



ARCTIC WINDS

NOTHING WILL STOP A WOLF ONCE
HE'S FOUND HIS MATE

SONDRAE BENNETT



Back Cover Copy

Nothing will stop a wolf once he's found his mate...not even her own doubts.

After her skulk abandoned her four years ago, Samantha knew she would never truly be wanted. When she accidentally stumbles into a wolf town and is asked by their premier to stay, she believes it's the novelty of an arctic fox motivating him. She knows she'll be on her own again once he tires of her.

Jason finds himself pulled to Samantha from the moment she faints in his arms. His wolf is calling to him, telling him he's found their mate and the heat he feels for Samantha is impossible to resist. But his little fox is loaded down with emotional baggage and doesn't believe she's worthy of love. Can he overcome her fears? Or will pack jealousies and the local foxes convince her she doesn't belong with him before he has a chance?

Highlight

Jason felt Samantha stiffen. She still didn't understand. They'd already accepted her as their own. The decision had been made.

"I already told you, I'll stay for a little while, but I'm not sticking around. I'm a fox, for crying out loud."

"So?" he asked, genuinely confused.

"So, I can't be a part of your pack."

"Why not?"

"Uh, did you not understand me when I said I'm a fox? Who ever heard of a fox in a wolf pack?" She laughed. It was nice and low and it made Jason's belly clench with desire. How did she pull at him like this? He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. His wolf was begging him to take her, to mark her as his. She had no idea what she did to him or the kind of danger she invited. Here she was, sitting and laughing and insisting she could never be part of the pack when all he wanted to do was bend her over the table and make her submit, forcing her to stay forever.

Arctic Winds

by

Sondrae Bennett

Alpine Woods Shifters: Book 1

Arctic Winds

9781616502270

Copyright © 2011, Sondrae Bennett

Edited by Christy Phillippe

Book design by Lyrical Press, Inc.

Cover Art by Renee Rocco

First Lyrical Press, Inc. electronic publication: January, 2011

Lyrical Press, Incorporated

17 Ludlow Street

Staten Island, New York 10312

<http://www.lyricalpress.com>

eBooks are not transferable. All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE:

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party Web sites or their content.

Published in the United States of America by Lyrical Press, Incorporated

Dedication

For Keith. You were the first person I trusted to read my stories and the one who pushed me submit. Without you, this might not have happened. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Chapter 1

Jason paused in the entrance of the pack's local diner as a tantalizing scent hit him. Although completely foreign, it held a familiarity that compelled him closer.

Smells like home. Jason shook his head. He had no idea where that thought came from. The scent evoked no memories of his childhood home or his current house on the outskirts of town.

Whatever it was, it was doing strange things to his wolf. The sudden urge to shift and start chasing his tail almost overwhelmed him. Better yet, the tail of that woman in the corner booth. Taking a deep breath, he confirmed the strange and delicious smell came from the petite blonde huddling into her sweater. She was definitely a shifter but that was about all he could figure out. She wasn't any type of shifter he'd dealt with before. Without question Jason would have remembered a scent like hers.

Spotting Martha, a waitress at the diner and a respected elder in the pack, he made his way to the counter.

"Who's that?" he asked, inclining his head toward the woman.

"Dunno. Came in a few minutes ago and ordered. I was about to phone your office but you saved me a call by coming in. Doesn't seem dangerous but she's definitely not local." As leader, or Premier, of the Alpine Woods pack, Jason was called upon whenever something out of the ordinary occurred.

"Not dangerous at all. Still, I'm having trouble placing her. She doesn't smell like anything I've dealt with before." They both looked as the woman sneezed into her napkin three times. Who would've thought anyone could look attractive while sneezing? "Maybe some kind of cougar?" he guessed.

"That bitty thing? Housecat maybe, cougar no way. Besides, whatever she is, she's canine, not feline," Martha murmured, moving away toward some customers.

Jason looked at the woman in the booth again. Martha was right. Whatever she was, she was definitely canine. Her mannerisms reminded him of the fox shifters he dealt with on occasion, but Jason was positive that couldn't be right. He knew the local foxes and none of them would come into his town without a courtesy phone call first. Besides, the woman's coloring was not the brassy reds and oranges prominent in fox breeds.

Jason stood and moved next to the woman's booth, watching her gaping stare slowly travel up his frame. Her eyes grew wider as her gaze raked over him. Jason was large, even for a wolf, and obviously his size intimidated the small shifter.

Though his animal form came from his mother, Jason's human form came from his father, who was built like a linebacker despite being full human. His father had been shocked after his mother had shown him her animal form, but instead of being freaked out, he eventually came to think of it as amazing. "Why would I want normal when I can have remarkable!" his father had said throughout Jason's childhood.

His father was thrilled to be mated to a wolf and loved Jason's mother more each and every day, although he had been disappointed he himself could never be more than human. Contrary to popular belief, a shifter's bite didn't "transform" a human.

Lately, whenever Jason visited his parents, he felt a keen sense of longing. He wanted love like theirs someday. When he walked into his empty house after work, he thought about what it would be like to come home to a hot meal and a warm body. At the end of the day, he wanted to share his hopes and dreams with someone. He felt ready to build a home, but as yet hadn't found anyone he could imagine building that home with. Maybe it was his father's words echoing in his head, but he didn't want normal...he wanted remarkable.

He'd dated his share of women, but none he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. Hell, he could barely stand to spend an entire night with them and usually found himself leaving early the next morning. Being the leader of the pack, he never wanted for female companionship, but lately it just wasn't enough.

"Can I help you?" The woman's hesitant voice interrupted Jason's daydreaming, drawing his mind back to the present.

"I'm wondering the same thing." He slid into the opposite side of the booth, never taking his eyes off the woman driving him crazy with her delectable scent. "What brings a woman like yourself to my town?"

"Your town?"

"That's right." Leaning forward over the table, he pierced her with his gaze. "My town."

She ran her small tongue lightly over her plump lower lip and nibbled absently on the corner of her mouth. Jason's desire spiked as he watched. When was the last time something so simple made him so horny?

Her eyes got impossibly wider after she delicately sniffed at the air. She started shaking and held a hand out in front of her as if fending off an attack.

"Please don't. I...I'm sorry. Please," the woman whispered desperately.

* * * *

Oh my God! It's a shifter town! I'll be lucky if I get out alive. Samantha couldn't believe she'd made such a huge mistake. Her mind screamed at her to get out quickly.

Stumbling into the diner, she had thought of only one thing. Food. Although running out of money fast, she wasn't feeling well enough to hunt up meals today. She had decided to splurge and drove into this small town looking for sustenance. But she had no desire to take her life into her hands by trespassing on pack territory.

This damn head cold. Normally she would have smelled the warning signs long before reaching the border of their town, but her nose had been clogged for days. She hadn't even thought about it as she drove up.

Back in Alaska, where she grew up, shifter communities were interspersed everywhere and God help anyone who ventured into one. The bears would rip intruders in half and send them back to their skulk in pieces before asking questions. And her people were no less fierce. They didn't have the strength of the bears, but they were crafty and knew how to take down a trespasser before they even got close to the burrows. The moose and wolves were equally defensive. No community let strangers live long enough to explain.

She had managed to get as far as the diner. Maybe she could quietly leave the town and they wouldn't harm her. Or maybe they were just trying to figure out where to send the remains.

"I'll leave. Right now, and you'll never see me again."

Anger filled the man's gaze.

Oh God, she wasn't going to make it out of here. "Please, I'll go," Samantha said as everything went hazy around the edges of her vision. *No, not here...* was her last thought before the world went black.

* * * *

Jason jumped forward and caught the woman as she collapsed. He easily lifted her and kicked out a chair at the table to the right of the booth, sitting as he examined the beauty he held. She was obviously starving, and felt as if she barely weighed one hundred pounds. She also seemed to be running a slight fever. Why was she frightened upon discovering this was a shifter town? If she was ill, she should've been happy to find a town with a doctor used to dealing with her kind.

"Is she all right?" Martha asked, coming to stand beside him. A couple of the diners stood to help but he waved them back to their seats.

"I think she just needs some food and rest, but she should see a doctor as well. Call Eddie and ask if he'll come over." Eddie Pritchard was the town physician and, although not shifter himself, was used to taking care of those who were. Unlike most shifter communities, the full humans in Alpine Woods were considered pack. They attended pack meetings and events along with the wolf shifters.

Jason went back to examining the beauty in his arms as Martha moved to make the call. He was surprised at the spurt of frightened anger that ran through him when she mentioned going away and never coming back. He barely knew the woman, but he definitely wanted to change that. His wolf howled at him to find out everything about her. He'd never felt such a strong attraction to a woman before. He didn't even know her name, but he wanted her with a fierce passion. Even starving and ill, she was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen. Her hair was so blond it appeared white and fell down her back in long waves. She had a delicate face with a long nose and sharp cheekbones. Her almond-shaped eyes had been crystal blue.

He looked up as the front door opened, the cold air blowing against him where he sat. He watched his younger brother's eyebrows rise as Ethan took in the woman in his arms. His two brothers, Ethan and Danny, helped him run the pack. As the oldest, Jason was technically Premier, but they were his officers and their leadership was a team in the truest sense of the word. The pack looked to all three to keep them safe and happy.

"What's with the girl?"

Jason looked back down at the woman he held. It would probably be better to lay her down, but he didn't want to relinquish her warm body yet. Logically, he knew he would have to once Eddie arrived, but until then, she felt right in his arms, like she belonged there.

"I don't know. She collapsed. Eddie's on his way."

As he watched, the woman shifted slightly against him, seeking the warmth of his body. She was a tiny thing. Everything about her called on his protective instincts. Whatever she needed, he wanted to be the one to provide it. Starting with some food. Jason scowled at her almost sunken cheeks. She was too skinny and looked like she'd been surviving on breadcrumbs.

"Earth to J?" Ethan waved his hand in front of Jason's face. "Where did she come from?"

"I don't know. She was sitting in the booth. When I went over to see what she was doing here, she panicked. She looked at me like she thought I was going to tear her head off. Kept apologizing and stuttering, and then collapsed."

"Interesting," Ethan murmured, watching him closely as Eddie bustled into the diner carrying his black bag.

When Eddie reached them, he motioned for Ethan to help him push several tables together. Jason felt himself stiffen. As stupid as it sounded, especially considering it was his request, he didn't want Eddie to look at her. He wanted to bundle her up and take her back to his house to care for her himself. Already his wolf thought of her as his.

Reining in his irrational wolf for the moment, he laid his precious bundle on the hastily put together exam table. Not wanting to give up contact completely, he grabbed her hand and held it in both of his as Eddie looked her over. Jason noticed Ethan staring at their joined hands and growled a warning.

His brother's shocked gaze rose to meet his, before a wide grin slowly spread over his features.

"So that's the way it is. Guess we're adding a new pack mate."

"Huh?" Eddie asked, having missed the exchange.

"Never mind, Eddie. Make sure we take good care of this one," Ethan said.

"Just get on with it," Jason growled. Ethan's smile widened, silently mocking him. "Get that look off your face. It's not what you think. Don't you have somewhere you need to be?"

"Not at all. I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be than right here." Ethan crossed his arms and leaned back against the table behind him.

“I swear, your only purpose in life is to torture me. Why don’t you get out before I beat you black and blue?”

Chapter 2

Samantha heard arguing but couldn't make out any of the words. It seemed close and yet so far away. Was someone growling at her? Everything seemed fuzzy. Her head felt like it weighed a hundred pounds, and her eyes refused to open.

The growling came again, louder this time.

She heard people talking, but the words didn't make sense. Her hand was trapped in something. Had she fallen while hunting? No, that wasn't right. She hadn't gone hunting. She'd gone to the diner instead. The wolf had come, talking about his town. *Wolf town!* Her world shifted into focus in a panicked flood.

"Get out before I beat you black and blue," someone snarled at her.

She sat up with a gasp. Wolves surrounded her, three to be exact. No, one of them wasn't a wolf, only two. *Only two*, Samantha thought on the verge of hysteria. One was more than enough to kill her where she sat, and the town must be teeming with others. Wolves lived in packs. Where there was one, inevitably there were more.

"Please don't." Samantha's voice sounded rough even to her own ears. "I'll leave. You don't need to do that! I'll go."

"Easy, honey," the non-wolf said, rubbing her arm soothingly. Her other hand was caught by wolf number one. "Listen to me. I'm a doctor, and I'm going to take good care of you. Okay? You sit right here and let me make sure you're all right." The man must have been in his sixties. His gray hair surrounded a bald patch, and his kind eyes were framed by wide black spectacles. He was a heavy man and although not small, the two wolves dwarfed him.

Samantha tried tugging on her left hand but the wolf held firm. "You don't understand," she whispered to the man. "I have to go." Samantha looked back at the wolf holding her hand. "I don't want to cause any problems."

"You're not going anywhere," he growled.

Samantha's eyes widened. "Is it too late?"

A puzzled expression crossed his face. "Too late for what?"

"To escape the beating."

There was a long pause before the second wolf asked, "What beating?"

Confused, Samantha looked back and forth between the two wolves before settling on the one who held her hand. "The one you said you'd give me if I didn't leave."

All three men looked at her like she had two heads. She'd been told when a wolf hunted, he stared his prey down, but she didn't think she'd be stared at when she made such an easy target. She figured they'd just kill her and get it over with.

“You told her you’d beat her if she didn’t leave?” The second wolf’s sudden exclamation made Samantha jump. His relaxed pose disappeared instantly as he rounded on the first wolf.

“Of course I didn’t!” The first wolf twisted toward the second. She thought about making a run for it, but the first wolf still had her hand trapped in his. There was no way she’d make it out of the diner, so that plan was out. She realized all three men were once again staring at her.

“I..I’m sorry. What?” Samantha asked hesitantly.

“I said,” the one with her hand gritted out between his teeth, “when did you think I said I’d beat you if you didn’t leave?”

“Uh, just now. I was waking up and you said, ‘Get out before I beat you black and blue.’” Why hadn’t they gotten this over with already?

Wolf number two burst out laughing, and even the doctor smiled. The man patted her shoulder and placed a stethoscope on her back.

“Now, don’t you worry, Jason may look big and scary, but he’d never raise his hand to a woman. What’s your name, sweetheart?” The doctor winked at her when she glanced at him.

“Uh, Samantha Walker,” she murmured absently, shaking her head. This man didn’t get it. How could he understand territories and wolves when he didn’t even know they existed?

“If you let me go, I won’t cause any trouble. I’ll leave and you’ll never have to see me again,” Samantha implored the wolf named Jason.

“Exactly.”

Now, what could that possibly mean? Samantha thought about what she had said and realized the wolf still held her hand firmly in his.

“You...you want me to cause trouble?” What kind of a trap was this?

“No. I want you to stay.”

Samantha tipped her head to the side and looked at him. She couldn’t figure him out. Why would he want her to stay? No one had ever wanted her to stay. Not even her own skulk had wanted her. Her parents died soon after she was born, and she’d been the responsibility of the skulk from then on, a responsibility they neither wanted nor took particularly well. She’d never felt the warmth of love and friendship. After she turned twenty-one, they’d asked her to leave. That was four years and eight states ago.

As much as she tried, she’d never found anywhere she belonged. She took odd jobs here and there, waiting tables, bartending, serving coffee, but as soon as she made enough money to last a couple of months, she’d take off for a new state and a new adventure. It had always been difficult for her to make friends, and therefore she never had attachments to keep her in one place. No one cared what happened to her. She was on her own. Always had been and probably always would be.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I understand.”

“Honey, he wants you to stay here and become one of the pack.” Wolf number two grinned.

She looked quickly at the doctor at the mention of *pack*, but he continued with his exam without blinking at the odd phrase.

“Um...why?” No one answered, but the wolf leaning against the table continued to smile at her. He was handsome in a “devil may care” way. His hair was light brown with streaks of blond, and his posture shouted “carefree.” His curly hair, which fell around his head in a tangled heap, only enhanced the boyish charm in his face.

“What are you exactly?” The one named Jason interrupted her thoughts. Again she looked cautiously at the doctor. “Don’t worry about him,” the wolf said. “He knows all about us. You won’t find many in this town who don’t. Secret societies rarely stay secret forever.” Jason continued to stare.

He was handsome in a completely different way than the other wolf. His hair was a dark brown but with a slightly reddish hue. It was shorter than the other wolf’s with a gentle wave curling around his ears. The strangest urge to run her hands through the locks assailed her. His features were similar enough to the carefree wolf that she could tell they were related, but while his gaze seemed charming, this one’s was sharp and appraising. Of the two, this was the one to watch out for.

Her stomach fluttered as she looked at him. In fear? She didn’t feel afraid anymore, but the fluttering in her stomach hadn’t gone away. His green eyes were piercing, and Samantha could do nothing but stare back.

“Well?” he finally asked.

“Huh?”

“What kind of breed are you?”

“Oh. I’m a fox.”

“Aren’t foxes supposed to be red or something?” wolf number two asked, looking at her hair.

“I’m an arctic fox. I was born in Alaska. My coat is white when I shift, and I’m smaller than red foxes.”

“What’s an arctic fox doing all the way down here in Colorado? And where’s the rest of your...what are fox packs called?” Jason asked.

“Skulks. And I don’t have one. It’s just me.” Both wolves started staring at her again. This ogling thing was beginning to make her nervous. “Did I say something?”

“What happened to your skulk?” Jason asked.

“As far as I know, they’re still up in Alaska.”

* * * *

Jason closed his eyes. At least she wasn’t cowering any longer. Getting information was like pulling teeth, though. He couldn’t care less where her pack was. He wanted to know why she wasn’t with them and why they let her travel on her own. She should be home, wrapped up safe and warm, not wandering around the country by herself.

Everything about her compelled him to learn more. And her scent was slowly driving him up a wall. It smelled earthy yet crisp and clean, reminding him simultaneously of a warm fire and a crisp snowfall. He was going to have to taste her, sooner rather than later hopefully.

“Is there a particular reason you’re down here when your skulk is up there without you?” he finally managed to get out.

“They’re not my skulk anymore. They never really were.”

Jason’s wolf raised its head at the calm acceptance in her voice. She didn’t seem upset by the proclamation, but Jason wouldn’t be the same without his pack. They looked out for him as much as he did for them. He couldn’t imagine a life without them, especially for a shifter who wouldn’t be able to open up around people unaware of what he was.

“Is that why you look like you haven’t eaten in days?” he asked her. “How long have you been on your own?”

“I’ve been on my own for four years. And I eat just fine, thank you very much.” She sniffed defensively. Her answer surprised him. Four years? Jason couldn’t believe she’d been on her own for such a long time.

“You have no family or friends or skulk?”

“I do fine on my own,” she repeated.

“Yeah, I can see it’s really working out for you,” Jason murmured, running his hand down her cheek. She reared back and looked at him probingly.

“You’re scaring her, Jason. Ease up a bit.”

* * * *

The second wolf practically shoved Jason out of the way and took his place next to Samantha. “My name is Ethan, Ethan Callahan. This idiot here is my brother, Jason.” He dropped his voice to a stage whisper. “He likes to act tough and scary ’cause he thinks it makes him a better alpha, but he’s actually soft and mushy inside.” Jason growled behind him. Samantha glanced back, wide-eyed, but Ethan ignored it and continued talking. “And this is Doc Pritchard. He might not be wolf, but he’s pack.”

The doctor kissed her knuckles. “Eddie. And welcome. You’ve got a nasty cold but nothing a little hot tea and a couple days’ rest won’t cure. Why don’t you come see me if it gets any worse, okay?”

“Oh, I don’t plan to be here long. But thank you for everything. I, um, how much do I owe you?” Samantha mentally calculated the money she had left in her bank account. Hopefully it would be enough to cover the bill and get her to the next town. She’d have to find a job soon.

“On the house.” Eddie pulled on his coat and zipped it up. “I’m sure I’ll see you around town.”

She looked on, bemused, as he left. Hadn’t she just told him she wasn’t going to stick around? What a strange group this was.

The waitress came over with the omelet she’d ordered. “Hi, honey. I’m Martha. Why don’t you come back over here and finish your breakfast? I’ll get you a fresh cup of tea.”

“Thank you,” Samantha mumbled, swinging down from the tables and into the booth. Already the people in this town had shown her more courtesy than anyone else ever had. Most people didn’t bother being nice to the little nobody with no home.

She was so consumed with digging into her omelet, it took her a moment to realize Jason was sitting in the other side of the booth. As she watched, Ethan squeezed in next to his brother. The two barely fit together on the same side. Jason glared at Ethan.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be, little brother?”

“Nope!” Ethan smiled cheerfully at Samantha. “Besides, I want to get to know our newest pack mate.”

What was wrong with these people? She never agreed to be their damn pack mate. First the doctor and now these two wolves. She couldn’t figure out their angle. No one gave away anything for free. If they were offering her a place in their pack, they must want something in return.

“I appreciate the offer, but like I said, I need to be heading out soon. I don’t plan on sticking around.”

“Where are you going?” Jason asked immediately.

“What?”

“You said you have no skulk and no family. I’m curious where you’re running off to.”

“Uh...well, I don’t...I don’t know. Somewhere I can settle down for a little while I guess, find a job.”

“You can settle down here. The local bookstore recently built a coffee bar, and they’re looking for someone to serve. You’ll take that job,” Jason stated with finality. He didn’t ask, just commanded her to take a job she hadn’t even heard of before now.

She felt her hackles rise. Not because the job wasn’t perfect. Working as a barista had been one of her favorite jobs. She loved the smell of coffee, even if she preferred the more soothing flavors of tea. And she loved to read. Where better to work than a bookstore to feed her habit? Still, it grated that this wolf had all but ordered her to stay.

“I may not even get the job if I apply, you know. There’s no need to order me into it. But thank you for the suggestion.” She sniffed with a condescending air. “Maybe I will hang around, for a little while at least.”

Ethan laughed. “I like this one. She knows when you need to be put in your place.”

* * * *

“You’ll get the job. Don’t worry,” Jason told Samantha, enjoying the heat that flared briefly in her eyes as he ordered her around. Foxes were timid by nature; crafty, but timid when directly confronted. Maybe arctic foxes were different from those he’d dealt with in the past, but he doubted it. He’d wager not many her size would go up against a fully grown timber wolf like himself. He liked that. She may have been frightened when she first realized where she was, but he already knew the shifters she grew up with weren’t like the shifters he knew. He still couldn’t believe her pack had let her go.

Now she has a new pack, he thought fiercely. He'd make sure she got the job at Laurie's bookstore and see if she could rent the apartment above the store. He wanted her close. He wasn't sure yet why, but he had feelings for her already and knew they would only grow in time. He wanted to shelter her, and hearing she was packless only made him more protective. She might be the one he was waiting for.

Jason should call Laurie to make sure she'd take Samantha before she found a reason not to stick around. He wanted her to have some ties to the town. He wanted to make it hard for her to leave.

"Excuse me for a moment." Jason shoved his brother right out of the booth and onto the floor. He briefly caught Ethan's eye and didn't like the mischief he saw there. "Behave," he admonished. Ethan's smile continued to grow.

* * * *

"Don't worry, big brother. I'll take care of Samantha while you're gone."

Samantha looked up from her meal and glanced between the brothers. What a strange relationship they had. There was affection, but Jason also looked as if he wanted nothing more than to kill Ethan at any given time.

"Samantha." Ethan stared at her mouth.

"Do I have crumbs somewhere or something?" she asked, swiping her tongue at the corners.

Ethan's chocolate brown gaze swept over her face. He looked deeply into her eyes, a mischievous smile curving his lips. Slowly, he stood and moved to her side of the booth, glancing briefly in Jason's direction before giving her his full attention. He crowded her into the corner, resting his arm along the back of the booth and around her shoulders. She glanced to her right as she felt him playing with a lock of her hair, jumping as his breath caressed her ear. Did he just sniff her neck?

"No crumbs," he whispered.

"What are you doing?" She put her hand on his chest and leaned away from him.

"Getting to know you." He shrugged. "I've never seen an arctic fox before. Will you shift for me sometime?"

Suddenly, their request for her to stay, to join the pack, became clear. Like a kid with a toy at Christmas, they were enchanted by something new. Never having met an arctic fox before, they probably wanted to observe her, like a bug under a microscope.

At least it was a place to stay, though. She could stay for now, and after they tired of her, as they inevitably would, she'd be on her own once again. Always on her own. Samantha sighed dejectedly. Her head was pounding again making her want to curl up somewhere and go to sleep. Maybe she could find a cave or an abandoned den somewhere in the woods around here and settle down for a couple of days. She needed a long rest, and afterward she was sure she'd be good as new.

* * * *

Jason came back from calling Laurie to find his brother practically snuggling in the booth with Samantha. He forced himself to take a couple of breaths, calming down before he ripped his own brother to pieces. Jealousy flowed thick through his veins as he watched Samantha smile tentatively at Ethan. He needed to explain a few things to his younger brother. Samantha was off limits.

Jason walked over, yanked his brother out of the booth and shoved him into the opposite seat. Taking his brother's place, Jason's arm replaced Ethan's around Samantha's shoulder. Ethan winked at him, grinning like an idiot, while Jason glared.

"Testing a theory, big brother. Well, and keeping our dear Samantha warm for you." He was trying to stir up trouble. Jason knew his brother too well to fall for those tricks.

"I spoke to Laurie. You start next week, provided you're feeling better. She'll let you stay in the apartment above the bookstore for a cut in your wages. You can move in immediately."

He looked down at the petite woman beside him. She was looking at him narrow-eyed. "She hired me without even meeting me? And she's gonna let me stay at the store, too?"

"You're part of the pack now, honey. We look after our own," Ethan said.

Jason felt Samantha stiffen. She still didn't understand. They'd already accepted her as their own. The decision had been made.

"I already told you, I'll stay for a little while, but I'm not sticking around. I'm a fox, for crying out loud."

"So?" he asked, genuinely confused.

"So, I can't be a part of your pack."

"Why not?"

"Uh, did you not understand me when I said I'm a fox? Who ever heard of a fox in a wolf pack?" She laughed. It was nice and low, and it made Jason's belly clench with desire. How did she pull at him like this? He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. His wolf was begging him to take her, to mark her as his. She had no idea what she did to him or the kind of danger she invited. Here she was, sitting and laughing and insisting she could never be part of the pack when all he wanted to do was bend her over the table and make her submit, forcing her to stay forever. He had to get control of his wolf, but he longed to throw back his head and howl in triumph.

"Come on, I'll take you to meet Laurie and see your new place," Jason said, reluctantly pulling his arm from around her.

Chapter 3

Samantha didn't know why she trusted him, but she did. Growing up, she'd been taught to be wary of other animals, especially those bigger than herself, which admittedly was most. In her human form she just squeaked past five feet tall, but in her fox form she was barely one foot high and three feet long, tail included. In the winter, her snow white fur puffed out and made her seem bigger, but she couldn't rely on illusion to keep predators at bay.

She always kept a wide berth around the wolf territories. Not only were the wolves fierce and deadly, but they were extremely territorial. Instead of killing her, these wolves were welcoming her into their town, trying to make her pack. It was beyond understanding. Inexplicably, she felt comfortable and safe around Jason and his brother.

While Ethan had made her comfortable with his teasing manner, Jason had been less outwardly welcoming. However, all his frustration was directed at his brother, and when he put his arm around her, she had an overwhelming desire to snuggle against his side, bury her nose against his chest and breathe in his scent. The butterflies were back tenfold.

When Ethan had done the same, her animal senses had stood at attention, waiting for any reason to bolt. Yet her fox had curled up and settled in with Jason. It instinctually trusted him and she was willing to listen to intuition, for the time being.

"I walked here, so I'll ride with you and introduce you to Laurie. She owns the bookstore. It's not far, and you can keep your car in the lot behind the store," Jason suggested.

Samantha nervously wondered about the intelligence of letting a strange man into her car, never mind the fact he could shift into a wolf. He'd been nothing but nice to her, but that didn't mean she should tempt fate. But she supposed if he had wanted to rape or kill her, he could have done it at any time. Premiers were a law unto themselves within their pack. He could easily have dragged her from the diner and killed her already. Besides, if she was going to live here, she might as well trust their Premier, of all people.

* * * *

Jason noticed Samantha's moment of hesitation before leading the way to her car, but he let it pass without comment. She didn't fully trust him yet, which was something he'd have to work on. It was his job as Premier to make sure every member of his pack felt comfortable coming to him with problems. Many leaders didn't see it as he did and used fear or dominance to rule. Jason ruled with reason and justice. How could he fix problems if no one ever came to him for help?

He loved his pack, and as far as he could tell they were happy under his leadership. So happy, in fact, many other leaders came to him for advice--something he never foresaw when he took over two years ago and became one of the youngest wolf Premiers in shifter history.

“Turn left after this light.” He motioned. “The store’s right there.” He watched Samantha out of the corner of his eye. She must trust him to some degree or she would’ve never let him into her car. He’d have to build onto whatever already existed. Creating a foundation was key to any relationship, especially the one he planned to have with her.

Jason was tempted to ask her to dinner tonight, but he knew foxes tended to be hesitant in new situations and he didn’t want to scare her off. He had to proceed with caution. If he came on too strong, she would run, but if he didn’t snatch her up soon enough, he was worried someone else would. Samantha was stunning, and the men in this town acted like a dog with a bone when someone new appeared.

He mentally slapped himself. A dog with a bone? The woman was obviously addling his brain. As soon as he had climbed into the car, Samantha’s scent surrounded him. It made him want to pull this little fox into the backseat and have his wicked way with her. The whole ride over he had to force himself to pay attention to the road and not bask in the warm feeling her scent inspired.

He had to play his cards right. He would take things slowly but make sure to keep tabs on her. One way or another, she would be his. His wolf would settle for nothing less.

* * * *

Samantha looked around the bookstore as she entered. It was larger than the outside made it seem. Not only were there bookshelves but small nooks where large brown leather chairs and small tables invited customers to stay. A fire crackled in a fireplace by one of those nooks behind a beveled glass and wrought-iron screen. Cozy and welcoming. She could, without doubt, fall in love with this place.

A woman stood behind the counter. She looked at the pair as they entered, running her eyes over Samantha, sizing her up. . The woman was not traditionally beautiful but striking. Samantha was sure even in a crowded room, every eye would be on her, especially the men’s. With her dark brown, shoulder-length hair and high cheekbones, surely she was one of the most popular women in town.

“Is this her?” the woman asked Jason.

“Laurie, this is Samantha. Don’t let her rudeness fool you, Samantha. She may not have any manners, but we’re convinced she’s a good person deep, *deep* down.”

The gleam in Laurie’s eyes made Samantha worry Jason had pushed her too far. Jason would obviously win a fight against the two, but Samantha suspected the woman would do quite a bit of damage. She was taller than the average man and exuded strength and confidence.

Before Samantha had time to blink, the woman launched herself over the counter and straight at them. She quickly got out of the way as the woman threw herself onto Jason’s back. Incredibly, instead of going for his throat, the woman looked like she was giving him a noogie. What the hell was going on?

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry!” Jason laughed.

“You better be or I’ll tell Mom you said she didn’t raise me right.”

“Oh God! I take it all back.” Jason continued to laugh as the woman lithely jumped off his back and straightened her clothes.

“Laurie, why don’t you show Samantha the apartment, and I’ll watch the store for a few minutes?”

* * * *

Laurie hadn’t missed the daggers in Samantha’s gaze the moment she launched herself at her brother’s back. She had dealt with women throwing themselves at her brothers her whole life, so she wasn’t terribly surprised. What did surprise her, however, was her brother’s decision to make Samantha one of their own so soon after meeting her. She wasn’t wolf, and she certainly wasn’t related to anyone around town.

As she unlocked the door to the small studio above the store, Laurie decided to withhold judgment for now. She pointed to the larger square key as she led the way to the door.

“This one will let you in the building, just the stairwell. The second is for the door at the top that will actually let you into the apartment,” she explained. “It’s not much, but it’s got a bed and a roof. The kitchen is small, but all the appliances work. Bathroom’s to the right.” Laurie pointed out a few things in the apartment as she watched Samantha for her reaction.

“This is wonderful!” Samantha exclaimed. Laurie would’ve thought it was sarcastic if she didn’t catch the gleam of wonder in Samantha’s eyes. She knew the studio wasn’t much, just a small room with a bed and a kitchenette on one side, but Samantha was gazing around as if Laurie had handed her the keys to Buckingham Palace.

“Jason never told me where you came from.”

“Oh, I’ve moved around a lot.” Which didn’t really tell her anything.

She almost started digging deeper but saw Samantha yawn widely as she sat on the bed.

“You must be tired. I’ll leave the keys on the counter here. I close the store at eight tonight but I’ll be around until then. Let me know if you have any questions or need anything.”

“Thank you...for everything.”

“Don’t mention it.” Laurie wasn’t sure why since they’d barely exchanged two sentences, but she already liked Samantha. Now she just needed more information.

* * * *

“Everything settled?” Jason asked the moment Laurie walked into the store. He was sitting in one of the large armchairs facing the door, but jumped up as soon as she entered.

“Who is she?”

“I told you on the phone. She’s new in town, Ethan and I decided to help her and she needed a job.”

“I don’t doubt any of that. But I also know you, and I know you’re not telling me everything. So since I’ve now hired her and letting her live in my apartment, perhaps you should tell me the whole story, don’t you think?”

Jason sighed loudly and started muttering to himself. Laurie could've sworn she heard something about "meddling family" but decided it was best to wait it out.

"She's got no one. She's half-starved and collapsed in the diner. I don't know the whole story myself. Could you just do me a favor and watch out for her?"

Laurie looked at him speculatively. Something was definitely going on. She'd never seen him so invested in someone, especially a virtual stranger.

"Fine. But keep me in the loop, okay? I know I'm not part of your officer core, but this is my pack, too, and you've put me in the middle without giving me any information."

"I want to keep her around. I'm not sure why yet, but I sense she's important to me. Does that satisfy you?"

"For now."

"Vulture."

"You love me."

Jason crossed to Laurie, leaned down and kissed her cheek before leaving.

Chapter 4

When Samantha woke up, darkness had settled outside her window. She felt much better, but she still hadn't fully regained her strength. The sound of her stomach grumbling reminded her she hadn't eaten since breakfast.

She hadn't even bothered getting underneath the covers or changing out of her clothes after Laurie left. She had curled up on the bed and immediately drifted off to sleep. Sometime during her sleep, she had stripped and shifted. The cracks and snaps that always came with a shift had filled the small room. Anyone listening would assume shifting was accompanied by torturous pain, but it was far from painful. To a shifter, the breaking and reforming of bones and muscles necessary to change forms was more of a reassuring ache. Shifting felt like a good stretch after a long nap.

Burrowing under the covers to block out the light, Samantha had curled up, tucked her nose under her tail and promptly fell back asleep. In the wild, her tail protected her face from the cold winds and created a blanket of sorts for her body. The protective pose wasn't necessary in the warmth of the apartment but curling into herself gave her the comfort of familiarity. After weeks of hunting up her own food and sleeping as fox, it felt unnatural to sleep as human. She was in the same pose now.

Samantha quickly shifted and pulled on her day-old clothes. Swiping her keys from the counter, Samantha locked up and made her way downstairs. She needed to get her stuff from the car and see if she could find a grocery store.

The bookstore was dark as she passed it. It must be later than she thought. Laurie had mentioned the store closing at eight.

As she walked toward her car, she noticed a piece of paper underneath the wipers. She groaned out loud. She couldn't afford a ticket right now. Hesitantly, she pulled the paper out and stared at it. It wasn't a ticket.

Hey , Sam, I knocked on your door before I left for the night but didn't get an answer. Figured you were either out cold or out exploring. If you need anything , give me a call on my cell . Laurie. A phone number was listed under the name.

Samantha stared at the note. Her throat felt tight, and tears blurred her vision. Samantha was moved Laurie had thought to check on her before leaving. No one had ever cared about her before.

She shook herself and straightened her shoulders. This, too, would pass. Best not to get used to it.

Samantha looked at the number Laurie had written on the note. Too bad she didn't have a cellphone. It seemed she was on her own for searching out food.

Samantha pulled her keys out of her pocket and slid behind the wheel. Glancing briefly at the clock on the dashboard as she started the car, Samantha was amazed at how late it had gotten. It was almost ten o'clock! Luckily it was a Friday night. She was sure something would be open.

* * * *

Where the hell is she? Jason thought for the six-hundredth time as he sat in his car and looked around the empty parking lot.

He'd been at the Wild Boar, the local pub, having a cold one with his brothers, when Laurie walked in and slid into the booth with them. She signaled the waiter to order a beer.

"Where have you been?" Ethan asked casually. "We expected you an hour ago."

"Went home to take a shower and freshen up after closing."

"Well?" Jason interrupted, not willing to wait around while they made small talk. "How is she?"

She looked at him innocently, reaching for the nachos sitting on the table. "Who?"

"Don't play dumb, Laurie. It doesn't look good on you."

"Oh, Samantha? I don't know, she didn't answer the door when I went to check on her. I'm sure she's fine."

"She didn't answer so you left?" Jason yelled, drawing the eyes of half the bar to their table. His siblings looked at him like he was insane.

"What's your problem? She was probably sleeping. I left a note with my number. If she needs something, she'll call."

Shoving his way out of the booth, he left the bar, intent on checking on Samantha.

Only Samantha wasn't at the bookstore. Her car was gone from the parking lot, and she hadn't come to the apartment door when he knocked. He was overcome by fear. What if she had decided not to stick around and left town, left him, without a word?

The question ran through his mind over and over again. There was nothing he could do but wait. So he sat in his car and stared at her door, as if by staring at it she would magically appear.

Where the hell is she?

Headlights came around the corner of the store, and as he watched, Samantha's midnight blue Taurus rounded the side of the building and pulled into a parking space. She stared at his car warily.

Knowing she would be able to see him even at night, Jason opened his car door and stepped out. He watched as she guardedly exited the car and waited for him to come to her.

"Is there a problem?" she asked him when he approached.

"Where the hell were you?"

"Excuse me?"

"Where the hell were you? Laurie said you didn't answer your door. I was worried, so I came to check on you and you were gone. No note, no call, nothing."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize I had to check in with you. Do all your pack members have to notify you when they go to the grocery store, or is it just the new folks?"

“Grocery store?”

“Grocery store,” Samantha confirmed.

Jason rubbed his hands over his face, suddenly tired now that he realized she wasn't leaving him. He wasn't acting like himself. He hadn't been able to think of anything besides Samantha all day long. Throughout the day he found himself rising from his desk, intent on coming over to check on her, before reason returned, stopping him in his tracks. He trusted Laurie to call him if anything was wrong.

A couple of times he caught Ethan or Danny watching him curiously after he rose, forcing him to refill his coffee cup in order to cover up his strange behavior. Ethan had been grinning like a fool by the end of the day, with Jason scowling right back. Danny looked at them both like they were crazy.

* * * *

Samantha nervously wrung her hands. “Listen, I told you I wasn't going to cause trouble, but if you don't believe me, maybe I should just head out. I appreciate everything, and I'm feeling much better now...”

Samantha stopped talking as Jason backed her up against the side of her car. Towering over her, Jason drew her eyes to his. He had a wild, almost feral look in his eyes, and a wave of desire crashed through her. He gripped her hips as he pressed her against her car door with his body.

“I'm not worried you're going to cause trouble,” he all but growled out.

Staring up into his eyes, altered from their mossy green color to a pale yellow that practically glowed, Samantha felt heat flood her core and she began to get wet.

“Then what are you worried about?” Samantha whispered, gripping his forearms. He didn't answer, but his gaze lowered to her lips and he growled again, low and deep. From her position, pushed up against the car by his hard chest, Samantha didn't hear the rumble so much as she felt it reverberate against her. With the car behind her and the equally unyielding chest in front of her, Samantha felt an unfamiliar spike in her desire as she realized there was no escape. She didn't want one. She had no thoughts of running away from this man.

Jason slowly lowered his head and molded his lips to hers. The kiss was softer than she expected, barely exerting any pressure.

She stared into beastly eyes and knew the animal was on a short leash. Wanting his wolf set free, she ran her hands up his arms and locked them behind his neck. Deliberately arching her body into his, she tried to make him snap. She wanted his untamed passion--and she got exactly what she asked for.

He pushed her harder against the car as his tongue thrust into her mouth. It was exhilarating, and she moaned, closing her eyes as she moved restlessly against him.

This kiss was unlike the careless assaults she'd previously experienced. Jason's kisses felt like he was claiming her mouth as his own.

She freely gave him everything he demanded and more. Samantha massaged his tongue with hers and let the world drift away. Only the two of them existed in this new world. She felt a gentle pressure on her hips, and realizing he had lifted her, she wrapped her legs around his waist. His lower body held her up against her car, completely supporting her. Being in his arms, depending on his strength to keep her from falling, only turned Samantha on more. She deepened the kiss and felt his fangs begin to extend. He lifted his hands from her hips and pushed them up under her sweater to cup her small breasts. He circled her stiff nipples through her lace bra with his thumbs, causing her to moan deeply against his lips.

This was by far the most exhilarating experience she'd ever had, and she moved her body against him. She couldn't get close enough. She wanted to feel his naked flesh against hers. Samantha didn't know what miracle had made this strong, beautiful and giving man desire her, but she wanted him, now, before he changed his mind.

"Wait." He pulled his mouth away from hers and gripped her hips once again with his hands. Samantha groaned in frustration at the loss of contact. "Wait, this isn't right. This isn't why I came here." He pressed his forehead against hers and took a deep, shuddering breath. He didn't release her so she left her legs wrapped around his waist and let him support her.

She would've stripped right there and let him take her in the open against her car door if he hadn't stopped. She couldn't help but wonder why he had, and her old insecurities rose up to haunt her.

She didn't have a large amount of experience. It wasn't as though she'd never had sex before, but the few times she had weren't exactly noteworthy.

Last year, she had felt lost in life and thought if she could feel desired and wanted for who she was, she would be able to dispel the demons of loneliness constantly dogging her. With that goal in mind, she started a relationship with one of the waiters at the restaurant where she had worked. After a week he pushed her to have sex with him, claiming he had spent enough money on meals so she should "put out."

It had been one of the most awkward experiences of her life. She'd been told her first time would be painful, but it hadn't been. She had barely felt the pressure as he pushed his way into her, but she hadn't gotten any pleasure out of the act. Afterward, her loneliness returned tenfold when he immediately fell asleep, leaving no one for her to talk to. She tried to convince herself it would get better, that it was just awkward because it was her first time, but things hadn't improved. He didn't seem to care whether or not she got pleasure, and the two seconds of foreplay never got her in the mood.

After three weeks, Samantha's patience had run out. She left town without a word, just packed up and left. She called work, told them she wouldn't be back, and driven three states away. She'd never seen or heard from him again.

“Did I do something wrong?” she asked when Jason didn’t open his eyes, just continued to lean against her. Slowly, his eyelids rose and he gazed into her eyes. He was close enough she could see little flecks of green in his pale yellow eyes as he attempted to change them back to human.

“You were perfect. You are perfect. But if we didn’t stop, I was going to do something I’d regret later. I’m not going to take you against the hood of your car. When we sleep together, it’s going to be in a bed...the first time at least.”

“Don’t bother.” Focusing on the word “regret”, Samantha pushed away from him. She didn’t need his pity. Too many people *regretted* her very existence. No one else would be joining their ranks if she could help it.

She saw the shock on his face as he lowered her until her feet hit the ground. “I wouldn’t want you to do something you’ll ‘regret later’.” Samantha used her fingers to quote him. She moved to open her door to get her groceries but once again found herself turned around and backed up against her car by a large hard body.

“Make no mistake, Samantha. I want you so much I can barely think straight.” Jason ground his hips against hers, and her eyes went wide as she felt the massive bulge of his erection pressing against her. “We *will* have sex and when we do, there will be no regrets on either side. But when I take you, it sure as hell won’t be out in the open where anyone can stumble upon us.”

Samantha looked around, suddenly realizing where they were. She had been so immersed in Jason and what he made her feel, she had forgotten they were outside in a parking lot. She took a deep breath and looked back up at Jason.

“Oh.” She didn’t know what else to say. What was a girl supposed to say after the most handsome man she’d ever met kissed her senseless and then stated they would be having sex in the near future?

* * * *

She was adorable, flushed with desire and anger. Jason had flustered her and he knew it. Her cheeks were still tinted a light pink, and her eyes glowed from the kiss. He liked flustering Samantha. Jason tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, letting his finger trail down her cheek. Her skin felt like velvet. He wondered if she was soft all over.

“Come on, I’ll help you carry your groceries in,” Jason said, reluctantly backing away. He opened the car door to get her groceries and discovered only one bag in the backseat. “Are there more bags in the trunk?”

“Uh, no. I just bought a few necessities.”

Looking into the bag, he saw turkey slices, a bag of Swiss cheese, a box of chamomile tea and a loaf of sourdough bread. He looked over at her curiously. “This is all you bought?”

“So? I told you I just got necessities. I’ll go back if I need to.”

He shook his head and started walking toward her door. It took him a moment to realize she wasn’t following him. Jason looked back in time to see Samantha trying to pull a large suitcase out of her trunk.

“Samantha!” he cried and watched as she jumped, dropping the bag back into the trunk. She pushed her hair out of her eyes and looked over at him.

“What?”

“I thought you said this was it,” he exclaimed. Thrusting the bag of groceries into her hands, he strode past her, easily pulling her suitcase out of the trunk.

“No, I said there were no more groceries.”

He glanced at her as she grumbled. He tried to hold on to his frustration but burst out laughing at the petulant look on her face. God, she was adorable. Finally, she smiled at him.

“Okay, maybe I should’ve mentioned the luggage. It’ll be a whole lot easier for you to carry it up the stairs.”

Jason walked her up to the main door and waited while she unlocked it. He carried the luggage up the stairs, placing it inside her apartment doorway at the top.

“I don’t have any coffee or beer to offer you, but if you’d like, you can come in and warm up a bit.”

“I’d better not, but thanks.” He leaned down and kissed her cheek chastely. “See you later, Samantha.” Jason needed to get home and take a cold shower--a very cold shower.

Chapter 5

Samantha walked into Books and Crannies the next morning and sought out Laurie, who was helping a customer at one of the bookcases sprawled around the room. She made her way over to the counter and flipped through one of the magazines while waiting for Laurie to finish.

“Samantha, is there something you needed?” Laurie asked, coming to stand beside her.

“I know I’m not supposed to start until next week, but I was wondering if I could start a little early. I’m feeling much better now and could come in as soon as you wanted.”

“Are you sure you’re better?”

“Truth be told, I’m going a little stir-crazy trapped up in that apartment. I’m dying for something to do.”

“If you’re sure, I could definitely use the help. The weekends are always a bit crazy and with the addition of the coffee bar, I’m having a hard time keeping up with everyone. It’s still early enough that we haven’t gotten too many customers yet. Let me show you how to work the machines and then you can give it a try.” Laurie started leading the way to the back. A few tables were set up for people to enjoy their beverages or eat their food, but Samantha’s gaze was drawn to the corners where more armchairs were placed with end tables for people to set their cups. It was a cozy getaway for readers and coffee drinkers alike. Samantha imagined drifting away into her favorite book while sipping a cup of tea.

“This is so cozy. I’ve never seen a store look this inviting before.”

“Thank you. Cozy is exactly what we wanted. I love to read so I built my own personal fantasy.”

“We?” Samantha asked.

“My sister, Julie, and I opened the bookstore together with some money our grandmother left us. She’s away at college right now, but she’s still half owner of this place.”

“Wow, you guys have a lot of brothers and sisters.” Being an orphan and an only child, Samantha had often wondered what it would be like to have a little brother or sister.

Laurie laughed. “Yeah, I guess my parents wanted a big family. There are five of us running around. Jason’s the oldest, followed by Ethan, me, and Danny in the middle. Julie’s the youngest. She’ll be home on spring break in a few weeks. You’ll meet her then, I’m sure.” Laurie rounded the corner and started pointing everything out to Samantha. Before Samantha knew it, the day was more than half over.

* * * *

Samantha leaned against the counter as she finally got a break from the onslaught of customers and thought back to the night before. She'd never felt such a strong attraction to anyone as she had to Jason. When he'd kissed her, everything drifted away except him. He had been the sole focus of her world, and Samantha could've happily spent the rest of the night in his arms.

But he had insistently pulled away, she thought with a frown. Was it because she was a fox? She knew a wolf couldn't desire anything more than a passing fling with her. Not only was he a wolf with a pack, he was the fricken Premier. And who was she? A packless nobody.

He claimed it was the circumstances, but Samantha wasn't sure she believed him. He hadn't done anything to further their acquaintance. After all, he hadn't asked her out, and he hadn't wanted to come inside her apartment, apart from bringing her luggage up.

She hadn't imagined his arousal, though. It had pressed insistently against her as he pinned her against her car. Maybe Jason was only interested in a wild night with the exotic new shifter. Or maybe Jason was just one of those men with large sex drives who got horny looking at tinfoil. Samantha thought she might be okay with either. Honestly, she'd take him any way she could get him.

As if conjuring him with her thoughts, the object that had invaded her daydreams all morning walked through the door. His gaze sought her out immediately, and he started walking toward her, a frown marring his brow. What had she done this time?

"Hi, Jason. Can I get you something to drink?" Samantha asked as he approached the counter.

"I thought you weren't supposed to start working until next week. You shouldn't be on your feet all day, you're sick. Did Laurie pressure you into working?"

"No, of course not. I pressured her into letting me come in. I'm fine, really."

"If you're sure..." He trailed off, looking at her speculatively.

"I am. Now how about that coffee?"

"Sure. Black. What time do you get off tonight?"

"I don't actually know. I suppose whatever time the store closes."

"Okay, I'll pick you up at eight thirty for dinner."

"Dinner?"

"Yeah, dinner. You know, like a date."

"A date?"

"I thought you said you were fox shifter, not parrot," he teased with a glint of laughter in his eyes.

"Sorry. Dinner sounds great. I guess I'll see you at eight thirty."

"Have a nice day, Sam."

"You, too, Jason."

The smile he threw her before leaving melted her insides, and Samantha leaned against the counter with a sigh. She was definitely in trouble where Jason was concerned.

* * * *

Samantha pushed her wet hair out of her face and stared down at the clothes strewn across her bed. She couldn't decide what to wear. She had no idea where Jason might be taking her, so she wanted to look nice but casual. In the end she decided on a soft, white v-neck sweater that clung to her curves, along with a pair of skinny jeans. She had just slipped on her mid-calf black boots and grabbed her hair dryer when the buzzer went off.

"Shit!" Taking a deep breath, she hurried down the stairs. Opening the door, Samantha had to take a mental step back. Jason looked dashing with a black shirt and brown cashmere blazer encasing his broad shoulders. He had on jeans and a pair of dark brown cowboy boots. His hair was wilder than normal and only enhanced his stylish look as it draped off his head in a mass of curls. And here Samantha stood with her wet hair falling about her face in a lifeless droop. She almost slapped a hand to her head in embarrassment.

"Jason, I'm sorry, I'm not quite ready yet. Do you think you could give me a couple minutes to dry my hair?"

"Nope. We have to leave now," he stated, looking at his watch.

Oh God, she couldn't go out with wet hair and no makeup! Her expression must have given away her horror, because Jason smiled down at her. "Relax. I'm kidding. Take as much time as you need, but do you mind if I come in and get out of the cold?"

"Oh, of course!" She quickly stepped to the side and started up the stairs. "I'll be done in a minute." At the top, Samantha took a look at the bed and the array of clothes spread out on it. She mentally shrugged. If he asked, she'd say she was unpacking. No need for him to know how long she'd agonized over what to wear. Grabbing her hair dryer, she disappeared into the bathroom.

* * * *

Jason had been charmed when Samantha opened the door with wet hair, her cheeks rosy as if she had been rushing. He hadn't missed the way her gaze raked over him from head to toe. Seeing the desire in her eyes made his wolf want to howl at the moon. He reined himself in as she led him up to her apartment.

She didn't have much by way of belongings. There was a pile of clothes on the bed and a ton of shoes lined along the wall. But there were no knickknacks that made someone's home their own.

There was a small travel alarm clock on the bedside table. Jason picked it up and looked at it. It was a simple clock in a leather case. When opened, the case made a triangle prop and when closed, provided a protective shell around the clock. He spun in a circle and took in the entire room. There was no permanence anywhere in sight. Definitely something Jason intended to change.

He looked up as Samantha came out of the bathroom, surprised at how quickly she had managed to dry her long hair. She hadn't been in there more than five minutes, but the white golden tresses curling daintily around her shoulders held no trace of water.

"That was fast."

"It's the arctic fox in me. My hair dries quickly. Ready when you are," she said, slipping a scarf around her neck. He took her coat and held it out as she slipped her arms through it.

After making sure she locked her apartment, Jason held the car door open for her. He registered her surprise and wondered at how little romance she must have experienced in her life for her to be shocked by such a common courtesy. Something else he intended to change. Already, Jason began to plan his seduction.

Chapter 6

Flowers arrived the next day at the store. Samantha watched from behind the counter as the delivery boy carried in a bouquet of white roses sitting in an elegant glass vase with a white ribbon tied in a bow around the neck. The boy spoke briefly to Laurie as she took the roses from him.

Samantha sighed wistfully as she watched Laurie sign the papers on the boy's clipboard and take the small note out. Laurie tapped the card thoughtfully against her lips without opening it. Her assessing stare shot over to where she stood watching. Samantha couldn't read the expression in their depths from this far away, but she could feel the intensity of her gaze. As if reading her thoughts, Laurie carried the roses over to where she stood.

Laurie held the card out. "Here, they're for you."

Samantha stared at the card, certain she'd heard Laurie wrong. Who would send her flowers?

Laurie placed the roses on the counter, took Samantha's hand in hers and shoved the card into it. "Go on, open it! I'm anxious to see what my boneheaded brother wrote."

"How do you know they're from your brother?" Samantha asked, still staring at the card. No one had ever given her flowers before. No one had given her much of anything before. Even her clothes growing up had been hand-me-downs.

"Who else would send you flowers?" Laurie laughed. "Besides, his name was on the slip I signed."

"Yeah right, who else would send me flowers? But why would your brother send me flowers either?"

"Oh stop. I didn't mean it like that. I'm sure lots of guys would be thrilled to be the ones sending you flowers. And I'd wager my brother is sending you flowers because he likes you. But you're never gonna know if you don't open the card." Laurie winked at her as she grabbed a bag of M&M's from the shelves beneath the counter and started eating them.

Samantha looked down at the card again and popped open the seal. Taking the small piece of paper out of the envelope, she silently read it, then read it again. *Samantha, I wish I could be with every moment of the day, but in my stead I send these. They reminded me of your soft elegance and beauty. I can't wait to see you again.*

"What'd he say?" Laurie asked, snatching the card from Samantha's hand before she had a chance to answer. "Hmmm, not too bad, big brother," Laurie murmured before focusing on Samantha. "So spill, what's going on between you two?"

"Nothing. We had dinner last night. I mean, maybe something is going on, but I'm sure it's nothing serious. It's not like we're going out or anything. Well, we are going out, but we're not going *out* out..." Samantha stammered, suddenly nervous to be talking about Jason with his sister.

Laurie laughed and held out a cluster of M&M's to Samantha. She took one, grateful to have something to distract her. "You ramble when you're nervous. It's kind of cute. Hey listen, the bookstore's closed tomorrow. What say we go back to my place, whip up a pitcher of margaritas and have a girls' night."

"Girls' night?" Samantha didn't exactly know what went on during a girls' night, but she was intrigued. She'd never been invited to, well, anything before. She'd never had giggling slumber parties growing up or any other girl-bonding events in her life.

"Come on. It'll be fun."

"Okay, yeah. Yeah, I think I'd like that."

* * * *

Jason walked into the bookstore ten minutes before closing. He narrowed his eyes at the sight of one of the local wolves leaning against Samantha's counter flirting with her. He didn't like the predatory gleam Jason saw in the wolf's gaze. The wolf touched Samantha's arm and leaned forward slightly with a smile. It wasn't until Jason noticed the green sweater Samantha was wearing had turned gray that he realized how close his own wolf was to the surface. His eyes must have changed over to his wolf's.

Closing his eyes and breathing deeply, Jason managed to get control of himself. He stalked over to the counter in time to hear Jack, the wolf, ask Samantha what she was doing that night.

"She has plans," Jason stated with finality, dropping a hand on Jack's shoulder.

"*She* can speak for herself." Samantha declared. Jason glanced over at her, noticing the frustrated expression on her face. She'd better not have been thinking she was going to go out with this guy. "But Jason is right. I have plans tonight. Sorry, Jack. It was nice to make your acquaintance though."

"No worries, sweetheart." Jason growled again as Jack winked at her before quickly exiting the store.

Samantha looked up at him and laughed. "Relax, Jason. I wouldn't have accepted his offer. I don't believe in starting one thing until I finish with another."

"You're mine," Jason growled, surprising himself with his forcefulness. He watched her eyes widen before narrowing on him warily. "For right now," he quickly added, not wanting to rock the boat, yet needing to make it clear she was not to see other people. "You're mine for now." Her eyes remained narrowed on him, but she eventually nodded.

"As I said, as long as we keep dating, I'm not dating anyone else. One overbearing man at a time is plenty for me, thank you very much."

Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, Jason managed to pull his wolf back from the ledge it had almost jumped over. "Okay. What are you in the mood to eat for dinner?"

"Jason, I have plans."

He opened his eyes and stared at her. She had only claimed to have plans to get rid of Jack, right? He continued to stare at her until she fidgeted.

“What?” she asked indignantly.

“You have plans with me.”

“I do? I don’t remember making plans with you.” She scrunched up her nose and tilted her head to the side, her unfocused gaze going over his shoulder as if puzzling something out. “I think I would’ve remembered that.”

“I sent you flowers,” Jason reminded her, pointing to the roses sitting on the counter behind her. “Didn’t you read the card?”

“Yes.” She still looked confused. “It didn’t say anything about tonight, though. Unless I missed something on the back...”

“It didn’t have anything on the back!” Jason growled. “I thought it would’ve been clear I wanted to see you tonight.” Truth be told, he hadn’t considered she’d have plans. He just assumed they would have dinner. He hadn’t considered his pack would’ve already honed in on her or that she would actually accept any advances.

“Oh. I’m sorry, I didn’t understand. Can we reschedule?”

Reschedule?

“Who the hell are you going out with tonight?” Jason demanded, his voice rumbling around the words. He silently made a mental list of all the eligible bachelors in town and wondered whom he was going to have to kill.

“Laurie.”

“What about Laurie?”

“I have plans with Laurie. She invited me over to her place for a girl’s night.”

Jason stared as her words slowly penetrated the red haze of anger he’d built at the thought of Samantha with another man.

“Laurie doesn’t have girl’s nights. Laurie doesn’t like girls,” Jason said as Laurie ambled over to them. He always did have rotten timing.

“I do, too, like girls! I just didn’t care for any of the bimbos my brothers called girlfriends, present company excluded, so they never thought I liked girls. Jason, picking up some coffee after work?”

“No,” Jason gritted out between his clenched jaw. “I came to pick Samantha up for dinner.”

“Oh. But Samantha has plans with me tonight,” Laurie said. Jason growled again. “I guess you’ll be heading out.” Laurie sent Jason a huge mocking smile, aggravating him as only a sister could. “Have a nice night, Jason.” And like that, he was dismissed. Jason turned to Samantha, who was glancing between Laurie and him warily.

“Tomorrow night. Dinner.” It wasn’t a question. He didn’t have the patience for questions now. As happy as he was Samantha was going out with Laurie and not somebody he’d have to kill if they touched her, he wanted Samantha to himself.

“Since you asked nicely, tomorrow would be fine.” Samantha smiled sweetly at him, draining away his anger, if not his frustration.

He leaned in and kissed her hard on the mouth before glaring at Laurie. "Take care of her."
"We're just going back to my house for pizza and margaritas. How much trouble can we possibly get into there?"

Famous last words coming from his sister.

Chapter 7

“Unbelievable,” Jason angrily whispered, yet again. He looked at the wolf sitting in the front seat next to him. “I told you to take care of her!”

Jason glanced in the rearview mirror at the wet arctic fox. Unconscious, she was spread out over the entire backseat of his car. She looked a bit like a big rat with her white fur plastered against her skin. “What, exactly, made you think skinny dipping in the very public park fountain was a good idea?”

The wolf looked at him with her tongue hanging out the side of her mouth. As he stopped at a red light, she put front paws on his thigh and licked his face.

“Ugh, stop,” he exclaimed, wiping his face and pushing her back onto the passenger seat. “You’re already getting my car wet, do you need to get me wet, too?”

A goofy wolf grin and soft chuffing was his only answer.

“Unbelievable,” he breathed out softly to himself.

He’d been unable to sleep, his mind drifting to thoughts of Samantha and conjuring all the things he wanted to do with her, for her and to her. Eventually, he decided to take a drive, hoping it would clear his head.

He’d been driving past the park when he smelled them. He knew Laurie too well, and suspected she was doing something he wouldn’t approve of. Deciding to investigate, he’d followed his nose until he came upon them dancing in the fountain, naked. Laurie noticed him immediately and shifted into her wolf form. He heard the cracks of her joints, signifying her shift, but wasn’t paying attention. All his focus was on Samantha as she continued dancing. She hadn’t noticed him or Laurie’s sudden transformation. Bathed only in moonlight, she was gorgeous and for a moment all he could do was bask in her creamy white complexion and stare at her small breasts as they gently swayed with her movements. Her body was lean and perfectly proportioned, with slight curves in all the right places. The moonlight glorified her skin as if it had found a perfect canvas to paint on. The thought of her stunning figure out in the open for anyone to see was infuriating. Taking a quick look around, he was relieved to find the park deserted.

Samantha didn’t stop dancing until Laurie, in wolf form, rubbed up against her leg. She looked at Laurie in confusion for a moment before glancing around and spotting him. Yelping, she quickly shifted into a small and adorable white fox.

As soon as Samantha had fully shifted, she immediately scrambled from the water, but by that time she was thoroughly soaked. She looked at him shyly with those soft brown eyes, water dripping down her face, and he had absolutely melted. The tension he felt at finding them exposed drifted away. It was as if there was a switch buried deep inside him only Samantha could reach.

Sighing in resignation, Jason had picked up their discarded clothes and ushered them into his car. Laurie had always been a bit of a wild child, which was one of the reasons the brothers hadn't brought her into their software developing business; well, that and her complete inability to program. Laurie had always preferred the comfort of paper books to computers. He couldn't believe Samantha had gotten pulled into Laurie's scheme. Had the smell of tequila not infused their very beings, he might not have believed it at all. But "tequila" and "common sense" weren't often used in the same sentence.

He pulled into Laurie's driveway and got out of the car. As he grabbed her clothes and went to unlock her door, Laurie looked over at the backseat and barked questioningly.

"There's no way I'm leaving her with you after that stunt. Don't worry, I'll take care of her." She threw him another goofy wolf grin. He opened her front door and waited for her to enter before tossing her clothes in after her, hitting her square on the head.

* * * *

Samantha stretched as she woke. She stopped suddenly when she realized three things: one, she was naked; two, she was in a bed; and three, she wasn't at Laurie's or anywhere else she recognized.

Suddenly wide awake, Samantha clutched the blanket around herself as she got out of the bed. She looked around nervously, but couldn't find her clothes anywhere. Quickly evaluating her choices, she started nimbly sneaking out of the room, keeping low to the ground hoping to avoid detection. She found herself in a living room. A door across from her looked like it led outside.

She made it to the door and put her hand on the knob when a voice startled her from behind.

"Don't even think of exiting this house before you get dressed."

Samantha straightened and turned to face Jason, oddly comforted once she heard the rich tones of his voice. As soon as he spoke, her muscles instantly relaxed and the need to flee vanished. She knew she was safe in his presence. He was standing at the top of the staircase fully dressed and looking good enough to eat.

"Are you going to say anything or just stand there and stare?"

"Where am I? And why am I, uh, naked?"

He stared at her for a moment, then asked, "How much of last night do you remember?"

Samantha thought back to the previous night. Everything was a blur. "I went to Laurie's house. We made margaritas."

"Do you remember the park?"

"The town park?" she asked. At his nod, she racked her brain but couldn't remember anything happening at the park. "No, I don't. Did we go there?"

"You went swimming."

"There's a pool at the park?"

"No. In the fountain. I found you and Laurie skinny dipping."

Samantha struggled to remember as she stared at him in horror.

“You’re cute when you’re a fox, by the way. Even when you’re soaking wet.”

“Oh.” A sense of relief flooded through her. “You mean, we shifted and played in the fountain.”

“No. I mean you went skinny dipping. The shifting came after I found you. And, to answer your first question, this is my house. I brought you back here after I took Laurie home.”

Oh dear God. Now that he mentioned it, snippets of memories from the previous night were coming back to her. She groaned and dropped her head into the hand not holding up the sheet. She heard him moving down the stairs toward her but couldn’t bring herself to look until she felt him touch her.

He gently swept a lock of hair behind her ear and she looked up to find him staring at her tenderly. “Don’t worry, I’m pretty sure I was the only one who saw you.” He grinned down at her with a devilish look on his face. “And I didn’t see anything I won’t see--” His hand came up and rubbed her arm. “touch--” He lowered his head and rubbed his lips at the spot where her neck met her shoulder. “and taste, eventually.”

As he continued to nuzzle her neck, she felt herself melting into his embrace. He nipped his teeth lightly, causing her to moan before gently licking the ache away. Samantha fisted her hand in his hair and tried to pull him closer.

“Mmm, you taste delicious. I could eat you for breakfast.” He nibbled a trail up the side of her neck until his breath fell against her ear. “But I’m guessing you’re going to need some real food to soak up all that alcohol. Why don’t you go upstairs and take a shower, and I’ll whip us up some pancakes.”

Groaning, Samantha tried to pull him closer, her body denying his plan to leave. Chuckling softly, he gently pushed her away.

“No, no, little heart. We can continue this later tonight.” Jason leaned down and placed a chaste kiss on her nose. Samantha looked up at him and could do nothing but nod.

Chapter 8

Samantha stared at the menu in awe. Surely Jason couldn't mean for them to eat here. Everything listed cost a fortune!

"The pasta is great." Jason smiled at Samantha from behind his menu. "Although Carmella's doesn't have much on their menu that *isn't* great." Smiling faintly, Samantha glanced back at the menu. "Anything strike your fancy yet?" Jason asked.

"Uh..." Geez, even the salads were almost twenty dollars! She'd never been to a restaurant like this before. She looked down at her simple dress, one of the few she owned, and felt completely out of place. Samantha sighed and returned her attention to the menu. It looked like she was having salad tonight. She glanced back at Jason to see him looking at her peculiarly. Uh-oh, did she say that out loud?

"Samantha, don't worry about the price. You can have a salad or a steak if you want. It's my treat."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to sound ungrateful, it's just..." Samantha trailed off as she realized Jason was looking at her with an almost angry gleam in his eyes.

"Samantha, I'm serious. I want you to get whatever you want. I wouldn't have brought you here if I didn't want to. Besides, tonight is a special night and I wanted to celebrate."

"Oh? What are we celebrating?"

"You're coming back to my place tonight, right?" His smile turned wolfish, and his eyes positively gleamed in the candlelight. Blushing lightly, she jerkily nodded once. After this morning, there was no question what tonight held for either of them.

"Well then, we're celebrating us and our first night together. The first of many, I hope."

The waitress chose that moment to come over. Jason ordered a glass of red wine and looked questioningly at her. Samantha thought briefly about drinking water after the events of the night before, but she decided she might need the liquid courage since they were going to go back to his place. She wanted this with all her heart, but that didn't mean she wasn't nervous. She was terrified she'd do something wrong and things would end before they began.

"I'll have a glass of the pinot noir please." The waitress seemed to snarl at Samantha before disappearing. *What the hell?* Samantha puzzled over it for a minute before shrugging it off. Surely she had imagined it. She'd been in this town less than a week and didn't think she'd done anything to anger the pack.

When the waitress came back with their drinks a few moments later, she smiled brightly at Jason. Samantha brushed off her earlier unease and continued to enjoy herself. Jason possessed a dry humor that had her laughing throughout dinner. She couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed so hard or so much.

At one point during the meal, he'd grabbed her hand on the table and rubbed his thumb over the top. Her skin sizzled where he touched her, and desire pooled in her belly. Jason sent her one of his dazzling smiles, and she was completely lost.

"Are you ready to get going?" Jason asked. Staring into his eyes, Samantha took a deep breath and nodded.

* * * *

Samantha was quiet on the ride back to his place, but whenever Jason glanced at her, she would smile and her eyes would shine up at him. All the signs silently told him she was excited about the night ahead. Jason took a deep breath as he led the way into his house.

He enjoyed the way her eyes lit with surprise every time he held the door open for her. "Would you like a glass of wine?" he asked over his shoulder as he hung up their coats in the closet. He turned around only to pull up short. Samantha stood right in front of him, close enough he had to look down into her eyes. He was surprised at how quietly she had snuck up behind him.

"Maybe later. Right now I have something else in mind." Samantha stepped into him, running her hands up his chest and behind his neck.

Jason placed his hands on her hips, his blood heating at the look in her eyes. Her scent wafted up and pulled him to her. "Oh? And what might you have in mind, little heart?"

"You called me that earlier today, too."

"You don't like it?"

"I like it very much. Jason?"

"Yes, little heart?"

"Kiss me."

"If you insist," Jason murmured, lowering his head to capture her lips. He pulled her closer as his lips gently rubbed hers. Nudging her backward, he led them toward the stairs.

Samantha's feet hit the edge and she almost fell backward, but Jason caught her and picked her up easily. She giggled against his lips as he swung her into his arms. Lifting his head, Jason smiled at Samantha as he carried her up the stairs and into his bedroom.

A small gasp escaped his eager captive as they entered his room. Before leaving for their date, Jason had scattered dozens of candles around the room.

"Wait here," he whispered against her temple as he lowered his precious bundle onto the foot of the bed. He could feel Samantha following him with her eyes as he quickly lit the candles and turned off the light. Looking back at the bed, he saw Samantha had her shirt halfway off.

"Hey!" he said. She glanced up at him, confusion lighting her eyes. "That's my job."

"Oh." She smiled and pulled her shirt back down. "My apologies. Please be my guest."

Jason leisurely prowled toward the foot of the bed, slowly unbuttoning his shirt. He saw Samantha's eyes change from her pale blue to the warm honey color of her fox as she took in his bare chest. Her shifted eyes triggered his own. He hadn't been this turned on since high school. He slowly pulled off his shirt and reached for his fly but froze as Samantha sat up and placed her

mouth over his nipple. Moaning, he felt her tongue come out and trace it before sucking greedily. When she nipped at him, he jumped. His jeans became uncomfortably tight as she sucked a trail up his chest and bit lightly at his neck. She didn't break the skin, but his little fox obviously liked using her teeth. Her hand burned a trail down his chest as she reached for his fly. Her husky laugh fell hot against his neck, then she reached his erection and rubbed her hand teasingly against it over his jeans.

"Looks like you're happy to see me," she whispered in his ear before taking the lobe into her mouth and gently biting.

Jason took a deep breath but couldn't form a response. He growled low in his throat as his fingers started lengthening into claws. He closed his eyes, trying to control his beast. Eventually his claws receded, despite all odds. Samantha continued to torment him with her mouth and hands.

Jason jolted as he felt her unbutton his pants and slide them down his legs. His erection twitched as her hands reached for him and her mouth slowly burned a trail down his chest. She began to trace the trail of hair from his belly button down, but he grabbed her before she could go any further. She glanced up at him with confusion once again in her warm honey eyes.

"Jason?" Uncertainty made her voice quiver.

God, she was beautiful. He growled low in his throat, unable to form the words to explain. If she continued, he wouldn't be able to control himself. He wanted to be inside her when he came, to feel her come around him before he plunged into ecstasy. The primal noise seemed to comfort her, and she smiled slyly. It was enough to set him off, and he found himself tearing off her shirt and throwing the shredded material to the side.

Jason reached out and supported her as he laid her back down on the bed and let his eyes feast on the creamy flesh bared before him. He ran his hands up and down the sides of her waist, lowering his mouth to hers. Her eyes glowed with desire as he nibbled on her lips, making him smile. She wanted him just as badly as he wanted her. It was heady knowledge, and his wolf howled internally at the thought. He waited until he felt her breath stutter out before plunging his tongue into her mouth. Her nipples beaded against his hair-dusted chest, begging for his attention.

He ran his hand up and massaged her breast as his mouth sucked a trail down her neck. Jason paused briefly at the juncture of her shoulder where he suspected she would someday wear his mark before traveling down to her other turgid peak. He feasted greedily, loving the taste and feel of Samantha. She made the most erotic sounds in the back of her throat as she writhed beneath him. He could smell her arousal wafting up around them both.

She was stronger than he thought, and in his surprise she almost bucked him off as she arched upward. He pinched her nipple and bit gently on the other one in warning, causing Samantha to yip in surprise before moaning softly. Jason smiled. She sure seemed to like that. He'd have to file that information away for use later. He wanted to discover all of Samantha's hot spots, to know what sensations made her moan and which made her come apart in his arms.

He continued to feast on her rosy pink nipples as his hands moved over her stomach and removed her skirt and underwear. Throwing them to the side of the bed, he cupped her mound. He thrust his finger inside her as he circled her clit with his thumb.

“Ah, little heart, you’re wet for me already,” he groaned out, continuing to thrust his hand against her. Adding a second and then a third finger, Jason brought Samantha quickly to a peak and bit hard at her nipple as he felt her tumble over.

“Jason!” she screamed as she came, riding his hand. Her body writhed as she rode out her pleasure. Jason wanted to feel her riding his cock as she came. He wanted to be buried deep inside her, feeling every quiver.

“Beautiful.” He quickly grabbed a condom from the bedside table where he’d left them earlier and positioned himself at her wet entrance. “Look at me.” His voice commanded her to open her eyes. When she did, Jason felt a wave of possessiveness unlike anything he’d felt before. “All mine,” he proclaimed right before he thrust inside her.

She was tight, like a silken glove squeezing him. He groaned at the amazing feeling of being buried inside her. Despite the tightness of her sheath, she easily accepted him and wrapped her silken legs around his waist, drawing him deeper. It was obvious she hadn’t been with a man in a while, a fact that pleased both the wolf and the man. Knowing he had to go slow, Jason grabbed her hips, trying to still their movement as she arched into him.

“Jason! Move!” she half-screamed at him, clawing at his back.

His wolf broke loose from the tenuous hold he had on it as he felt her inner muscles contract around him. He thrust into her hard and rode her fast. Just the feel of her made him want to shoot off like a teenager. He pushed harder and faster, desperate to feel Samantha come around him again before reaching his own climax. Jason nipped lightly at her shoulder, careful not to break the skin, but letting her feel the pressure of his teeth. She whimpered in pleasure, causing him to swell further as he thrust in and out of her feverishly.

Jason ran his hands down Samantha’s legs, detaching them from his waist and pulling them up to his shoulders. The new position seated him further inside her and increased the pressure until it was a delicious ache. He could feel her getting closer and closer to completion and vowed she would reach ecstasy first. He reached between them and gently massaged her clit.

Samantha’s short claws scraped down his shoulders, leaving trails as she came around him, screaming out his name in her ecstasy. He thrust long and hard, throwing his head back and howling as he emptied himself into the condom. Soon, he vowed, he’d be able to come inside Samantha and claim her completely as his.

Technically, sexual intercourse, with or without a condom, wasn’t required during mating. It was a shifter’s bite that released the enzyme into their mate’s bloodstream that linked the pair. However, most shifters choose to mate while making love as the all-encompassing sensation strengthened the bond between them. Every bite thereafter was unnecessary, but reinforced the

connection, which was why most mated shifters had small scars all over their bodies from subsequent bites. Not only did each bite give the pairs almost unbearably intense orgasms, shared by both partners, but it also deepened their love for each other.

Jason knew it was too early to talk to Samantha about their mating, but he couldn't help dreaming about the moment he knew loomed in the future. Their future. He couldn't wait to mark her as his and to bear her mark in turn.

Jason collapsed on top of Samantha, feeling completely content for the first time in his thirty-one years. She had responded perfectly to his every move.

He hoped he hadn't been too rough on her. He had wanted to take his time and make tonight special, but he couldn't control himself once her heat enveloped him. Just being near her made his wolf howl, and he felt the overwhelming urge to seize her fully until even she couldn't deny his possession.

The heat of her desire had only increased his own. They fed off each other until their desire was one blaze, consuming them both in its wake. Wanting to make sure Samantha was okay, Jason levered himself up on his elbows and looked down at her.

Samantha whined softly as he pulled away, but she didn't cling to him. She opened her eyes and searched his questioningly. She must have liked what she saw because she smiled and Jason felt himself tumbling even deeper into love with her. *Love?* Jason was startled the word had crossed his mind this soon, but as he gazed at Samantha, he knew it was the truth. His feelings for her weren't fleeting and they went well beyond lust.

Jason rolled onto his back and pulled Samantha tight against him. She was stiff for a moment before curling into his heat. As her nose pressed against his side and she rested her hand lightly on his chest, Jason sighed in contentment and went to sleep.

* * * *

Samantha woke surrounded by warmth and the utterly male scent of her wolf. She smiled as memories from the previous night returned, then she snuggled deeper into the warm body lying next to her. Hers!

"If that smile is any indication, last night was as good for you as it was for me." She heard the deep voice rumble beside her as he stroked up and down her side with his large hand. She opened her eyes and looked into the green ones staring at her. He was propped up with pillows, and his arm was draped around her.

"How long have you been up?" Samantha nibbled at her lower lip.

"Not too long. Fifteen minutes maybe."

"Were you staring at me while I slept?"

"Not in a creepy way." Samantha felt Jason's laugh rumble in his chest where she lay against him. "You know you make the cutest little noises in your sleep?"

"I do not snore!"

“No, it’s not snoring, more of an exhalation of air. It’s rather endearing, actually.” The smile he sent her way was filled with such warmth and emotion, Samantha couldn’t hold on to her anger.

“Oh. I’m not sure what to say to that. Somehow ‘thank you’ doesn’t sound right.” Her anger had drained, but that didn’t mean she was above indulging in a little pouting. Jason laughed again and leaned down to kiss her lightly on the lips. He briefly tightened his hand on her hip before releasing her with a groan.

“I wish we could spend all day like this. I would call in sick, but Laurie already warned me she’d have my head if you didn’t come in today. However…” Jason trailed off as his hand ran up her side and cupped her breast. He leaned down to sniff at her neck. “You’re kind of smelly.”

Samantha froze. “Excuse me?”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t even step outside smelling like that. Almost the whole town has increased sense of smell, you know. I think it would probably be best if you showered here. And just to be safe, I’ll help. I’ll make sure you wash--” Jason’s hand resting on her breast began to twist and pinch her nipple. “--everywhere.”

Samantha laughed long and hard, finally onto his game. Jason whined beside her and sent her his best puppy-dog look, causing Samantha to laugh harder. It wasn’t until she felt him cup her mound and press a finger inside her that her eyes opened wide and stared up into his questioning gaze. “You do make a convincing argument.”

The grin he sent her was positively wolfish.

Chapter 9

She was late for work. Samantha ran inside expecting to get flack for being late, but Laurie sent her a knowing look and a wicked smile before going back to work. If Samantha had learned anything the past week, she knew that look meant she wasn't in trouble, but she had no doubt Laurie would tease her all day long.

Samantha couldn't be upset, though. Last night had been much more than she expected, so much more than she had imagined possible. Being around Jason made her feel sexy and desirable and downright wanton. She'd never felt wanton before, but she decided she rather liked it.

The only dark thought marring her morning was the depth of the attachment she felt toward Jason. She tried to tell herself they were only having fun but, looking back, she had been kidding herself since the beginning. Everything in her was drawn to him. He made her laugh and made her fox want to curl up against him and settle in. But settling in was dangerous. She had to keep reminding herself of the facts. Getting comfortable was dangerous. She knew he couldn't be interested in more than a casual relationship with her. He was the Premier of the pack and therefore would have his pick of the alpha females, and would most likely choose the strongest to mate with.

She wondered if she should end things before they got too serious. It was the logical choice, but her fox cried at the thought. Samantha couldn't break things off, but she could try and shield her heart as much as possible. She'd enjoy Jason for however long he was willing to give her, but she'd never tell him how deeply she felt. By hiding the depth of her emotions, she would at least retain her pride, even though her heart might be a lost cause, because the more she thought about it, the more she realized it was already his.

The day passed by fairly quickly and by closing time, Samantha was tired, hungry and desperately needed a shower to wash off Jason's scent. As the day wore on, she had to endure countless comments from the other shifters who came in to get coffee and obviously smelled Jason on her skin. The more subtle of the pack had winked at her or gave her a knowing look, but she also had to endure the females of the pack who made snide comments to her. Samantha's head throbbed with the beginnings of a headache.

* * * *

Jason paused in the entrance of Books and Crannies. He softened as he gazed at Samantha puttering behind the coffee bar. She really was beautiful, a soft and feminine beauty that made him want to pull her into his embrace and nuzzle her neck. What affected him more than that, though, was her caring and giving nature.

He frowned as he saw her tilt her head to one side and massage her neck. Ethan mentioned something had been bothering her earlier when he had come in for a cup of coffee, but Jason hadn't thought too much about it. When he dropped Samantha off this morning, she had kissed him passionately and smiled before hurrying inside.

Jason shook his head and strode toward the counter. Samantha opened her eyes and despite the weariness Jason could sense, a smile lit up her face. He loved how open she was with her emotions.

Jason leaned over the counter and placed a quick kiss on her lips.

"How was your day, baby?"

"Better now. How was yours?" She rolled her shoulder as she spoke.

"What's wrong with your neck and shoulder?"

"Oh it's nothing. Just a small headache."

"Have you taken anything?"

"No, it's fine. I'll take something later."

Jason came around the counter and pulled Samantha flush against him. His lips pressed against her temple and he stood there for a moment savoring the feel and scent of her in his arms.

"Let me take care of you, little heart. How 'bout we order some Chinese food and I give you a back massage while we wait for it?"

"That sounds heavenly." Samantha breathed out as she clutched his shirt and nuzzled his chest.

"Aw, isn't this cute," a snide female voice sounded behind them. Samantha jumped and tried to hide her face against him. "Jason, shouldn't you be dealing with real women? I can make you forget this nobody even exists."

"Cynthia!" Jason exclaimed, shocked by such rudeness from one of his pack mates. "What the hell is wrong with you? Apologize." Jason's voice deepened with the force of his command. Cynthia flinched at the authority in his voice as if receiving a blow.

"Sorry, I guess."

As far as apologies went, it was pretty lame. Jason was on the verge of commanding a better one when Laurie joined them.

"Get out of my store." Jason had never heard Laurie's voice sound so cold.

Samantha tried to pull away from Jason's grasp, but he held firm and turned to look at his sister as she spoke. "Jason, I was wondering if I could talk to you for a minute before you drag Samantha away." There was an odd gleam in Laurie's eyes. Whatever she wanted to discuss, Jason had a feeling he wasn't going to be happy.

"Samantha, why don't you run up to your apartment and grab a change of clothes and anything else you need for the night. You won't need any pajamas," Jason murmured in her ear before she could pull away. Her smile dazzled him, but Jason could see the sadness lurking behind her eyes.

Jason turned to Laurie as Samantha left. She eyed him shrewdly. "Listen, I hope you're as serious about Samantha as I think you are."

"I don't think that's any of your business, Laurie. I appreciate you looking out for her, but what's between Samantha and me doesn't concern you."

"I just thought you'd like to know that pretty much every single female in the pack came in here and gave her a hard time today. Most of them were incredibly rude and some downright cruel. I even heard a few people call her a whore."

Jason felt his face mottle in anger, and he wondered why Samantha hadn't told him herself. He needed to make sure his pack understood how important Samantha was to him. He would not accept this treatment of her. And he needed to find out why Samantha hadn't told him anything about it.

* * * *

Samantha moaned into the pillow as Jason's hands ran up her back, pressing in all the right places.

"God, your hands are amazing."

Chuckling quietly, Jason leaned down to nibble on her ear. "Anytime you want my 'amazing' hands, they're at your disposal."

She shivered under his hands as they pressed into her naked back. He licked around the rim of her ear, causing another delightful shudder to work through her.

"Tell me, little heart." Jason paused and nibbled down the back of her neck, placing a love bite hard enough to leave indents on her shoulder. "Why didn't you tell me what happened today at work?"

Jason felt Samantha stiffen beneath him. She might not want to tell him anything, but her body couldn't avoid him in their current position.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Laurie told me you had a bit of trouble today with some of the pack."

"How did she... Oh right, wolf hearing. It's not a big deal, Jason." Samantha started to sit up and pull away, but Jason wouldn't let her.

"How can you say my pack disrespecting you like this is not a big deal?" He expected Samantha to be furious or at least upset. This calm acceptance of his pack's rude behavior bothered him more than anything had in a long time. The wolf side of him had already declared Samantha to be his mate, and his human side was beginning to trust its instincts. His pack's lack of respect toward Samantha, his mate and the future leader of the pack, infuriated him. Especially since she wasn't even demanding what was rightfully hers.

"Why should I get upset with people for speaking the truth?" Samantha whispered into the bedcovers. Even with his wolf hearing he had to strain to hear her, she spoke so quietly. Her back was tense beneath his hand.

"What did you say?" Jason demanded, his anger increasing dramatically.

“It’s not like anyone said anything unwarranted.” When she pulled away from him and tried to sit up again, Jason let her. She turned toward him but wouldn’t look at him, staring at the comforter instead.

“Explain,” Jason growled out, barely able to form words. When she didn’t speak, Jason grasped her chin and, careful not to hurt her, pulled her head up, fixing her eyes with his.

“I just meant that…” Samantha stammered. “It’s fine, but it’s not like we’re *not* sleeping together. And I *have* only known you for a little over a week.” Samantha looked away. “And it’s not like we’re anything serious. But I’m okay with it. I…” She took a deep steadying breath and shook her head. “I don’t want what we have to end yet.”

“Samantha, look at me.” Jason waited until her eyes met his again before pulling her into his lap and continuing. “Yes, we are sleeping together, and yes, we have only known each other a short time. But neither of those facts makes my feelings for you less than what they are. And we are something serious. I have absolutely no intention of ending what’s between us.” He felt her muscles loosen as her head came to rest in the crook of his shoulder. Her nose nuzzled his throat.

“Jason?”

“Yes, little heart?”

“Make love to me.”

Jason looked down at the woman who was quickly becoming the most important thing in the world to him.

“With pleasure,” he said seriously before capturing her lips in a bruising kiss. When he finally lifted his head, both of them were breathing heavily. “But sweetheart, no more taking flack from anyone. If you want to give me their names and let me take care of it, fine, but my pack *will* respect you. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir,” she joked, saluting him.

“I’m serious.”

“Okay, I promise I won’t sit by and let someone slander my good name again. Now are you going to talk all night or are you going to--”

Jason didn’t give her a chance to finish as he threw her down and pounced on top of her. Claiming her lips once again, he ran his hands down her body. He loved how pert her breasts were and how responsive. Her nipples beaded instantly to his touch, and she bowed up as he played with them. He moved his hands lower and pushed a finger inside her. She was wet already and anxiously thrusting up against him. Releasing her mouth, he nibbled his way to her ear and bit down harder than intended. If her moan was any indication, though, his roughness had only turned her on more.

“I didn’t get dessert tonight, but I’m thinking I can fix that right now.” He felt her body shiver with excitement. Trailing his lips down the column of her throat and over one creamy white breast, he teasingly placed a chaste peck on the peak before moving on. He savored her moan of frustration as he continued to tease her with his mouth. He nibbled at her flat stomach and dipped his tongue into her belly button briefly before moving lower. Just as he hovered over her exposed

mound, Jason sat back and took in the view. Samantha was beautiful. Her pink folds beckoned him closer, but the woman behind was just as enticing. A sheen of sweat glistened on her skin as she writhed back and forth and clenched the bedsheets in small fists. She looked at him with desire clouding her eyes.

“Jason. Please.”

Jason thrust another finger inside her as he leaned down and sucked on her clit. He loved hearing her sounds of pleasure as he added a third finger into her wet channel and quickly brought her over the edge. He chuckled softly as he replaced his fingers with his tongue and let her essence flow into his mouth. His mate was a bit of a quick shot, and he couldn't wait to see how many times he could get her off in one night.

Jason had wanted to tell her exactly how serious he was about this relationship earlier, but he didn't want to scare her off. He wasn't sure how quickly it took other shifter species to sense their mate and didn't want to risk her running. He'd take things slowly until he was sure Samantha was ready to accept what he already knew. Well, he'd take things as slowly as he could with his tongue buried deep inside her.

Samantha writhed again as he moved back up her body and captured her mouth in a searing kiss. Gently he nudged her onto her stomach and up until she was on all fours in front of him. He ran his hands over her gently curved ass and had to suppress the urge to bite her there, marking her forever as his. Eventually he would mark her wherever he wanted. She arched against his hand, moaning his name. She was beautiful in this position, completely vulnerable to anything he wanted to do. He smacked her ass, testing her responsiveness, and was pleased by her startled yelp, which quickly turned into a throaty moan.

Hurriedly donning a condom, he lined himself up with her entrance and leaned down to whisper in her ear. “Tell me what you want, baby.”

“You. I need you.”

“You need me where? You're going to have to be more specific,” Jason teased.

“I need you inside me. Please, Jason, don't make me wait.”

“Anything you want, little heart.” Jason thrust inside her snug passage and groaned at the exquisite feel of her surrounding him. He could still taste her cream on his tongue and the sight of her in front of him, arching her back, made him want to howl. He pulled out until only his tip remained buried in her sheath, then plunged back in, seating himself fully. Alternating between shallow and deep thrusts, he felt Samantha climb toward her second peak. Just before she went over the edge, he held himself perfectly still until she whined and squirmed. The exhilarating smell of her arousal infused his senses. He loved the feel of her bound by her lust beneath him, depending on him to give her what she needed.

As her excitement climbed to a peak, Jason plunged inside hard, bringing her to a screaming orgasm that milked his own release from him. He almost collapsed but caught himself before crushing her. Gently, he removed himself from Samantha and eased her onto the bed.

Jason quickly disposed of his condom and crawled back into bed. Breathing a sigh of satisfaction, he pulled her closer and spooned her from behind as he drifted into sleep.

Chapter 10

Samantha breathed the cold winter air deeply as she hurried across the forest floor. She didn't know what time it was, but she figured she had at least another hour before she needed to head in for work.

Last night was the first night in weeks she hadn't spent with Jason. He was visiting another shifter community to lend a hand to their new leader. Jason had asked her to come with him, but it seemed silly since he would only be away a couple of days at most. However, after tossing and turning throughout the night, she had quickly realized her body had become accustomed to sleeping with her wolf.

The realization worried her. What would she do when he finally tired of her? Granted, he didn't seem to be tiring at all. If anything, his desire seemed to grow. The other night he had practically attacked her in his kitchen as she was cooking them dinner. They'd ended up having passionate sex on the table and the pasta had burned. But life had taught Samantha to never let her guard down, because the moment she did, life would throw her to the ground and stomp on her.

She'd decided to go for an early morning run before work to clear her head. It had been a while since she'd given her fox free reign and she'd started feeling itchy in her own skin. She'd gotten the same feeling in larger towns where her fox wasn't able to connect with nature. If she wasn't able to immerse herself in the wild every now and then, her fox grew anxious.

A slight movement caught her attention, and she snapped her head to the right and froze. Her gaze scanned the area until she caught the movement again and saw a mouse scavenging for food underneath one of the trees. She licked her lips in anticipation of a hunt.

Slowly creeping forward, Samantha kept low to the ground, trying to blend in with her surroundings, and inched forward. The mouse looked up and, for a minute, she was sure it had seen her and was going to take off before she got close enough to catch it. But after a moment it went back to digging in the snow.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Samantha crawled closer and got ready to pounce. The mouse must have sensed her presence, though, because the moment she pounced, it took off running. Her animal instincts wouldn't let her give up on her prey that easily, and she took off after it, chasing it through the woods and in between trees, turning left and then right, blindly pursuing the mouse. She thought she had it until suddenly it disappeared into the snow. Samantha put her head to the ground but she couldn't sense any movement. She tried digging and met only with the hard earth.

Huffing in frustration, Samantha decided it was time to head back. She'd grab a muffin for breakfast as she opened the coffee bar. It wouldn't taste as satisfying as something she'd hunted herself but it would have to do. She didn't want to be late.

She raised her head and looked to the right and then to the left. Panic started to overtake her as she realized she didn't know where she was. The mouse had taken her farther than she intended to go, and she didn't know which way she had come from. Her nose couldn't detect any hint of the wolf town she was beginning to think of as home. But there was something in the wind. Deciding to test her luck, Samantha headed toward the smell and prayed she could somehow find her way back home.

* * * *

Jason was in the shower when the shrill strains of his cellphone broke into his thoughts of Samantha. Grabbing a towel and throwing it around his waist, he looked at the number. Books and Crannies. It looked like Samantha couldn't wait to talk to him, either. Maybe a little time away was just what the doctor ordered. Jason smiled at the thought.

"Good morning, little heart," he said into the phone. Silence was the only response. "Samantha?" Jason tried again, starting to get worried. A prickling unease crept up the back of his neck.

"She's not with you?" Laurie's voice sounded strained.

"Laurie? What's wrong?" The unease spread, causing his stomach to drop like a lead weight. Whatever Laurie had to say, he knew he wasn't going to like it. He sat on the edge of the bed.

"Samantha didn't come in to work this morning. I figured she was running a bit late, but she wasn't in her apartment either. I was hoping she went with you and just didn't mention it."

"Where is she?" Jason all but shouted into the phone. Things had been going well. He couldn't understand why she would leave him. This had been the first night in weeks they hadn't spent together, and he thought she might be beginning to love him. But now he wondered if everything had gone to shit.

"Her car's still here, Jason. She might just be down at the diner or something and lost track of time. I'm sorry I worried you." Laurie wasn't telling him everything. He could sense the lie even over the phone. Besides, it wasn't like Samantha to be late for work. She took her responsibilities seriously.

"What aren't you telling me?" Jason put every amount of authority he had as Premier into his voice. If there was a problem with Samantha, he needed to know. He was anxious to find her and take her back in his arms. Nothing but the feel and scent of Samantha, the sound of her lyrical voice, would appease his wolf right now.

"I called the cellphone you bought for her," Laurie said hesitantly. "I heard it ringing upstairs. Wherever she is, it's not with her."

Jason closed his eyes, barely reining in his panic. He'd find her. No matter what. He had to get home. "I'm on my way. Call Ethan and Danny and have them ask around. Call me if anything happens before I get there."

Jason hung up the phone, gathered his clothes and flung them into his suitcase. He ran out to his car and jumped inside it. The only thought running through his head was *I have to get home. I have to get to Samantha.*

* * * *

Shit. All she could think was...*shit.* Samantha kept under the cover of the trees and glanced at the town she had stumbled into. It was another shifter town and smelled familiar enough that she was willing to bet they were foxes. What the hell was she supposed to do now? She could shift, explain herself, and ask for a phone to call the bookstore. Of course, if she shifted she'd be naked, so that plan had some pretty major drawbacks. But what could she do as a fox? Nothing.

Closing her eyes, Samantha rethought her options. If she stayed in fox form, she'd blend into the snow, hopefully enough to allow her to get close enough to town to find some clothes before anyone noticed her. There was no way she was going into a strange shifter town naked, but if she could find some clothes, she could find a payphone, call Laurie and be gone before they even knew she was there. Hopefully.

Taking a deep breath, Samantha crawled out of the shadowy forest and started inching toward the closest house. She was halfway across the snowy expanse when she sensed someone watching her. Her ears twitched as she cautiously looked around. Not ten feet away stood a gorgeous male red fox watching her with one foot raised. It appeared to have been following her since she left the cover of the forest.

Samantha panicked. Her mind went completely blank, and her feet automatically began to run toward the town. She didn't get far before the fox was on her, tackling her to the ground. Samantha struggled for a moment, strengthened by sheer adrenaline, before she assumed a submissive pose. She could never win a fight against this much larger fox. She'd have to figure another way out of this mess.

Samantha mewled in distress, wanting to cry out at the unfair twist life had just dealt her. Everything was going well, she had a job, an apartment, and a man she was beginning to love. All she could hope was this community was like her wolves, that they would help her find her way home.

The strange red fox kept close to her, steering her toward the first house they came to. The fox pawed open the side door and ushered her inside. The house was a small ranch style but was obviously a bachelor residence. Clothes were piled on chairs around the room and a few empty beer bottles sat on the coffee table in the living room.

As soon as they entered, the red fox started shifting. If he hadn't been blocking the exit, Samantha would've taken the opportunity to get away. She thought about running into the house and trying to hide. With her small frame, she could easily find a nook to hide in until the man went away. But even if she could hide herself visually, she was sure he could track her scent and find her. Shifters' increased senses were always much sharper directly following a shift. No, she would have to bide her time and wait for the next opportunity to make her escape.

As the man's form began to take shape, Samantha looked away embarrassed. He was making no attempt to shield himself from her, and everything was completely exposed. Samantha lay on the floor, covering her eyes with her paws, whining softly. It suddenly occurred to her how vulnerable she was, trapped in a house with a naked man who was capable of overpowering any attempt she made to fight him.

Samantha heard the man chuckle above her, but she still refused to look. "Modest little thing, aren't you?" She heard him move away from the door and made a dash for the exit. At the last second, he closed the door, causing her to slam into it before she could make it outside. Samantha shrank away from him again.

"Easy, princess," the man said as he grabbed a pair of jeans from the chair near the door and slipped them on. "You know, not many shifters are squeamish about nudity." His eyes raked over her small form appraisingly. "It's rather charming." He chuckled again as she continued to stare at him warily from the floor.

"Not going to change in front of me, huh?" His eyes twinkled as he looked down at her. "I don't have any girl clothes around, but I can dig up a clean t-shirt and some boxers. Come on, the bedroom's this way. I'll get the clothes out and give you some privacy while you change." He led Samantha to a door on the right and went digging in a drawer until he came out with the promised articles of clothing and laid them on the bed.

"Come on out when you're done." He looked at her again as if trying to puzzle something out. "We have a few things to discuss."

In the bedroom, the human Samantha nervously pulled the shirt over her head. What could he possibly want to discuss with her? He seemed nice enough, even allowing her privacy to change. But despite his demeanor, Samantha was reluctant to trust him. She needed a phone to call Laurie. Somehow she had to get home. Home to Jason.

Samantha peeked out the door and didn't see the fox. Glancing to the left and to the right, she couldn't find him anywhere. Would this be her only chance to escape?

"I know you aren't planning on running after I nicely offered you my clothes." The man's voice came from behind the archway to her left. Samantha held a brief internal debate over her next course of action. The man was right, though. He had provided her certain courtesies and if he was going to hurt her, he'd had plenty of opportunities out in the fields before they even got inside his house. Once again, her instincts told her to trust a strange shifter.

Samantha stepped through the archway into a beautiful kitchen. It was surprisingly clean considering the state of the living room. The man stood at the stove making scrambled eggs...a lot of them. There had to be enough eggs there to feed three people. He stood at the stove with his spatula frozen in midair, his mouth gaping, as his eyes ran from her feet to the top of her head and back down again.

Samantha nervously played with the hem of the t-shirt as he continued to stare at her with a shocked look on his face.

“Thanks for lending me the clothes,” Samantha stuttered out. “I’m sorry to intrude on your skulk’s property. I got turned around in the woods and couldn’t find my way home.”

“Must’ve gotten really turned around to end up all the way down here in Colorado. Quite a trek from Alaska.” He smiled at her finally as he leaned against the counter.

Samantha found herself smiling back. “That is quite a trek, but I’ve been staying in Alpine Woods.. Do you know of it?”

The man frowned at her. “Alpine Woods is wolf territory. What are you doing there? You should be staying here among your own.”

“Oh well, I kind of stumbled into their town and they helped find me a place to stay and a job. I work for Books and Crannies, the bookstore. I’m actually late for work. If I can use your phone, I can give them a call and then get out of your hair. I appreciate all the help, but I should be getting home.”

“Why don’t you have some breakfast first? I’m always ravished after a shift, and I made plenty for both of us. I’m Cody, Premier of the Vulpes skulk.” Cody dished the eggs onto two plates and set them on the table.

“I really should be going...” Samantha’s rumbling stomach cut off her protests, and she reluctantly sat at the table. “I’m Samantha,” she stated after a pause and began eating the eggs in front of her.

“Pleasure to meet you, Samantha. I must admit I was a bit shocked to see an arctic fox crawling toward my house this morning, but after meeting you I think my birthday must’ve come early. I can’t wait to get you into the skulk.”

Samantha blushed as she swallowed the food in her mouth. “Oh. It’s nice of you to offer, but I’m fine where I am. Everyone has been really nice to me.” Samantha frowned. “Except some of the females. But that’s another matter.”

Cody laughed. “Dealing with some pack jealousies, huh? You won’t have to worry about that once you choose a mate. I’m hoping I can help you with that. Although we need to spend more time together before we make any decisions, of course.”

Samantha paused with the fork halfway to her mouth and looked at Cody in shock. Surely, she hadn’t heard him right. Or she’d misunderstood what he was trying to say.

“I appreciate the thought, but I’m not in the market for a mate,” Samantha said, putting her fork down. Her appetite seemed to have deserted her and her nervousness had returned in full force, making her stomach clench. “I really should call my boss. I don’t want her to be worried.” The truth was Samantha had never even considered having a mate of her own. A mate meant comfort and security. Samantha’s life held none of those things. She’d been on her own her whole life. Mating had never been an option before.

Cody laughed and put his fork down as well. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable, Samantha. I just wanted you to know, I’m throwing my hat in the ring. I know once we get you in the skulk, every single fox in the town will be after you. I just wanted to make sure I had the first claim.”

“As I said, I appreciate the offer, but I’m quite happy where I am. I’m not joining the skulk.” Samantha barely registered her words. Her thoughts pounded as they tossed around in her head.

“All right, all right,” Cody soothed.

Samantha was still a bit uncomfortable but she found herself relaxing slightly. He was handsome with his shaggy red hair and striking emerald green eyes. He had sharp features but an easy smile and confident demeanor. Truthfully, if she wasn’t in love with Jason, she could easily see herself becoming attracted to Cody. But she *was* in love with Jason.

Despite her uncertainty, her heart broke just from being separated from him. She’d take however much of him he would give her and hope she could pick up the tattered pieces of her heart after he finished. Until then, she was his. On the other hand, this offer for permanency, true permanency, wasn’t something she could throw away lightly. She needed more time to think everything through.

“The phone’s on the wall behind you. Feel free to use it to call whoever you need to call. But before you leave, I hope you’ll at least clue me in to why you don’t want to join the skulk. If you’ve got a job, I assume you plan on staying for a significant period of time. We’ll help you find another job if that’s the concern.”

Samantha sighed, chastising herself for her distrust. Cody had done nothing but try to make her comfortable, feed her, and offer her help. Meanwhile, all she’d done was be suspicious of him and insult his skulk.

“I’m sorry. It’s not anything against your skulk. I’m comfortable in Alpine Woods. And I’m currently seeing someone,” Samantha said self-consciously, hoping he wouldn’t ask for more details. She certainly didn’t need anyone else to point out how implausible her relationship with Jason really was. “I’m just going to use the phone real quick.”

Samantha got the number for the bookstore from Information and asked to be put through. When the phone rang for the third time, Samantha worried no one would answer. She needed to get home, if only to sort through her tumbling emotions. She’d been counting on Laurie being at the store today.

“Hello?” Jason’s frantic voice exploded out of the earpiece.

“Jason, for God’s sake, I’m still running a business.” Samantha heard Laurie’s voice in the background, as well as the sound of the phone being grabbed. “Sorry. This is Books and Crannies. How can I help you?”

“What’s Jason doing back?” Samantha asked, momentarily forgetting why she’d called. He was supposed to be away for another day at least. She was hoping he wouldn’t find out about this morning’s adventure. Somehow, she didn’t figure he’d be too happy about it. Not to mention she was a bit embarrassed. What kind of a grown woman couldn’t even go for an early morning romp in the woods without getting lost?

“Samantha! Where the hell are you? We’ve been worried sick!”

“Samantha! Give me the phone, Laurie,” Jason’s voice commanded.

“Jason, will you hold on a second? I won’t be able to hear anything with you screaming in my ear. Samantha, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Laurie. I’m sorry to have worried you. I was feeling a bit anxious so I went out running this morning and got a little turned around. Well, a lot turned around, actually. I ended up at the Vulpes shifters. I was wondering if maybe someone wouldn’t mind picking me up?”

“What’s your exact location? We’ll leave right now.”

“I’m in their Premier’s house.” Cody called an address out and Samantha repeated it to Laurie. “Did you get that?”

“We’re on our way. We’ll be there in twenty minutes, tops.” The phone line went dead. Samantha stared at it for a moment before replacing it in its cradle.

“They hung up before I could ask them to bring something for me to change into. I don’t suppose you’d let me wear this home? I’ll wash it and return it to you.”

“Don’t worry about it. Besides, I kind of like seeing you in my clothes.” His wink caused Samantha to blush and she tried to pull down the hem of the shirt again. Her breasts were small enough she didn’t actually need a bra, but there was something about not wearing one that made her feel exposed.

“Tell me more about this guy you’re dating. Is he shifter or human? That town is so overrun by humans, it’s almost hard to tell half the time.” Cody’s voice interrupted her thoughts.

“He’s one of the wolves. And I know fox and wolves and all the cross-breed arguments, but it seems to be working at the moment. I’m willing to wait and see what happens.” Samantha knew she was starting to ramble and immediately closed her mouth, biting at the corners.

“I know most of the pack. Who is he?” Cody pressed. His gaze was sharp on her, almost as if he sensed she didn’t want to tell him. He probably did. Foxes had extremely good detection of emotions, more than other shifters, and right now Samantha’s were in turmoil.

“Jason Callahan,” Samantha said with a raised chin. At first there was no change in Cody’s facial expression. Then unexpectedly, a smile broke over his features.

“You’re kidding, right? I mean, Samantha, he’s the pack’s Premier!” When Samantha continued to look Cody in the eyes with a determined look on her face, his features fell. “Oh, hell.” He rubbed his face with his hands before continuing. “He’s playing with you, you must realize that. He’s a wolf and you’re a fox. What’s more, he’s Premier of a pack and you don’t even seem to have one. He’s going to use you until he’s had his fill, and then he’s going to dump you.”

Samantha knew logically all Cody said was true, but her heart wouldn't accept any truth that meant leaving Jason. She wasn't living in delusion. She knew the realities of the situation, but when she was with Jason her world seemed to focus and everything felt right. It was like a missing piece of her soul slid into place. For the first time in her life, she felt wanted. She felt like she had a home. She didn't know what the future held, but then again, she never had, and it had never bothered her before. So why was all this talk making her want to curl up in a fetal position and bawl like a baby?

* * * *

"Would you stop brooding? You're giving me a headache," Jason heard Laurie say as he stared out the windshield of Laurie's Escape, willing the car to go faster. Laurie had insisted on driving, a fact that annoyed Jason until he realized he'd be able to hold Samantha the whole way home.

Even knowing she was safe, his wolf was restless after the scare this morning. It had taken him an hour to complete the normally two-hour drive back to town after Laurie's call. He fully expected Samantha to be waiting for him when he got there. He'd thought maybe she'd played some horrible practical joke, or maybe Laurie had forgotten to call him when she found Samantha sleeping at his house. Instead, he'd found his clueless siblings no closer to finding Samantha than they had been when they called earlier.

As more time passed, Jason became more and more anxious to have Samantha back in his arms where she belonged. His need for her was a palpable thing living and breathing inside him. Hearing Samantha was okay appeased the man but did nothing for the wolf. Only when he could feel, taste, and smell Samantha would the wolf relax. He didn't bother answering Laurie's complaint, but stared straight ahead and continued to brood.

"Geez, Jason, she's fine. We'll be there in another ten minutes, tops."

Jason's only response was a growl. Hearing Samantha was with the foxes didn't lessen his anxiety much. What if she decided she wanted to be around her own kind? Jason knew he could never be happy if he wasn't around other wolves. What happened if Samantha felt the same way? As Premier, he had the freedom to mate with any member of his pack, but if Samantha chose the foxes over the wolves, he would never be able to have her. And he needed her as much as he needed his next breath.

Last night without Samantha had been horrible. He'd tossed and turned and finally crawled out of bed at six AM and gone to the gym in the hotel. He'd put his body through a brutal workout trying to wear out the restlessness inside him. He'd gotten used to having Samantha curl against his side at night, inhaling her scent with each breath he took in sleep. It had soothed his wolf into a tranquil comfort unlike anything ever had. Now he had to face the possibility Samantha might rather be with her own kind than with him.

He didn't realize he was growling aloud until Laurie snapped at him, "What is wrong with you?"

“Just get me to her,” Jason spit out as they entered fox territory. There were less full humans in this town. The foxes tended to keep to themselves and other shifters. Jason never understood it, personally. Being a wolf didn’t make him less of a man. It added a facet to his personality but it didn’t take away who he was.

A few foxes waved at them as they drove through the main strip of town. The two communities were close enough they often coordinated together on shifter matters. Jason focused on counting down the moments until they got to the Premier’s house, until they got to Samantha.

Jason threw open his car door before Laurie came to a complete stop and stormed up the porch steps. He was about to pound on the door when Samantha threw it open and came barreling into his arms. Her hands snaked around him and she pressed her face against his chest.

Instantaneously, his anger and fear were replaced with protectiveness and love. The wave of relief almost drowned him and made him stagger as he clutched her tightly, burying his face in her hair. Her scent was stronger, probably due to the recent shifts, and Jason took a gulping breath. Something was off.

Jason pulled back and held Samantha at arms’ length. “What the hell are you wearing?” he all but growled. She smelled like the damn alpha fox. Rationally, he knew nothing had happened. Despite his history with Samantha, she wasn’t the type to jump into bed with someone immediately after meeting them. Even if he had doubts, his nose could tell the difference between intimate encounters and the subtle wisps coming off of Samantha. Still, he couldn’t escape the overpowering jealousy swamping him as he gazed at Samantha in another man’s clothes. *His* scent should be the only one marking her.

Samantha looked surprised until she glanced down at her clothing. Blushing lightly, she looked at him sheepishly. “I didn’t exactly wear a dress when I went out hunting this morning. And I couldn’t very well ask for help as a fox.”

Red-hot rage burned in his gut. “He saw you naked.” He was going to kill him. Friendly or not, no one looked at his mate naked but him.

“No! God, no. He lent me the clothes and left the room while I shifted.” Samantha stepped closer and ran her hands up his chest. She seemed to sense his inner struggle with his wolf and knew exactly how to pacify both man and beast.

Jason gazed into Samantha’s eyes and let his anger drift away. He was so happy to have her back safe and sound. That was all that mattered. *She* was all that mattered and he had her back. Jason buried his face once again in her hair.

“Those clothes are coming off the moment I get you home,” he rumbled against her neck.

A clearing of a throat behind him reminded him where they were and that they weren’t alone. Gently easing away from the embrace, Jason pulled Samantha against his side with a gruff grunt.

“Yes, Captain Caveman. Woman back, man happy,” Laurie teased. “Hey, Cody. Thanks for picking up our runaway.”

“It’s not like I ran away on purpose,” Samantha grumbled.

“It was no problem. Samantha, can I have a quick word with you before you leave?”

Jason didn't like the calculated look Cody gave Samantha.

“Sure, you can, we're in no rush,” Jason stated as he pulled Samantha tighter against his side, refusing to let her leave. If Cody was going to cause trouble, he could do it out in the open with all three of them listening.

“In private.”

Samantha looked up and gave him a reassuring smile. “I'll be right back.” As she pulled out of his arms, Jason tamped down the urge to grab her back. He clutched his arms to his sides and looked on helplessly as Samantha talked to Cody. After he got her home, he'd strip her bare and find out exactly what the fox was telling his future mate.

* * * *

“I want you to consider it. You belong here with us, not there.”

Samantha glanced over to where Jason was waiting less than patiently. She didn't know what had brought him back to town early, but she was incredibly grateful. All the anxiety and worry of the day melted as he held her securely in his arms, and her whole soul lifted and sighed to have her wolf back. Her brain cautioned her not to believe he was hers, to remember the facts.

“He is mine.” It was true, she realized. Whatever her future brought, Jason was her wolf. He might not be hers to keep, but he was hers right now. She didn't realize she had spoken out loud until she looked at Cody and saw him gazing at her with sympathy and pity.

“He's not yours, Samantha. And he won't ever be. But I can't make this decision for you. I want you to know my offer to join the skulk is open-ended. You'll always be welcome here. You know how to reach me if you need me.”

Samantha thanked Cody and walked back to Jason feeling beat down. She wondered how much time she had left with him. Would Jason allow her to stay in Alpine Woods after he was finished with her? She hoped so. Even without Jason, the town felt like home. And who knew, maybe one of the lesser Beta wolves would want a small arctic fox mate. How odd. She'd had to travel thousands of miles away from her birthplace to find her home.

Jason latched onto her again as soon as she reached his side. She giggled in surprised pleasure when he followed her into the backseat of the car and pulled her into his arms.

“Sure, make me feel like a chauffeur, sitting up here all by myself,” Laurie joked as she slid behind the wheel.

Samantha blushed at the reminder of why they were here. Not only had she missed the entire morning of work, but Laurie probably had to close the store to come pick her up.

“I'm sorry, Laurie. You can dock my pay for the hours lost coming to pick me up. I don't know what happened, I just got turned around. Stupid mouse.” Although Samantha grumbled under her breath, Laurie and Jason both pounced on it.

“Mouse?”

Blushing, Samantha told them the whole story of how she got turned around while chasing a mouse. Both Jason and Laurie burst out laughing.

“Oh, man--” Laurie wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “I hope you know you’re never going to live this one down. It’s going to be a long running joke at family gatherings, I’m sure. I hope you’re prepared for that.”

Warm pleasure rushed through Samantha at the words “family gatherings”. Samantha knew Laurie didn’t intend to include her in the comment, but it still gave her a happy feeling. She allowed herself to pretend, if only for a moment, she was a part of Jason’s family.

“I’m glad you’re safe.” Jason snuggled closer to her in the backseat and bit her shoulder hard enough for a small yelp to escape.

“Hey, no hanky-panky in the backseat of my car unless it involves me and a hunky blond!” Laurie cautioned from the front seat.

“Laurie, I don’t want to hear this,” Jason groaned, causing Samantha to giggle again. It felt nice to be sheltered in Jason’s arms in the company of friends. Snuggling more securely in Jason’s embrace, Samantha let his scent surround her and her worries drifted away.

* * * *

Jason looked at the sleeping woman in his arms. She appeared to have slept no better than him last night. As selfish as it seemed, Jason felt a surge of joy thinking she had fared no better being away from him than he had. Laurie pulled into Jason’s driveway and glanced back.

“I’ll let you inside. Tell her not to worry about work, I’ve got her covered,” Laurie said before opening the doors and allowing him to carry his precious bundle inside. Laurie quietly shut the door behind him and left without another word. She really was a great sister. He’d have to think of some way to thank her in the near future.

True to his word, as soon as he laid Samantha on his bed, he removed the offending clothes. Once she was completely naked, he gently pulled back the covers and tucked her inside. He was tired. Not only had he not slept, his soul was weary from the scare he’d received this morning. He knew it couldn’t have been any less traumatizing for Samantha, being caught in a strange shifter town in her animal form. Jason remembered her abject terror a few weeks ago when discovering she’d stumbled into a wolf den. It was no wonder she passed out in the car.

Pulling off his own clothes, Jason crawled into bed in his boxers and pulled Samantha into his embrace. Comforted by the feel of her curling into him, her hand resting over his heart, Jason breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn’t forgotten about Cody or his private farewell to Samantha, but there was plenty of time to get to the bottom of that mystery later. Right now, there was nowhere else he wanted to be but next to his little fox.

Chapter 11

Jason wasn't sure if it was the lack of Samantha's warm body pressed against him or his own internal clock that woke him after only an hour and a half of rest. Whatever woke him, he was furious to discover Samantha was not only not in his bed, but not in his house at all.

Jason stormed out of his house and jumped into his car. His anger grew the closer he drew to the bookstore. He rushed inside, determined to find Samantha. How dare she leave him after the scare he'd had this morning? A scare *she* had put him through. He stopped short when he saw Laurie making coffee behind the bar. Panic started to set in after he realized Samantha wasn't there. Where could she have gone? He didn't think she would take off again. Even in his anger, Jason hadn't forgotten how happy she'd been to see him earlier, or how she had clung to him almost desperately. Samantha had had a scare today, too, and he couldn't picture her taking off on her own again anytime soon.

"Laurie, have you seen Samantha?" Jason bit out, walking to the counter. He resented having to admit he'd lost his mate for the second time in twenty-four hours. It was his job to make sure Samantha was safe and cared for.

"No, but I thought I heard the shower running upstairs a few minutes ago," Laurie responded.

"Thanks," Jason choked out. Why hadn't she showered at his house? Jason was fed up with all the uncertainty he was feeling. It was time to lay his cards on the table and tell her that he wanted her as his mate. That he never wanted to spend another night without her. That he wanted her to move in with him and be his partner for life.

Tonight, he decided. He'd cook her dinner, set a romantic scene and ask her to spend her life with him. He would spend every moment of his life thanking whatever force had brought her to him...if she said yes.

Jason turned around, intent on planning his seduction, when a tall woman barreled into him, almost tackling him to the ground. He grunted at the impact, his arms automatically closing around the woman and preventing them from falling over.

"You're losing your touch, old man, we almost fell over," the woman said as he righted them. He looked into familiar hazel eyes. He couldn't help but return her smile as he pulled her into his arms for a tight hug.

* * * *

Samantha rushed out of her apartment after taking a hurried shower and changing out of the clothes Cody had loaned her. She had hated leaving Jason's bed after she woke up safe and secure in his embrace, but she knew she had to get to work. She felt bad enough about getting lost this morning. Missing more work wasn't an option.

Samantha wasn't exactly a morning person, but she could easily see it becoming her favorite time of day if she got to wake up in Jason's arms every morning. She had such a sense of comfort there; she felt cherished for the first time in her life. Briefly worrying she might be projecting her wants and desires onto the situation, Samantha decided there was no harm in a little fantasy. She was already in love with the man. If her heart was going to be broken in the end anyway, she might as well throw her hopes into the mix, too.

Simply allowing herself to hope lifted Samantha's spirits. She hadn't hoped for anything since she was a little girl. She'd almost forgotten how hope's warm glow felt like a blanket wrapping her in its embrace and telling her everything was going to be all right. The world seemed to have taken on new life.

Feeling even lighter of heart than she had when she'd left Cody's house with Jason, Samantha walked through the door of Books and Crannies, only to feel her heart shatter and fall to her feet in pieces. The scene before her had the same effect as a bucket of cold water.

So this is what heartbreak feels like, Samantha thought as she watched Jason smile down at the brunette in his arms. She knew what was between them couldn't have lasted forever, but it was a blow so soon after waking up feeling loved.

It hurt to admit it, but she had begun to think he was in love with her. But looking at Jason's face as he gazed at the woman in his arms, Samantha knew she saw true love in his features. He looked so pleasantly surprised.

The woman was stunningly beautiful in a soft, feminine way. Judging by her scent, she was full human. She was tall, her head coming up to Jason's chin, causing her to fit perfectly in his arms. Her reddish brown hair fell down her back in a gentle wave, and delicately arched eyebrows framed her smiling hazel eyes. She smiled up at Jason and he smiled back at her. Samantha watched as he tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, a gesture she knew meant affection. A gesture she had thought Jason reserved only for her. The woman was gorgeous in a way Samantha could never be.

Swallowing a sob, Samantha backpedaled out of the store. She heard Jason call her name as the doors closed behind her, and she ran to her apartment, refusing to stop. All she could think about was leaving. Staying in town, being forced to watch Jason with his new lover, was more pain than she could withstand.

Jason closed a hand on her shoulder as she was fumbling with her keys, and she almost collapsed as Jason turned her to face him. Tears trailed down her cheeks, and she bit her lip to hold in the scream threatening to break free.

"Oh, honey." Jason's rough voice held sympathy and pain as he looked down at her tenderly. "It isn't what you think, little heart. That was Julie, my--"

Samantha didn't let him finish as she sobbed out her reply. "It's okay. Honestly. I knew you'd find your mate eventually." She couldn't finish as her knees gave out under the weight of her despair. She felt the beautiful world of this morning crashing down around her.

* * * *

Jason caught Samantha before she hit the ground and carried her into the apartment. He felt her hot wet tears against his neck and his heart broke for her. He had wanted to woo her and romance her when he finally took her as his mate, but waiting to tell her his intentions wasn't an option anymore. Seeing her grief and knowing he had caused it, even unintentionally, was like a knife in his chest.

Jason gently set her on the bed and crouched down, looking up at her.

"Little heart, please stop crying. You're killing me. You are my heart, my soul, my life. You are everything to me, my entire world."

Samantha stopped crying as his words sank past her grief, and she stared at him in wide-eyed amazement. Tear tracks ran down her face, and every now and then a small sob would escape.

"The woman I saw you with downstairs?"

"That was Julie, my baby sister."

"I'm not stupid, Jason. That woman down there is human, not wolf."

"My father is human. Most of us are wolves like my mother, but my sister didn't get the shifter gene. She is full human, but she's still my sister."

Jason tenderly cupped Samantha's cheek with one hand and wiped at the tears with his thumb. "I love you, little heart. You are the one I want to wake up to every morning until my dying day. I can't even begin to imagine my life without you. Samantha, I wanted to set a romantic scene tonight, but I don't want to wait another minute before asking you to join your life to mine. To be mate to my wolf and wife to my man. You would make me the happiest man on the planet if you say yes."

Samantha opened her mouth but no sound came out. She took a moment, swallowed and tried again. "You...you love me?" She looked like she couldn't quite believe she'd heard him correctly.

"More than anything." Jason expected at least a smile and was shocked when instead Samantha burst into renewed tears. "Oh no, please don't cry, Samantha. If this is too much, I'll wait. Whatever you want, just please, stop crying."

Samantha laughed through her tears and launched herself off the bed at Jason, causing him to topple over with her on top. She straddled him and ran kisses all over his face and neck. Her lips were wet with her tears, which continued to run down her cheeks. Jason closed his eyes, savoring the feel of Samantha. His love swelled in his chest making his heart beat faster.

"I love you so much. I thought--" Samantha's breath hitched as she rubbed her face against his neck. "I thought we were just fooling around. I didn't think you'd want me forever."

Jason stroked her from thighs to waist.

"You are perfect for me. Why would I not want you forever?"

Samantha rose and looked him in the eye. The naked vulnerability on her face called on every protective instinct inside him. "No one ever has. I couldn't understand why you would be different."

“Oh, little heart.” Jason’s soul cried for the woman who’d had no one but herself for so long. He rolled them, together, his body covering hers, and gently swept her white blond tresses off of her face. “You will never be alone again. I’m going to spend the rest of our lives making sure you get the love you deserve. That is if you say yes. You still haven’t answered my proposal.”

“Yes! Yes, yes and yes!” Samantha laughed right before rearing up and clasping her lips to his in a passionate kiss.

Samantha had wanted to claim him as her mate right there, but Jason wouldn’t let her. He sent her down to work and gathered her things from the apartment. She might not know it yet but she was moving into his house immediately. He had a lot of work to get done before tonight, and although his proposal could no longer be included in the romantic evening he had planned, he still had seduction in mind.

* * * *

Samantha rang the doorbell to Jason’s house nervously. She didn’t want to walk in like she owned the place, but she felt strange ringing the doorbell. Jason opened the door and looked at her with a frown.

“Why are you ringing the doorbell? This is your house now, too.”

“I didn’t want to assume and just walk in,” Samantha explained as he held the door open wide for her to enter. Candles cast the room in a hazy glow and white roses decorated the coffee table where a romantic dinner sat. Jason closed the door and stepped behind her. His breath fell on her neck as he steered her inside.

They barely got the door closed when Jason tore Samantha’s clothes from her body. Samantha turned around and participated, tearing at Jason’s clothes in turn until they were both naked and panting for breath. Jason pulled her to the floor, turned her around, and thrust into her from behind. The feel of his naked cock inside made her even hotter as she pushed her backside against him in time with his thrusts.

Jason swept her hair to one side, exposing her neck. Samantha knew what was coming and shivered in anticipation. After this moment, she would be linked with him forever. After this moment, she would never have to worry about being alone again. Jason would be hers and no one could tear him away.

As his body covered hers, she arched into his heat. His breath caressed the sensitive part of her shoulder where it sloped into her neck. As his teeth sank into her, breaking the skin and releasing the mating activator, he continued to thrust into her from behind. Samantha jerked, feeling him possessing her completely, and then she exploded in a multitude of colors. She’d never felt anything like it as her world frayed around the edges. Jason howled as he came inside her, the power of her release causing his.

They collapsed on the floor, panting and sweaty, as Jason leisurely stroked her side. Samantha struggled to get her wits back, but Jason seemed in no hurry to get up as he kissed her sensitive shoulder and rubbed his lips against the bite mark. It continued to bleed for a moment before closing up. Two small scars were the only sign it had been there at all.

“I love you, my mate,” Jason whispered against her ear.

Samantha smiled, turning in his embrace. “I love you, too,” she whispered against his mouth before crushing her lips against his. She kissed him with every ounce of emotion she felt, and when she finally pulled away, they were both breathless with desire.

Sweeping Samantha into his arms, Jason carried her to the bathroom. Samantha rested her head against his shoulder and marveled at her change of fortune. Whatever winds sent her to this town had given her life new meaning.

Jason tenderly sat Samantha on the counter so he could clean her off, nibbling kisses on her skin along the way. It wasn't until he placed a quick kiss against her stomach that she realized she could already be pregnant with Jason's child. The thought brought a grin to her face as she pictured her future with him.

“What's that smile?” Jason teased, kissing her lightly on the lips.

“I was imagining being pregnant with your baby,” Samantha admitted with a blush. A fierce look entered his eyes, and he gazed down at her hungrily. His hand traveled down to cup her stomach tenderly, completely at odds with the feral look on his face.

“I did say I'd give you anything you desired. I think we should get started on this dream of yours right away.”

Samantha wrapped her legs around his waist as he pulled her from the counter and out the door. Samantha couldn't imagine a better life for herself than one spent wrapped in Jason's arms. She rested her head on his shoulder and sighed in contentment. Jason's love for her flowed through her veins, enveloping her in a warm glow. Samantha had finally found home, right here in the arms of her wolf.

Epilogue

Samantha stared around the room, amazed at the pack's response to her mating with Jason. She had expected some resentment, especially from the females, and cautious acceptance from everyone else. She'd been nervous about her reception to the pack since Jason first told her about the function his parents were throwing for them. Yet she was pleasantly surprised to discover everyone accepted her with open arms. Even the females, who had given her a hard time when she first arrived in town, treated her with a newfound respect.

It certainly hadn't hurt that Jason stood beside her ready to glare down anyone who disrespected her. His parents and siblings had strongly supported her as well. Jason's parents welcomed her into their family wholeheartedly, thrilled that Jason had found his one true mate.

Jason was overly protective but Samantha didn't mind. It was a nice change from having no one to look out for her. Now it seemed she had a whole family, a whole pack.

The single females of the pack immediately switched their attention from Jason to Ethan, as if they never had designs on her mate. Samantha giggled against Jason's arm as she watched Ethan dodge another female attempting to rub up against him.

"Jesus," he exclaimed, coming over to where Samantha stood with Jason. He handed her a glass of champagne and placed a quick kiss against her cheek. "Vultures, every last one of them. I never understood how difficult it was for you until tonight. I can't even turn around without one of them humping my leg."

Samantha choked on a laugh.

"It wouldn't be so bad if I wasn't so aware that every one of them is after a mate. I'm thinking of getting out of town for a short vacation. I won't be gone more than a couple weeks, at most. If you think you can spare me, I think the sooner I leave the better. Maybe the scavengers will move on to Danny while I'm gone."

"I thought you would've been happy with all the female attention. You always used to tease me about it." Jason grinned.

Ethan made a disgusted face. "It's the ulterior motive behind it. I'm not looking for a mate anytime soon."

"Now you know how I always felt," Jason said. Samantha elbowed him in his side. "Until I met the woman meant for me, of course," Jason soothed. "Take as much time as you need. Just don't miss the wedding. It won't be for another couple months, but you'll need to get fitted for a tux and everything else that goes with being one of my best men."

"Ooh, bachelor party!"

"As long as there's only looking and no touching." Samantha laughed. "If he remembers he's mine, I don't care what you all do." She ended on a grunt as Jason pulled her roughly into his arms.

“Always and forever,” Jason whispered against her lips before claiming them in a passionate kiss.

About Sondrae Bennett

http://www.lyricalpress.com/store/index.php?main_page=authors&authors_id=175

Sondrae lives in New York City where she loves to people watch for inspiration. She has been an avid reader of romance her whole life, however never thought about writing one until a small arctic fox shifter popped into her life and began telling her story. Before long, she found herself riveted by Samantha and Jason's tale and continues to enjoy it every time she reads it. Sondrae believes the best characters are those deeply and truthfully invested in the situations they find themselves in and usually lets her characters speak for themselves. Above all, she loves giving her characters the happily ever afters they deserve.

Sondrae loves to hear from readers. Please feel free to email her and drop by her blog to learn about upcoming releases.

Sondrae's Website:

<http://sondraebennett.blogspot.com/>

Reader eMail:

SondraeBennett@gmail.com

About the Alpine Woods Shifters Series

Book 1: *Arctic Winds*

Available in ebook from Lyrical Press

Book 2: *Chasing Paradise*

Coming soon from Lyrical Press

More from Lyrical Press



Where reality and fantasy collide

Ready for more?

Visit any of the following links:

[Lyrical Press](http://lyricalpress.com)

http://lyricalpress.com

[New Releases](http://www.lyricalpress.com/newest_releases)

http://www.lyricalpress.com/newest_releases

[Coming Soon](http://www.lyricalpress.com/coming_soon)

http://www.lyricalpress.com/coming_soon