her nipple was much darker than the surrounding skin, and he was very gentle when he let his tongue trail over it. She tensed at the sensation, so he moved back to the outer edge. It made sense she'd be super sensitive so close to having her pups and if he made her uncomfortable, she might make him stop.

A small vein ran along the underside of her breast and his inquisitive tongue followed it as she moaned, the momentary tension gone. He'd always adored the female body for its ability to find pleasure in the most innocent and mundane touch and was completely pleased that Mona reacted so strongly to just simple licks and touches. Her breathy moans and the scent of her growing desire made him want more. A lot more.

The bed shifted slightly and he knew her legs had parted. Her scent grew stronger and when he looked up, her eyes were open and watching him. He took a long lick along the crease between her breast and chest and felt her shiver while maintaining eye contact.

He could have it all. They could have it all together and when she shifted, welcoming him closer, he knew she felt the same.

She froze. He looked up again from where he'd been about to head lower in his licking. Sex fogged his mind but he'd never let down his guard. She just had amazing hearing, and he heard what she had a moment later.

“Who is it?” she demanded breathlessly.

He listened and groaned. “It’s a sledding party.”

“What?”

Chris reluctantly moved away from his place at her bosom. It was the only term that did the beautiful bounty justice and he was giving it up because he was alpha. That added strength of will was the only thing that could have pulled him away. He tugged the sheet and blanket over Mona and snagged the sweatpants he’d left beside the bed.

“It snowed last night,” he explained. “A lot.”

“I heard,” she said with a happy sigh. “I think my favorite part of being a werewolf is being able to hear the snow fall. It’s like rain, only not so bitchy.”

He laughed. “Huh, never thought of rain as bitchy, but okay. The snow, in this case, means school was closed and we’ll have a houseful of pack. I’ve got the best sledding hills on the property. Dawn just broke, so really I’m surprised they waited so long.”

She shot up, looking sweetly ruffled, soft, and panicked. It was a combination he was glad his cousin Owen would never see because he wouldn’t appreciate it. Chris did though, and loved the different sides of Mona.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded when the panic continued to grow and she was on her feet. “There’s no reason for you to be up, sweetheart. We’ll be outside. You might as well get a few more hours of sleep.”

“No, I’ll make breakfast and get things cleaned up,” she said, pulling on his favorite set of sweats and covering the pretty expanses of skin he wished he could go back to caressing and kissing. Licking. Sucking. “Chris, get moving. Another car just pulled up.”

He grinned at her back as she hurried into the bathroom. His mate.

“Chris!”

He jumped to his feet and grabbed a t-shirt on his way out of the room. It was about time he had an alpha female like her.

* * * *

Fifty werewolves in the backyard could have been nightmare fodder. Instead, as Mona looked out through the picture window in Chris’s living room, she smiled. Generations were playing together in the snow. Most were bundled up in human form, with sleds and toboggans, hurtling down the hills. A few ran around as wolves, mostly the teenagers who were new in their ability to shift and needed supervision yet. With everyone around, it was a safe environment for them to romp as wolves and sniff each other. She remembered her early teen years. They had been happy ones when she’d just been another wolf.

It had been ripped away when she was fifteen. She’d killed her first man after catching him sneaking into the nursery school where she and Amy volunteered. After that, her father said she had an aptitude and taste for blood. Her childhood ended on that miserable day.

“This is just wonderful.” Amy’s exclamation broke her out of her dark thoughts. “Mmm, but not as good as the ones you made at my house. I’ll bring you the nursery school cookbook next time. I was thinking if you had the time we could make muffins for my Christmas party at work.”

“Oh, Chris ordered those from the bakery,” Mona explained, following her friend to the kitchen, where tray upon tray of food lay ready for the mingling masses. A few of the older Weres were inside watching football on Chris’s big screen, but she figured the crowd would come in when the pig Chris was roasting in the bonfire was ready.

“I’m surprised. You love baking.” Amy looked her over and frowned. That look was never good. It was impossible to know what her dear friend’s brain would come up with, but usually she was incredibly accurate in her observations. Maybe Mona didn’t want her friend’s take presented yet, because she was so uncertain of the situation.

She’d been with Chris for over a week, and so far they were doing well. Since her snuggle request, he’d found his way to her bed every night after working and seeing to his duties as alpha. If those nights didn’t start until after midnight, she didn’t mind so much because she was already asleep anyway. The work she did consumed every hour of her day, leaving little time to worry about things or finish the baby quilts, but she was helping the pack. She’d already sent Owen to escort a few hunters out of Haven.

That morning had been wonderful as Chris had explored her body. She wondered where things would have gone if the company hadn’t shown up. Mona sighed.

“Yes, well.” She paused and shoved the sleeve of Chris’s sweatshirt to her elbow. “I haven’t had the chance to bake lately. By the time I finish running the daily background checks, I’m exhausted. The last weeks of this pregnancy are proving to be the most challenging.”

“Of course.” Amy nodded and chewed thoughtfully. Mona couldn’t make herself care too much though. She was tired. The day had started before she was ready. First with Chris, then the company. Ten inches of snow was enough to cancel school and most jobs for the day, and in the Haven pack, it also meant sledding parties.

Chris had been easygoing and hadn’t asked her to lift a finger, but she’d cleaned the place as quickly as she could when he ran out to get the food. They weren’t mated, but she already looked at the space as her home and, as such, she’d wanted it to sparkle.

She’d been eyeing the house and making mental changes since her arrival. When she started making money, she planned to buy a sewing machine and some fabric to make new pillows and curtains. The carpet was something she’d have to talk to Chris about. She wondered if any of the pack did flooring work.

In the time she had though, she’d done her best and lit a few bayberry candles and placed them high so the pups couldn’t get them. Mona looked around the room and was reasonably satisfied. She really had done her best, but now her efforts were making her ass drag.

“Honey, why don’t you go watch the game with Aaron and Pete?” Amy suggested. “The others will be out playing for another hour or two, so you’ve got time to relax.”

That sounded magnificent, but she hesitated.

“Oh, no,” Amy insisted and took her by the hand, dragging her to the living room where two Weres sat, each with a beer in his hand and his feet on the coffee table. “Boys, you’ve met Mona, right?”

“Well, sure,” the older one, Chris’s Uncle Aaron said. He looked like a more mature version of his nephew with silver threading his dark hair and deep lines around his brown eyes. He was undeniably handsome, and he’d been Amy’s boyfriend for a decade. “Come on in, hon. Looks like those babies could use a nap.”

The other, another of Chris’s uncles, patted his lap. “Feet right here, sugar. I’ll rub them for you.”

It was an offer she simply couldn’t refuse. Within minutes of lying down and having a foot rub on one end and her shoulders massaged on the other, she was asleep.

* * * *

Chris nudged his uncle’s shoulder, and Aaron smiled before carefully moving aside. Weres milled around in muted revelry. They were quiet, but happy. No one seemed to care that he’d put them in hush mode as not to wake Mona. They were just thrilled to be together. He was more than content now that he was touching his mate again and his pack surrounded them. It was a good feeling.

Pete, at Mona’s feet, gave him a grin that he was sure mirrored his own. When the alpha was happy, the pack was as well. Chris realized now why they’d all been bugging him to find someone. Even when Mona wasn’t in sight, while he was outside playing with the pups, he’d felt the bone-deep contentment of a Were who knew a smile was waiting for him.

Finding Mona sleeping hadn’t even been a disappointment. She was adorable in his sweats all rolled up at the cuffs. His socks were on her feet, the thickest ones he had and nearly brand new. He knew he had to take her shopping soon, for herself and for the pups who were due within weeks, but he liked having her in his things. They hadn’t formally mated so having her surrounded in his scent and cozy was compensation.

Laura Mason, the youngest member of the pack, crawled to them and pulled herself to her feet. Chris found himself smiling again when she patted his arm. When he’d babysat the month before while her parents went out for dinner, she hadn’t quite found her feet yet. He rubbed the soft curls on her head, and she giggled. He felt his mate instantly wake in his arms but couldn’t scold the little one. He leaned forward to see Mona’s face but she was tilted away on the pillow Aaron had placed under her head. She offered her arms, and the baby squealed again.

“She’s too heavy—”

The reprimand died on his lips when the baby cuddled against Mona’s chest. Moments later both females were snoozing. Chris closed his eyes, not to rest, but to take in the completeness he felt. It didn’t matter that he and Mona hadn’t done more than snuggle and kiss. They were mated now. Mated to their souls, and he would never let her go.

Chapter 5

Laura liked her. It was amazing how one little thing could reaffirm confidence. Having the tiny Were cling to her made Mona feel more ready for her own pups. She hadn't been mothered much, though the females of the pack had tried their best, and her time in the nursery had been spent mostly with pre-schoolers. She'd worried her babies would smell the fear on her and not like her. Laura snuggled her face deeper in her arms and Mona smiled. Obviously babies didn't care.

"Wow, she must really like you," Karina, Laura's mother, said as she handed Mona a thick blanket to wrap around the snoozing baby. "I mean, she's always friendly, but doesn't usually fall asleep unless Todd or I are holding her."

"She's a sweetheart," Mona agreed, giving into the urge to place a kiss on her downy hair before she wrapped the little one in the blanket.

The Weres were clearing out as the long day caught up to everyone. They'd sledded since dawn, and it was nearly ten o'clock at night. Beds were calling all. Mona had had her nap and was feeling fine, but there were things to tidy up before she could lie down again.

She didn't know what Chris would want or expect after their morning of light play. Not expect. She knew he wouldn't push her, but she didn't think that even his sexy self could make her overcome her exhaustion. Having a mate was so complicated. Before she had to worry about that though, she had the treat of helping little Laura to her car seat.

"Only two weeks away," Karina said. "And girls. Do you have cribs and everything? Now's a good time to find Christmas sales so we could go shopping together if you'd like. I've got loads of newborn clothes you're welcome to have, too—oh, and a nursing pillow. It's one of the greatest inventions known to man or beast."

"That would be wonderful." The lack of everything needed for the pups had started trickling into her mind, and she'd intended to ask Chris if he'd spoken to her father again. Her first paycheck would be issued three days before the pups were due, so it was too close for her to be comfortable. If she had the basics from Karina, she could make due until she shopped.

"Chris has my number. I'd love it if you'd give me a call so we can help you get ready for those sweethearts. I'm sure they'll be Laura's best friends."

Mona's nose twitched at a familiar scent. The other wolves around her had yet to notice. The scent was extremely subtle, something her father often bragged had been passed on to her, making them both so very deadly.

"Take Laura and get back into the house."

Karina started at having her baby gently shoved into her arms. "What is it, Mona?"

"Now," she growled and Karina ran, calling for her mate along the way.

“Everyone get in the house,” Mona commanded, and the females instantly listened, gathering up the pups of all ages and sprinting away from the danger they had yet to smell. The males hesitated, and she respected them for wanting to protect her, even if it was irritating not to be obeyed. Owen and Aaron both moved to stand beside her. Chris was still inside seeing to their guests.

“What do you smell?” Owen asked, breathing the night air in deeply.

“My father. You need to get inside with everyone else.” She scanned the woods, but her father wasn’t moving. Yet. Once he decided to attack, she knew he would blitz and try to kill as many as he could as quickly as possible. It was his technique, and it had a way of being devastating, even if it wasn’t always efficient. As she scanned she caught the scent of two others from her former pack. They were young scents. Young, dumb, and ready to most likely do the same damn thing as her father.

“That is so not going to happen,” Owen said, and when her gaze shot to him he rolled his eyes. “Sorry, sweetie, but alpha or not, enforcer or not, you’re still a pregnant female in our pack. There’s no way in hell you’ll be alone facing your father. You’d better get used to us being overprotective and bossy on occasion. And here comes our own badass alpha to drive that point home.”

“Conrad, get your ass out here, you cowardly piece of shit,” Chris yelled.

Mona cringed at her mate’s sudden appearance. He’d probably heard everything they’d said and unlike Owen, Chris’s stronger nose could pick out the scents. Mona had never heard Chris use such a serious tone. It was all threat, all command, and it in turn thrilled and terrified her. She had a feeling he was about to prove why he was the alpha. It was a show she could do without, but one that was going to happen.

“And you other two,” Chris continued, and Owen’s face became sharp as he finally scented what the stronger Were had without strain. “You’d better run like hell if you don’t want to die tonight with your alpha. Got them now, Owen?”

“Oh, I’ve got them,” he growled, peeling off his jacket and jeans. “I’m going to fuck them up so badly their mothers won’t recognize them.”

Part of her thought the growled promise was for show, and she was nearly sure she was right. Owen was taking his time, giving the young males a chance to run. She would have smelled if they’d left, but their positions stayed constant, and it saddened her. Her father had picked them for a reason; young and dumb translated into misplaced loyalty.

“Damn,” Owen muttered from beside her, then flashed her a grin. “Let Chris do his job, sweet stuff. It’s enforcer nature to protect the alpha, but this time let him take care of this. And I’ll handle these two dumbasses.”

Owen's change to his wolf was sudden, and he was off like a shot into the pitch-black woods. Not even the moon shone to illuminate the snow-covered forest. The blanket of white did give the night a bit of a glow, but the shadows were deep and dark. Mona didn't mind them and knew it was only a matter of time before her father came out and the last showdown happened. So much violence for no good reason.

If life was fair, she'd be heartbroken by her father's betrayal, but all she wanted now was peace. Alpha or not, father or not, she was going to end him, and it didn't matter that the twin rocks in her belly were rolling like mad. What did matter was keeping them safe so they could be born without shadow and grow without fear of a crazy grandfather.

Rough hands grabbed her shoulders, and she tensed but didn't fight. It was Aaron, not a threat. Several other males had circled up with the females now safely inside the house. She had no doubt the women would fight to their last breath, but it was better they were closer to the pups. The males might be the first line of defense, but the mothers were the ones who were the last line, and best against any threat.

"Come on out, you son of a bitch," Chris growled, and her father shot from the woods, faster than even Owen, and launched at her.

Despite his age, Conrad was strong, and Mona bit back a flinch because she knew with her size she wasn't fast enough to avoid the hit. She realized she shouldn't have worried, not with her mate nearby. With a move that seemed effortless, Chris plucked the rampaging male out of the air and hurled him into a bare maple trunk. Pride filled her when her mate turned to the tree, arms loose and posture nonchalant, but ready for anything.

"That's it, old man?" Chris taunted.

Mona didn't think that making Conrad angrier was the best course of action, but Chris had made this his fight and she had to let him do it. She didn't, however, need Aaron holding her back. She shrugged out from under his arm. He was reluctant to allow her to move away, but she did, stepping to the front of the circle so she had a better view.

"Mona." Her father was on his feet. He looked no different than the last time she'd seen him, only this time he was covered in his own blood instead of Charlie's. "You need to come to me now."

"No," she said even though the former bond she held with him as her alpha was strong. Her affection and respect for Chris had broken most of it, but her first instinct was still to obey.

"No? This one said you'd joined his pack," Conrad continued, leaving distance between him and Chris. Still, her strong male stood between her and the immediate danger while his pack watched their backs. It was a heady feeling to be surrounded by safety. "Well, you were never released from my pack, so it's null and void. I'll bring it up with the other alphas, and the Haven pack will catch hell for breaking our rules."

“What rules?” Chris demanded. “There’s no rule allowing an alpha to kill a mated male expecting pups for no reason. It goes against the freaking law of nature to attack a pregnant female. And I know for a fact there is no rule that will give you permission to take my mate without my body lying dead on the ground.”

“Mate?” Conrad choked. “She’s not your mate. No one said anything about that.”

“I’ll be sure to send out a card to announce the fact,” Chris said sarcastically, and warmth filled her at his claim. She was his mate, and unlike sweet Charlie, who had been surrounded by others in a pack who feared her father, Chris was an alpha with backup all around. There was no way her father could win. It was finally over.

“Just leave,” Mona said, and the tension around her grew exponentially. “It’s true. I’m mated. These babies are going to be raised by the alpha of Haven, and I’m going to do everything I can to help this pack succeed and grow. Go back to Canada and leave us alone.”

“Or what?” Conrad snarled.

He didn’t wait for a response before attacking Chris. Mona was no weak-willed female nor was she unaccustomed to violence, but the extreme bestiality of the attack was more than she’d ever seen. It hit her like a blow when her father got a punch in across her mate’s face. Chris lifted Conrad again and threw him across the yard at the same tree. She understood that her mate had allowed himself to be hit to do greater damage to his opponent, but she still didn’t like it.

Her father changed to his wolf and dread pitted in her stomach. There was no honor in the older alpha as a wolf. He went for the jugular, took cheap shots, and had no qualms in attacking a human which was his intent when he bolted for them once again. The snow flew under his paws as he demolished the ground between them. It had taken Chris only seconds to throw her father the first time, but the older male closed the distance back into the fray just as quickly.

But her mate was ready. He braced himself for the hit, and Mona fought herself not to command him to shift. She didn’t want to distract him, yet she knew that an unarmed human didn’t stand a chance against the teeth and claws of a wolf. Still, Chris made no move to embrace his change. He just stood there, waiting for impact.

Conrad attacked. Then Chris did it again. He picked Conrad out of thin air, but instead of throwing him to the tree, he wrapped his arms around the snarling wolf’s neck and snapped it.

She knew the best fights were the anticlimactic ones, but she’d never witnessed one instant that changed so many lives. With the breaking of only a few bones, Chris had set her and her former pack free from the oppression Conrad had caused for years. The last bit of instinct associated with him died as Chris threw his body to the ground.

There was angry acceptance in his stance when he turned to her. His eyes blazed with the violence he’d committed. She held back, letting the males around her ease away from the path to her should he need her, but she knew better than to run to an alpha so soon after a kill. He wouldn’t hurt her, she didn’t question that, but he might do something that required more privacy.

Owen returned in human form while Chris continued to stare at her. The two boys he had by their ears were incredibly young and, amazingly enough, neither looked injured. The hardness was ebbing in Chris's face, so she moved closer to him. The chill was starting to bite through her sweatshirt, but she didn't mind. Another few minutes wouldn't bother her, and she needed a touch and reassurance from Chris.

The young males attacked Owen at once, both shifting and biting in tandem with motions Mona kicked herself for not predicting. With Owen in mid-change to fight, the young males turned their rage on her. She was only a few feet away, and they were both on her in a heartbeat.

* * * *

Chris thought his heart would explode when the two males attacked Mona. It went against every instinct possessed by wolves to harm a breeding female, yet they did it with no hesitation. She couldn't be injured, that thought screamed from his wolf. She was his female, small and delicate, even if she was lethal. She was his and couldn't be hurt. He launched, but even as he did so, he knew he wouldn't be in time to intercept them both. The males of his pack were also moving in to protect her, but they were all going to be too late.

Mona took the first hit like a champ, rolling as smoothly as her extended body allowed while protecting her belly. Aaron intercepted the second wolf before he could attack and held him down with the help of several other males. Chris worried about them as the wolf seemed to have super strength, bucking and fighting five mature Weres with power most adolescents didn't possess.

Mona didn't seem to be having a problem, though. The adolescent wolf was snarling, but she seemed calm as she stayed in a tight ball. Chris was trying to decide the best place to grab the wolf while being sure he wasn't biting Mona, when the furry body went limp. Beneath the mound he finally heard Mona make a noise, and it was a cry of distress. He ripped aside the wolf's body, shocked to find it dead.

"I didn't kill him," she sobbed, struggling to sit up. "I don't know what's wrong with him. He's barely more than a pup. I swear I didn't kill him."

Chris lifted her to her feet, and held her against his chest, and ran his hands along her body feeling for injuries while she stammered. The other pack males continued to fight the second attacker. Owen stood over the young wolf. As enforcer, Owen had access to certain alpha powers, a big one being the ability to force a change in wolves gone insane or the confused creatures who got lost in their wolfen bodies. Chris watched as he forced the change in the young wolf, who immediately started blabbering.

"Drugs, drugs," he cried, jerking and moaning. "Alpha...gave us drugs to fight. Made us stronger. Don't want to die."

"Son of a bitch," Aaron swore, pulling a penlight from his pocket. He'd been a doctor for thirty years and some things didn't change, even after retirement. "That bastard hopped these kids up on something. Son, do you know what it was?"

"No, no," he moaned, and the others let him loose when he kicked miserably on the snowy ground. "Feels like my chest is going to explode."

"Go help him," Mona cried, tears running down her face as she looked at the dead wolf. Her eyes had yet to leave the youth, not even to see her own father. "He's used drugs on fighters before, and then calmed them down with alpha influence."

Chris knew it might not work, but chances were better with an adolescent wolf than adult. He didn't want to leave her, but also didn't want her any closer to a wolf not in control of his body. "Owen."

The other wolf came to him with no hesitation, and Chris took his place beside the youth. The boy was fair like Mona, with big eyes nearly as green as hers. He wondered about the relationship between them when he took the young face between his hands.

"What, what?" The boy tried to jerk his head away, but Chris held him firmly.

"Your name."

"Mark. Find Mona, protect. No kill. No kill. No kill."

"That's right, we don't hurt Mona," Chris agreed, pushing his will against the very strong youth who was fighting for his life. He heard Mark's heartbeat going too fast and focused there. "Who is Mona to you?"

"My sister. Maybe. He never claimed me or Mom," Mark said, panting heavily. "Bastard. Dead. You killed him. I felt it."

"Yes, he's dead." Chris ran a hand through the boy's sandy hair as his breathing started to calm. The drug, whatever it was, still ran in his system, but his heart rate was returning to normal. "Are you going to fight me, Mark?"

"No. So tired."

He was indeed showing fatigue in every part of him as he succumbed to the will of the alpha. The young one was strong, but still young.

"What's his name?" Mona asked, and Chris looked sharply at Owen, who'd allowed her closer than he'd have liked. His wolf said there was still the possibility of danger, and though rationally Chris knew the young man wasn't likely to offend, the wolf snarled.

"His name is Mark." Chris stepped over the unconscious boy to put himself between the potential threat and his mate. "He says he's a brother to you. Aaron, can he stay with you tonight? I don't want him in the same house as Mona until we know he's not a threat."

"I'll take him home with me and Pete." The older man nodded, and with the help of Pete, hefted the bulky youth. Chris figured he was maybe sixteen, which meant the six-foot frame would increase in the years to come and the thick muscle already over his body would become even denser.

"The other boy?" Mona asked quietly.

"I don't know." Chris took her in his arms and felt the chill under his palms. She was cold but hadn't complained. "We'll get our answers in the morning. For now, go inside, let the females know what happened, and then you warm up by the fire. I'll take care of this."

She opened her mouth and looked like she might argue. He put a gentle finger to her lips. The violence and tension had ebbed from his system, especially with her near, and he did his best to share his peace with her. “Please, mate. I need my babies warm.”

She instantly softened. Any protest was swept away with his words and he was grateful he’d found the right ones for the moment. She nodded and headed inside, looking back twice, but with a small smile on her face. Mate, he thought, surrounded by bodies and blood, she was worth it.

Chapter 6

Chris cursed when he hit the brakes abruptly and the catalogs beside him flew to the floorboard of his truck. He'd talked to a store rep earlier in the day and if he wanted the baby things delivered in time, they had to get their order in by midnight. Since the females in the pack had put Mona's due date right at the time she thought it would be, he knew they had a week, maybe ten days before their world changed forever. So far, his house didn't have a single diaper in it, let alone the plethora of other baby necessities.

But he was going to change that. He gathered the three catalogs that had everything from furniture to formula and grabbed the roast beef he'd wrapped up from the diner for their dinner.

The night before, Mona had made him hamburgers. She'd been in bed when he got home after working with the new adolescent, Mark, but he'd found his dinner in the refrigerator. It'd been ground chuck, the freshest from the beef one of his farmer cousins had butchered. He'd been pleasantly surprised to find it there, not having had a meal made for him in a long while. She'd been tired, and he should have been the one to cook for her. He needed to spoil her and had started thinking of the gentle discussion he planned to have with her about her doing too much.

Then he'd seen the red peppers on top. She'd made a smiley face in little pieces. The ketchup across the top had probably been meant to be hair, and upon closer inspection, he'd seen it was a mohawk. Her thoughtfulness and teasing had led to him cuddling her against him all night. Still no sex, but he knew she was uncomfortable. After the glimpse of heaven the morning her nightshirt had slipped, he hadn't gotten that close to consummating their relationship again. That part would work itself out with time. What mattered was she was his mate and now it was his turn to take care of her and his pups.

Multiple scents greeted him as he approached the house, and he frowned. His sentries had told him Mona had had company during the day, but he'd mistakenly thought they were gone. His mate was usually tired in the evenings, and he couldn't imagine the other females keeping her up unnecessarily. Maybe they were waiting for rides home.

He sighed. It wasn't what he'd pictured for their night, but maybe the females could help them pick out the things they needed. He opened the door, and the fresh scent of muffins and steaks was also in the air. The roast beef in his hands suddenly wasn't so great. He should have brought her steak instead. The very best. He'd remember the next time he went to the butcher to get her the finest New York strip he could find.

"You have a lot of damn nerve."

He pulled back when Amy Gunner's finger was suddenly waving in front of his face. No one had spoken to him in that tone since he was fourteen and his mother had caught him sneaking out past curfew to meet Erin Sanchez. Behind Amy were several females of his pack, all dressed up with silly flowers and tinsel in their hair, but their expressions belied their festive attire. He had a houseful of pissed off females.

He cleared his throat and put on his most charming smile. Alpha or not, surrounded by that many angry women wasn't a place any male wanted to be. "Good evening, ladies. Where is Mona?"

"She was exhausted. Again," Amy snapped. "So we visited and put her to bed."

"Okay, and you're all here because?"

"Because she had nothing for those babies and you've been working her like a dog," Laura's mother, Karina growled. She was livid, and her anger was sparking the rest of the females to show more fang.

"Wait a minute." He held up his hand as the other females instantly agreed with the two in charge of the lynching. "Mona was fine when I left this morning. Is she hurt? Are the babies okay?"

"They are fine," Amy said with a snort of disgust. "And due any day! Chris, are you so broke you can't front her some cash to buy some clothes of her own? Or a crib for the babies? There was nothing until we got here today. And heaven forbid you get a Christmas tree to spruce the place up."

He stepped further into his house and was shocked to find the space completely changed. A new rug covered the ratty carpet he'd been planning on replacing for years but had never gotten around to doing. Pillows and throws covered his leather sofa, but most apparent were the pink and white additions. Two bassinets sat side by side with a mismatched blue changing table that was heaped with tiny pink and white clothes and industrial-sized packs of diapers. Car seats with thick covers were also in the line, all things on the list the lady from the baby store had sent him.

Pride burst through him at the show of what pack meant to the ones surrounding him. He'd dropped the ball in their eyes by not moving fast enough, and maybe they had a point, but they'd stepped in and proven what family was.

"Thank you." His voice sounded rougher than he'd intended and emotion was suddenly upon him. In only days, two beautiful girls would look up at him from those beds. They wouldn't be his by blood, but he'd already claimed them, just as he had their mother. They'd be a family, and it would be easier because his pack was full of good-hearted females.

"Well, you should know..." Amy said, her fury of earlier replaced with acceptance. The whole tone of the room had gone from anger and defiance to acceptance and love. "I'm starting a girls' club and all of your pack women who want to join are welcome."

"What's that?" he asked suspiciously, though he was still taking in all the baby things around him.

"It's a sorority of sorts that Mona and I started years ago. We'll take all women. We need to watch out for each other. These girls want to be part of it and, well, they're going to be."

Amy was so smart and brave, yet she was also brazening out the common sense that told her it probably wasn't a great idea to defy him. He knew there was a reason he'd always liked her; she was as fierce as any mama wolf when it mattered.

He shrugged. "I know a good thing when I hear it. If this is what you ladies want, and it doesn't make for conflicting loyalties, you know I won't forbid it. Pack is always first, but yes, the females need extra support. Today showed how amazing that support can be. Thank you for caring so much for Mona."

"Chris?"

The females quieted and started for the door when Mona shuffled sleepily from the bedroom. She'd moved to his room the night of the fight. They were mates; her place was always beside him. As they left, the women gave her reassuring smiles and pats on her shoulders. The camaraderie was what he'd hoped for her as the pack got to know her. Having it sooner rather than later was wonderful.

They were alone within minutes, even Amy leaving with no more than a whispered assurance she'd call soon. The dirty looks were gone, his slights forgiven, and when the door closed, the house was peaceful.

Then Mona started crying.

"I'm so sorry, Chris," she bawled, and he set aside the magazines and food he was still carrying to pull her into his arms. "I had no idea what they intended when Amy and Karina stopped by today. We started talking and they decided to call the other females, and suddenly all this had happened."

More than the house had changed. Mona was no longer in his sweats, but in a pretty pink maternity outfit. Her hair had been cut and styled, even if it was a bit mussed from her nap. Pink nail polish adorned her fingertips, and she looked like a girl who'd been spoiled. He missed his clothes on her, but also loved the soft way she felt and looked. He took a peek down to see if her toes matched her fingers, but found his socks still covered her feet. The little piece left sent him over the moon in pleasure. She was still his.

"I don't know why you're upset, honey," he said, trying to reassure her past the tears so they could talk. "It looks great in here. I brought some catalogs home so we can order anything that we need for the babies, but it looks like the girls have you taken care of. If there's anything else you want, just let me know. We'll have it before the babies get here."

She sniffed, the tears ebbing quickly. "You're not mad?"

"Mad? Why would I be mad?"

She was quiet a moment, and he figured her former pack had to be all screwed up if she thought helping another Were would cause anger.

"Honey, I'm not mad. I'm very proud the females of the pack stepped up and helped. It's what pack does. If I'd had more time and thought things out a bit more, I would have had things ready for the babies the second day you were here. But things have happened so fast, and I'm still

playing catch-up. It's not a good excuse, and I'm sorry I have to make it. I should have thought about the babies more. Should have thought about you too, but I confess, I liked having you in my clothes."

"Karina brought this and a few other things from her shop," she said self-consciously.

"It's very pretty." He lifted her off her feet and carried her to his favorite chair, settling her in his lap. "Yep, even prettier in better lighting. What about the other things? Do you like what's here? If you can think of anything else, we can order what you want and have it here in two days."

She rubbed her belly and he added his hand, grinning when two tiny feet kicked him.

"Damn, they're getting stronger every minute." He leaned forward and kissed the bulging spots. "Behave, you two."

He heard Mona sniff again and looked at her face. Tears were back in her eyes, but she was smiling through them.

"Do you think we could get a Christmas tree before they're born?" Mona asked, her eyes bright with tears and hope.

"Of course." He should have thought of that too. Damn he had a lot to make up for. "I'll go out tomorrow and find one that can be culled from the back forty. My mom gave me a box of ornaments a few years ago. It'll be good to break them out so the babies are welcomed properly."

"Oh, good. Thanks." She sighed and laid her head against his chest. So easy to please, so sweet. His mate was multifaceted, and he loved all the surprises he found in her.

"You know, I can't wait to see you mother these two. No other babies in the world are going to be as well cared for. A badass, former enforcer, holly-homemaker for a mom. I don't think the pups could do any better."

"Especially when they'll have a strong, alpha, sweetheart of a daddy like you."

"Awe." He flicked her nose, breaking the sappy moment because his sinuses burned and nothing ruined the strong, alpha facade like crying like a baby. "They might even agree for the first fifteen years. After that, I'll be the daddy with the baseball bat keeping the sniffing adolescents away from my sweet, innocent darlings. With your help, I'm pretty sure I can keep it up until they're thirty-five."

Chapter 7

Pizza. It was even better than roast beef and when Mona called saying she was craving it, making one in the big oven at the diner had been a point of pride for both he and Owen. His cousin was in the passenger seat, sniffing like a dumbass at the ultimate meat pizza. Owen's car had broken down the day before, and none of the shops wanted to work on it so close to Christmas. That didn't bother Owen so much. With pack there was always a ride and if push came to shove, he could always change into his wolf and run home.

"So, are you excited?"

Chris kept his eyes on the road, the snow really coming down. It would be a white Christmas, and he had a feeling the sledders would be over before dawn.

"For Santa?" he asked as he turned onto the long driveway.

"Well, duh. Of course Santa. One of the females told me she has an in with the man in red and told him I wanted a new gaming system," Owen replied. "But actually I wasn't talking about Santa in this case. I meant the pups. I talked to Amy yesterday, and she said they were due any minute."

Chris's mouth instantly dried. He was ready to be a father. There was no doubt in his mind that the second he held those pups they would be the daughters of his heart, even if they weren't of his blood. What worried him were the hours immediately before the pups were in his arms. Labor. He'd been reading up on it and asking around. Every damn female had gnawed his ear off about the hell that was labor. He didn't doubt them either, because werewolves didn't exaggerate. If they said it was the most excruciatingly painful moments of their lives, then he believed them. He didn't want that for Mona but knew there was no way to avoid it.

"Hmm, looks like the sledders are here early," Owen said as he saw before Chris did the line of cars outside the house. "Good idea. I think I'll just stay over and get a really early start to get the hill warmed up."

"Mona." Chris smelled the blood the moment he opened his truck door. The snow was providing a cleaning service, but there was no missing the sharp metallic scent of his mate's blood. Owen tore out of the truck nearly as quick but Chris beat him into the house, ready to fight.

"Oh, right in time. Get your butt to the bedroom," Amy said with a happy smile.

"What the hell is going on?" Owen demanded.

"She started labor an hour ago. I suspect she was toughing it out on her own for a while, silly girl. Anyway, we all just got here and I was going to call Chris but Aaron heard the truck coming up the drive. And now Mona's about to have the babies," Amy answered, but Chris was already standing at the bedroom door and could see for himself.

"I will be cutting your balls off when I'm done here so nothing like this can ever happen again." Mona sounded completely conversational and rational. Maybe if she'd screamed he wouldn't have felt his balls draw up tight.

Karina was at the foot of the bed and gave him an encouraging smile as Mona panted. The sound of his mate's pain was all it took for him to remember his part in the situation. She could make threats and want to kill him. That was her right. His place was to love and support her. And keep his groin well protected.

"Alpha, you need to tell her to push, not moan," Karina said calmly.

"You need to go to hell," Mona replied just as reasonably before he could respond.

Chris carefully sat beside his mate on the bed, taking great care not to shake the mattress. He could smell her pain, but the most potent addition in the room was her fear. It wasn't something he was familiar with in regards to her. Mona was so powerful and confident, but parenthood had a way of bringing even the strongest to their knees. He knew, he'd been on his more than a few times since choosing to be a father.

"Should Aaron be in here?" Chris asked. The females had the room equipped with towels, water and baby supplies, but his uncle was a doctor.

"The last thing she needs in here is something else with a penis," Amy replied, adding another pillow near Mona's feet.

The uncomfortable female in his arms kicked the pillows away, growling at the females surrounding them. He felt the pain radiating off her in hot waves, but stronger than the pain was the fear.

"Mona," he said quietly. Outside the room, the other Weres had music playing softly and merriment reigned. They knew they were moments away from joy.

"Chris." She stilled and the extremely calm tone was back in her voice. He shifted until he sat behind her, supporting her back and protecting himself. "What are you doing?"

"I'm getting ready to help you deliver our babies." Leaning down, he gripped her thighs to put her in better position. "They're ready to come out."

"They are not ready to come out," she insisted, and he could feel her body tense with a contraction. She fought it and a minute later it was gone without a baby.

At the end of the bed, Karina shook her head and looked a little concerned. Chris could hear the babies' heartbeats and knew they were fine for the moment, but Mona couldn't continue to postpone their entrance.

"You need to push with the next contraction," he told her, shifting so Karina had better access.

"No, I don't."

"My heart, the babies are ready to meet their mommy," he said, fighting a flinch when her hand transferred to his thigh and her fingers dug in hard. "And you are ready to be their mommy."

"You don't know that," she said and once again he felt a contraction build in her body.

“Yes, I do,” he insisted. “They have known since the moment they were conceived how much you love them. Can’t you feel how much they love you and want to meet you? I can. I bet they’ll be beautiful like you.”

She moaned hard and threw her head to his shoulder, and he knew it was time. Under her nails he felt blood begin to trickle but he didn’t care because Karina was talking, calling in the other females to help as tiny cries filled the room.

Mona didn’t scream or do anything more than moan low, but it was enough to break his heart, even if it was for the best reason in the world. He pressed kisses to her temple, willing all his strength to her through every bond they’d created.

“Oh, no way! The baby is here?”

Owen’s voice was not what Chris wanted to hear, and he looked up to snap at him when he saw the color completely gone from his cousin’s face. A moment later Owen was passed out on the floor and the females were stepping over him.

“Can one of you males get him out of here?” Amy called, and when Chris looked to his left, he was face to face with his firstborn, wiped off and wrapped in pink. “Hey Daddy. Here’s Baby A.”

He instinctively reached for the little one, but Mona tensed again and the pushing resumed. He blew his baby a kiss and focused on his mate to help welcome little sister to the world. The room was steadily getting more full, but if Mona noticed or cared, it didn’t show.

“I see feet,” Karina announced. “Two of them coming straight—”

“Shut up, Karina. No more talking,” Mona said, and when her voice broke, Chris thought he would too.

“Almost done,” he whispered in her ear. “Finish this, love.”

A second cry joined the first, and it was a loud one. So loud it woke Owen who was still on the floor where he’d fallen.

“What the...is that the...oh hell.”

“Aaron, really!” Amy called again. “Get that boy out of here. Both babies are here, and they could use their first checkup.”

Chris was about to call out to the males to get moving when Mona abruptly sat up. She would have fallen forward if he hadn’t steadied both her shoulders.

“Babies. Now,” she said, though the demanding, calm tone had been replaced with the teary vulnerability he’d first expected upon finding her in labor. “I need them both.”

“Right here.” Amy gently laid the first baby in Mona’s arms. Chris quickly put his own arm under hers. “Oh, good job, Daddy. We’ll get the other little one to you and get your first family picture. And here she is.”

“Charlotte,” Mona whispered, taking the second baby in her other arm.

Chris had his hands full with all three of his girls in his embrace. His heart expanded and contracted painfully at the responsibility and love that bombarded him. “Which one is Charlotte?” he asked, pressing his cheek close to the side of Mona’s face to see the little ones.

“The second one. She’s my Charlotte.”

“Perfect,” he replied. “And the other?”

“Christina.” Mona sighed and kissed both babies on their foreheads. “How can they both be so beautiful?”

Pride filled him, and his eyes burned with unshed tears.

“Look at the beautiful family,” Amy cried happily. “Let’s get a picture. Mona, look up for just a minute. That’s right. Now everyone say ‘Happy birthday, babies.’”

Chapter 8

The changing table was getting a bigger workout than Mona had thought two little girls could give it. But after the latest round of feeding and changes, both babies were sleeping soundly in their crib beside the little plastic Christmas tree Owen had put up in the nursery right after he'd woken from his second faint. Her girls liked the soft, twinkling lights and Mona couldn't blame them. For a hasty effort, the tree really did make the room feel festive and even though Christmas day had passed with little fanfare, they'd make up for it at the pack Christmas party in a few days.

Seeing Charlotte and Christina wrapped up together, their pudgy arms touching lightly even in their sleep, gave Mona peace. They were a week old, healthy, beautiful, and growing incredibly fast. She could spend hours watching them, and sometimes she did, if Chris wasn't around to make her take a nap.

He would be back any minute from checking in at the diner, so she left her daughters to sleep, then returned to the living room and tossed a spit towel over the back of the couch and nudged a few diapers to the floor. He'd read that new moms shouldn't be bothered with trivial housework and should sleep when their babies did. To keep him happy, she made minor messes before he returned. In truth, she felt great. The labor and delivery had gone off without a hitch despite her panic. It was a day she would remember fondly, and she looked forward to doing it again. Not too soon, but after a bit she hoped she and Chris would add to their family.

She yawned but wasn't sleepy. She was generally tired from the fewer hours of sleep she got in a day, but overall she felt good. If not for Chris being on his way home, she would have finished the gift wrapping for the belated pack Christmas party and made more of the sugar cookies the Weres couldn't seem to get enough of. But he was on his way so she put those on her to-do list.

The sound of tires on gravel made her smile, and she quickly pulled a blanket down from the top of the sofa. If she was going to get her way with Chris, she knew it was best to approach him doing exactly what he wanted. She hoped to get what she'd been craving.

* * * *

"I'm back, Mona."

Chris gently kicked the door shut behind him. It was nearly thirty below outside, and he didn't want the cold trickling in. His pups liked a warm house and if that meant he wore t-shirts and his boxers so they could be comfortable, he didn't care. On the kitchen counter, he set the hot paper cup from the café with a specialty hot cocoa he thought Mona might like. She was slowly returning to eating normally after the birth had thrown her off a bit, and he wanted to tempt her. Nothing did that for his mate like chocolate.

The dishes from lunch were still in the sink, and he smiled because she'd listened to him for once. On closer inspection, he saw they were clean. It looked like he was going to have to stay home and sit on her if he wanted her to rest. He sighed, not put out at all by the thought.

Owen was running the day-to-day at the diner, so Chris knew things were taken care of. He was going to officially start his paternity hiatus and begin by making sure Mona slept for three days straight while he saw to the girls. If Mona could rest, then she'd get stronger faster. His wolf hated seeing any sign of fatigue or weakness in the mate that both man and wolf knew was incredibly strong. Time to heal was something wild wolves didn't always get, but Chris could make it happen for his woman. By the time the delayed Christmas party came around, Mona would be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

He smiled again when he peeked in the bedroom at the tiny girls, both already asleep. They'd be out for most of the night, though Christina liked to wake up around three AM to eat. Charlotte did the same, more out of loyalty for her sister than because she was really hungry, at least that was his theory.

They looked like him, but then their sire had been a distant cousin of his. Dark hair covered both heads, and when they were awake, their eyes were the darkest brown he'd ever seen. He felt good things were in store for the pups and slipped out of their room and headed back for the living room. He knew Mona wasn't asleep, but at least she was lying down.

His sweet mate, he thought, bending down to pick up a few stray diapers. She thought she was fooling him, but he knew her game. She wanted to be back up and running at full strength, but she wasn't there yet. It was his job to make sure she didn't overdo and she was just going to have to listen to him.

"Hi."

He straightened and looked at the couch, where she'd set the blanket aside. Her feet were bare and the farther up her body he looked, the more bare it became. By the time he reached her face, he'd taken in the full length of her lusciously curved body, and every drop of blood had rushed to his groin.

"Um."

"Hi, Chris. Were things okay at the diner?"

Her chest moved with her words, and he found himself entranced by the generous white globes tipped with dark nipples. She nursed at times and it had made her more endowed than ever. He didn't think he'd ever been the kind of male to fixate on a physical trait, but his attention was firmly held by the rise and fall of those breasts.

"Chris?"

He jerked his gaze to her face, and his wolf gave a little howl at the seductive pleasure in her expression.

“Hi.” He wanted to kick himself for the ineffectual greeting. ‘Hi’ was not a proper salutation for a gorgeous, naked mate spread out like a feast before her male, but it was the best his blood-deprived brain could do.

She ran the back of her fingertips down the side of her breast and rib cage, resting the pink-painted digits on the soft swell of her belly. “So, I’ve been thinking. I’m ready to be your mate now.”

“You are my mate,” he said automatically, because it was the truth. Sex or no, she was the female he’d claimed, and he loved her. She had to understand that.

“I know,” she replied, and his wolf settled again, back to enjoying the view and scent of his woman, aroused and waiting for him. “And I want to make love with you.”

“Six weeks.” His lust-laden mind scrounged for facts. One of the reasons he hadn’t pressed her to make love was because he wanted it too badly to guarantee it would be lovemaking. He wanted to nestle in and rut like a beast and that was not the way things between them should start.

“Um.” He cleared his throat. “We need to wait six weeks until your body is healed. All the books said so.”

“Those were for humans,” she said with obvious patience as she started tracing her fingers lower to the tops of her thighs. “I’m not a human, Chris. I’m already healed and feeling much better all over.”

“But you gave birth as a human,” he protested, and nearly whimpered when the pink tips disappeared into the shadow between the tops of her thighs. “Only four weeks, five days, fifteen hours and thirty-three minutes until we can m-make love.”

She’d tucked her hand further between her thighs and lifted one of her legs so her sex was on display before him. He was a goner. Unless he got the hell out of the house in the next two seconds he was going to take her, and he couldn’t guarantee gentle or sweet or any of the things she deserved as his mate and the mother of his pups.

“Sweet mother, what are you trying to do to me?” Chris’s palms were sweating and when she smiled he knew whatever she came up with next wasn’t going to help him in his resolve to wait.

“I’m ready now. I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t know I could handle everything you have to offer.” She shook out her hair and arched her back, in the process bumping a blanket above her. Mini marshmallows fell from her stash above, the little dots of sugar catching in her sweetest spots, and Chris knew there would be no more fight from him.

* * * *

Mona winced when the treats she’d forgotten about fell on her. She didn’t want to pick them up and kill the mood. She already wasn’t sure if Chris was going to let himself be seduced. Everything in his stance and scent said he wanted her. They also both said he was fighting the lust with all he had. It wasn’t a matter of *if* they would be intimate, it was *when*. She wanted the when to be immediate. He wanted four weeks, five days, and—

“Hell.”

She looked up from the marshmallows in time to see Chris dive for her belly. Giggling didn't seem appropriate but when his lips connected on her stomach, licking the skin under the sweet treat, she laughed out loud. He looked up, the white cylinder caught between his teeth. His eyes were twinkling with humor and lust as he chomped the treat and went back for another, letting his tongue drag along the expanse of her torso longer than necessary. She thought he might go south for more marshmallows but he found other things to nibble.

"Oh, damn." She sighed, content to let him sample anything he desired.

His lips circled her nipple, and she thought her body would explode. It was so sensitive, and while he wasn't being harsh, he was attacking it with a ferocity that made the other nipple ache for the same attention. Laughter forgotten, Mona wrapped her legs around his middle, pressing her aching sex against him. She wanted him. She'd wanted him from the first time she met him, and every moment that passed since had magnified that desire.

He moved to the second breast, squeezing them both in his hands as he laved the surrounding areola. As he neared her nipple, she tensed. Her breasts were very functional at the moment, and she didn't know what Chris's stimulation would do. She looked down and watched him suckle her breast. If he was worried or put off by the miniscule chance of milk flow, it didn't show, so she relaxed and enjoyed. Her breasts had felt more practical than anything lately, so having them worshiped and treated beautifully made every other part of her body ache for attention.

He released her nipple, giving it one last lick and nibble before moving up to her neck and finally to her lips. Shifting around slightly, he was naked in an amazingly short amount of time. He adjusted his weight, and she reveled in it, adoring the head-to-toe snuggle with his hard, thick erection pressing between her thighs.

"We'll do more next time, I promise," he said, taking biting kisses from every inch of her mouth as she reciprocated, trying to get under his skin.

"More?" she moaned.

"There are more marshmallows, and I want to explore where they landed." He kept on kissing and settling deeper and deeper as he rocked closer. "But right now I have to be in you."

She arched closer, feeling the head of his penis delve shallowly inside her. It drove her crazy, and the wetness there seemed to fuel his lust. The hands bracing him beside her head fisted hard as he fought for a moment she didn't want to give him. She didn't want him levelheaded and controlled for their first mating. She wanted him just as he was, consumed by passion and in love.

She ran her hands from his strong shoulders down his sinewy back to his butt. She grabbed tight and pulled him right where she wanted him. He growled against her mouth, and then threw his head back, taking charge where she'd started, thrusting deep into her core. She whimpered, rocking as much as she could to meet every deep thrust. A fleeting thought passed that they weren't going to last long, but his whispered promise for marshmallow exploration was still in the forefront of her mind. Just the thought of him using his long, rough tongue on her most sensitive places made a howl vibrate in her throat, but she held it back, wanting to come with him their first time together.

He sped up and moved deeper, as if he knew she was on the edge, and he probably did, just as she knew he was closing in on finishing what they'd started weeks earlier. He moved his hand from beside her head and cradled her cheek in his big palm, tilting her head until their eyes met once more. He stayed deep and steady, his strokes becoming more intense and frantic even as his gaze remained locked on hers.

"My mate."

She smiled at his growled promise.

"Your mate," she agreed, gasping between the words as he punctuated the promise with his thrusts. She moaned hard, no longer able to hold anything back. "Together."

Eye contact was broken when he tossed back his head and howled. She was thrown into howls of her own as pleasure overtook her.

She didn't realize she was shaking until he pulled a blanket over their naked bodies. She'd known it would be perfect and knew the more they were together, the more intense and creative they would be. The sky was the limit, and she wanted to touch the stars.

"Hear that?" Chris asked.

From around the valley, the sound of wolves baying amplified. He had his face to her neck, breathing her in again, but even though she couldn't see his face, she knew he smiled.

"They're celebrating," he whispered. "A new alpha female. Two healthy pups. A friend and protector. All in you."

"That's... It's good to be here." Her throat was tight, and she pressed her nose closer into his shoulder until she could control herself. Tears weren't what she wanted, not when she wanted so much more from the night ahead. She sniffled back the burning feeling and smelled something new. "Is that cocoa?"

"Oh." He lifted up and rubbed his nose to hers. She smiled and rubbed back. "I got you some from the coffee shop. Something special they only make at Christmas. I can warm it up for you if you'd like it now."

So thoughtful and sweet; her alpha mate redefined the label and made himself everything to her. She pressed her lips to his, feeling his interest stir between her thighs once more.

"Later."

Much later.

Chapter 9

“So, you were Chris’s wife when you Jedi-ninja’d that big guy?”

Mona looked at Ethan and Sadie, both kids hanging on to her every word. Sadie was more interested in the babies lying in matching Moses baskets on the counter, but she was listening to her brother. It was a little nice, Mona had to admit, to have two people she’d saved be thankful and interested in her.

“Yep, I sure was. We got married when he was on vacation last spring. I couldn’t move out here right away because my mother was ill.”

Sadie looked back and forth between them before shaking her head at Mona. “I can’t believe he didn’t tell any of us. I mean, that’s a long time to have a secret like that.”

Mona just smiled and shrugged. That was their story, and all the Weres were sticking to it. The humans were very friendly but pretty much completely in the dark about the species they shared their city with. They worked together in almost every sector of the city, so they often mingled, and keeping up certain appearances was important.

Too many questions would have been asked if Chris had taken in a random pregnant stranger two weeks before her due date, so instead Mona had the honor of being Amy Gunner’s niece. She and Chris met when he was on vacation in California. Amy had hooked them up, and though they’d been separated, they were very much in love.

“So, you were really pregnant when you saved us,” Sadie said, her eyes nearly as wide as her brother’s. “You shouldn’t have done that. The babies could have been hurt.”

“That’s what I told her,” Chris interrupted, placing a fresh cup of hot chocolate in front of Mona. Sadie smiled up at her boss adoringly. The teen had a bit of a crush on Chris, but Mona didn’t mind. She was pretty stuck on him too. “But you know, everything turned out well, Sadie, so we’ll just be grateful everyone here is safe. Did you guys have a nice Christmas?”

Mona listened with a half an ear as Sadie spoke. The Meyters Diner was full of Weres and humans in a belated Christmas party-baby-wedding shower. There were two tables full of gifts that were ready to be opened. The cake she’d made and decorated was nearly gone, with people going back for seconds and thirds. It made her happy to have so many enjoying the food.

The newest addition besides her babies was her brother. Mark was a conundrum. He barely spoke, even to her, though he was fiercely protective of her and the babies. When she tried to get him to open up to her, he shut down completely. It seemed to be something most males did around her though, and Chris said it was because of her smell. Since they’d become intimate the full mate bond was established and every Were knew it. She might dress in pink and spend her time baking

cookies, configuring slow cooker recipes, and cuddling her babies, but to the pack, she smelled like the extremely lethal alpha she was. Chris assured her they would get used to it in time and be more comfortable.

The females didn't seem to have a problem, and it was probably better that the males kept their distance from her babies anyway. Her mama wolf was on a short leash. Maybe in a few months she could get to know her brother. As far as she knew, he was the only family she had left. Her future was looking so bright with her mate and pups that she found herself cleaving to the good things in her past.

Amy, standing across the diner beside Aaron, was a shining example. Those two were wonderful together. They were set in their ways, but happy in them and with each other. If they ever did decide to tie the knot, that would surely be a hell of a party. Amy kissed Aaron's wrinkled cheek, and he goosed her butt before she giggled and walked away.

Mona's gaze traveled to Mark again. He'd come out of the drugs well. The only thing he put in his body now was mass quantities of food, according to Aaron and Pete. They'd decided for the time being it was best he stayed with the two bachelors. She was going to change that in the summer after school was out. She wanted him to have a home with her and Chris and their girls.

The little ones started fussing in their baskets. Charlotte and Christina, the lights of their daddy's eyes. She liked to think Charlie watched over them too.

"Damn, I was sure they were girls," Owen said, one of the only males that wasn't bothered by her new alphaness. "But these two eat like little piglets."

"Oh, watch your mouth, young man," Amy commanded playfully, already pulling bottles from the diaper bag. The girls were always hungry, much more so than Mona's milk supply could handle, so special formula was used. Amy shook the bottles and frowned before handing them to Owen. "If you think you can handle it without passing out, please go warm these. Not in the microwave—"

"Yeah, I know, in hot water," Owen grumbled. His cheeks were bright red from the fainting reference, something the pack had no intention of ever letting him forget. "But then I get to feed Charlotte. She likes me the best anyway."

Amy rolled her eyes and lifted Christina to her shoulder, patting the little one's back and offering a finger for her to suck while she waited. Amy wandered over toward the kitchen, probably off to give more bottle warming instructions. Charlotte was more patient and quietly kicked in her basket, waiting for Owen, who really did seem to be her favorite outside of her mother and father. Speaking of father... Mona turned to find Chris and laughed when he was eye to eye with her, he'd obviously been holding the position. Ethan smirked but Sadie was gone, begging Amy to hold the baby.

"So, Mrs. Meyters, I play basketball. You could come to our games if you want."

Chris laughed. "Beat it, kid. She's my girlfriend."

The youth snickered. "Girlfriend? I thought she was your wife."

“Girlfriend, mate, wife, sweetheart, lover, soul mate, and spouse—she’s all those things,” Chris said, but he wasn’t talking to Ethan anymore and they both knew it. Mona’s heart melted when he stroked a finger across her cheek, giving her the sweetness she needed. “If you’re really lucky, boy, you might find a woman who’ll fit that description. You might meet her at school, maybe at the grocery store. Or maybe one winter night after the snow has covered everything and you’re cursing your luck, she’ll fall into your lap and change your life forever with one moment.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Ethan said, and Mona realized he was still listening in.

She turned and smiled at the scrawny boy. “One day, Ethan. Until then, just enjoy being a kid. You’ve got the rest of your life to be a grownup.”

He nodded and wandered away. Her mate nudged her face back toward him. Chris kissed her lips, probably harder and longer than he’d intended, and the diner erupted in cheers. She’d forgotten about them too, while falling into Chris’s sweet words. He kissed her a second time, gentler, sweeter, and the revelers went back to their conversation.

“You know, I don’t think your advice to Ethan would fit for me,” Chris said after a long minute. “I wish I’d met you ten years ago so we could have started this then. Even if we get another eighty Christmases together, I don’t think that’ll be enough.”

She smiled and held his sweet face between her palms. “The timing on everything has been just right. We’ll have many more winters to come to snuggle and share with more babies and family.”

“I like the sound of that.” He closed his eyes as she stroked his temples. “I like that a whole lot.”

“Yes, I do too. We never know how long any of us have.” Thoughts of Charlie filled her with a sad warmth and she looked down to his little namesake lying beside them on the counter. Chris looked too and held his pinky out to the little one he’d helped deliver into the world. Charlotte grasped his finger and took it to her mouth, gnawing on it with her tiny gums. Mona smiled when Chris’s face broke out in the soft smile he wore quite often. “I don’t think there’s ever enough time, Chris. We just have to take each day and make it better than the last.”

“And love the ones around us,” he whispered, and leaned into the basket, kissing Charlotte’s tiny cheek. “No matter how they come to us.”

“Okay, lovebirds, break it up,” Owen announced, nudging Chris aside, but Mona noticed he didn’t even accidentally touch her. “Me and my girl have a bottle date. Here you go, Amy.”

Having followed him from the kitchen, Amy took a bottle from Owen’s hand, but not before she scowled at him. Chris rolled his eyes and Mona smiled.

“There, we’ll feed these beauties. You two can go back to making kissy noises and googly eyes,” Owen instructed.

Mona watched the two walk away with her babies, neither Amy nor Owen going far. They knew better than to take her little ones out of her sight.

“So,” Chris said, drawing her attention back to him, not that it was ever far from him anyway. “Is it kissy noises or googly eyes?”

She smiled and leaned close, the barstools allowing her the freedom to shift closer as he did the same until they were nearly chest to chest. “You know, I could really use a quick snuggle...”

“Oh?” Interest flashed in his eyes, curiosity and lust mixing in the way that made her want to satisfy every question he had and make a few new ones in the process.

“And maybe a warm-up on this cocoa?”

The lines around his eyes creased deep with his smile, and he pressed a hard kiss to her mouth before standing. “Cocoa now. Snuggles later.”

She liked the sound of that. “Oh, and don’t forget the marshmallows.”

About Stephanie Beck

http://www.lyricalpress.com/stephanie_beck

Stephanie Beck is a bit of a badass with a black belt in Tae Kwon Do, trophy years in tournament paintball and let's face it, the fact that she survived in a household with two older brothers and a younger sister says a lot. Those things never stopped her from baking cookies and carrying dollies though, and that's why she enjoys characters with duality or unexpected qualities.

All of Steph's leading ladies have a backbone in one way or another, but like Mona in *A Winter Tale With Marshmallows*, they still maintain a level of femininity. Of course, their male counterparts might not always realize what a catch they've found, but as a woman who found such an appreciative man in real life, Steph knows they are out there and deserve their stories.

For more paranormal fun, visit Steph's website or on Facebook for fun with her Freak Sorority stories. A free series about four extraordinary females finding their way in this world, the short stories culminate with character visits and biannual, week-long online festivals complete with games and prizes.

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