

## Fierce Wolf Chapter 6 - Tips

Heather sat across the kitchen table from her grandmother while Maggie watched cartoons in the living room.

“What has you so concerned?” Pearl asked.

“I joined a shifter dating site and I was matched with a wolf shifter named Thorne Winter.”

Pearl’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped slightly. Pearl’s generation could remember when shifters first came out to the public, and the shock that humans had at the news. Much progress had been made in the ensuing decades to incorporate shifters into human society.

Pearl lived in a community that had a high percentage of shifters. But, for a moment, Heather was worried Pearl might be nervous that her granddaughter was matched with one of them.

“And what is your primary concern?” Pearl asked, choosing her words carefully as she gripped the mug of tea in front of her on the table.

“He has this weird story about being cursed by a witch and being forced into shifter form for seventy-five years.”

Pearl’s eyes grew even wider and then she took a long, thoughtful sip of tea. Heather stared into the amber darkness in her own mug and sighed.

“He is really handsome. But it’s not just the crazy story. He also grabbed my arm, and it left a mark.”

Pearl frowned deeply, the lines around her face outlining her displeasure.

“This guy does not sound like a safe choice, sweetheart. I’m glad you discussed it with me.”

“I went to go see the new owner of New Moon Books. Her name is Luna Linwood and she’s the granddaughter of Louisa Pleasant.”

“I knew Louisa for a long time before she passed away. She was a good woman.”

“Apparently she was also a witch.”

Pearl shook her head. “A lot of people pray to the moon and read tarot cards and such. That doesn’t mean that they believe it’s possible to curse people or to force shifters to remain in their animal form for seventy-five years.”

"I know. But Luna told me her grandmother is the one who started the potion that enables Thorne and his brothers to remain in human form. She believed in curses and magic and all of that. Not just the hippie kind."

"This is concerning, Heather. What do you plan to do?"

Heather's shoulders slumped. "I don't know. I was hoping that you would tell me."

"If it was up to me, I would tell you to stay clear. But it's not me. It's your decision. If he grabbed you and hurt you, then that is an automatic no. But sometimes there can be extenuating circumstances for even something like that."

"He was an animal for seventy-five years." Heather looked out the kitchen window, wishing she could just fly away into the blue sky and forget all of this. "There was something. A spark between us. Luna corroborated his story. I can't completely rule him out."

"I'm not going to tell you to stay away from him. But you need to be extremely careful. If he ever shows any kind of violence again, you need to cut him off and not speak to him. If we need to, we'll get the law involved."

"I don't think it'll come to that, Grandma," Heather said before Pearl could go any further.

She didn't want to think of Thorne that way. She just didn't want to have the wrong kind of man in her life or around her daughter.

After she finished her tea, she bundled up Maggie and drove them both home. It had been an exhausting, emotional day, and she needed to relax. Luckily, she had graded all her papers already and didn't have class again until Monday. She would be able to spend time with her daughter and relax over the weekend.

Maggie went to draw on her art table in her bedroom while Heather started dinner. She made sautéed chicken with broccoli and rice and the two sat together, chatting about their day. Maggie told her about how she and Pearl went to the beach and enjoyed the warm sunshine. When she was done chatting about the chocolate chip cookies they baked together, she looked up at her mom and frowned.

"What's wrong, Mommy?"

Maggie was always so perceptive about other people's emotions. Sometimes eerily so. It was one of the most endearing parts of her already endearing personality.

"I met someone today, and I'm not sure what to think."

“Is it a new friend?” Maggie asked excitedly.

“I’m not sure yet.”

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

“A boy,” Heather said wistfully, remembering Thorne’s handsome face and the intensity in his eyes.

“Like a boyfriend?” Maggie asked with a giggle.

Heather looked down at her daughter, wondering what she knew about things like boyfriends at four years old. She supposed the idea of romantic relationships was everywhere and not something that a four-year-old would be unaware of.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you like him?” Maggie asked, shoveling rice into her mouth.

“Maybe. He’s quite handsome.”

“Do I get to meet him?” Maggie asked, her eyes brightening. “Is he going to be my new daddy?”

Heather groaned inwardly. She hadn’t expected to tell Maggie about Thorne at all, and now her daughter wanted to meet the man she was so concerned about protecting her from.

“It’s nothing like that, Maggie. If I ever fall in love with a man, I will make sure that you like him just as much as I do before he’s even close to being your new daddy.”

“The other kids at preschool all have daddies,” Maggie said. “Even the ones who don’t live with them anymore.”

Heather sighed and shoved food around on her plate. She’d suddenly lost her appetite. Maggie’s father hadn’t wanted her, so Heather had never pursued child support or any type of visitation. As far as she was concerned, the man didn’t exist—but she knew it wasn’t fair to Maggie. The child deserved to have a male influence in her life. But could that influence possibly be someone like Thorne?

“I know, sweetheart. Your daddy is far away, and he can’t talk to you because of his job.”

Heather had been telling her her father was a secret agent that loved her very much but couldn’t communicate with her because of his job. It was a stupid lie, and eventually she would have to tell her the truth.

For now, Maggie might as well believe her father was like Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. A great hero who loved her very much. She had decided it was the healthiest thing to tell her child and she hoped that Maggie would forgive her when she realized that none of it was true.

She hadn't thought about bringing anyone else into her life until now, and she was confronted with the worst-case scenario. A man who wanted her no matter what, but who had a questionable personality and temperament. She wasn't sure that he would want to take things slowly, but she needed to. If they went anywhere at all.

After dinner, they read together in the living room while listening to soft classical music. Heather gave Maggie a bath before bed and then dressed her in a warm fuzzy onesie with zebra print. Then she sat beside her bed and tucked her in before turning off the light. Maggie's eyes fluttered closed.

"What was his name?" Maggie asked softly as her breathing became long and deep.

"His name is Thorne," Heather said, turning off the lamp beside Maggie's bed. She kissed her daughter in the glow of the nightlight and walked out of the bedroom.

She felt a wave of anxiety rise in her chest, and she gripped her fists as she walked to her bedroom and closed the door. There was a notification on her phone where it sat on the bedside table. She picked it up and saw that it was from Thorne.

"I'm so sorry I grabbed you. I know it's unforgivable. I hope after speaking with Luna you are willing to give me another chance."

Heather stared at the text, cupping the phone in her hands as she sank into her bed. She exhaled and stared at the ceiling, her eyes rolling back in her head.

How was she supposed to deal with this? She already had too much on her plate as it was. Just that morning she'd been thinking about how wonderfully full her life was. Now she had to decide if she would allow this strange man with violent tendencies to come into her life.

Could she forgive him for grabbing her? He hadn't really hurt her. He had just wanted to stop her. Maybe she was overreacting.

It was the story about the curse that had really gotten under her skin. It sounded completely insane. But after speaking to Luna, she at least believed that he wasn't the only one who believed in the crazy fairy story.

Considering that when her grandmother was a little girl no one knew about shifters, maybe she was taking for granted that there might be other things in this world beyond human understanding.

"I'm trying to," she typed into the screen. She sent the message and waited, gripping the cellphone between her hands as she sat on the edge of the bed.

"You don't know how happy it makes me to hear that."

"I'm glad."

"Are you willing to go out with me again?" His reply came immediately.

"Maybe."

"Just maybe?" he asked.

"I want to say yes, but I'm scared."

"That's perfectly understandable. I'm scared too. I can't tell you how difficult it is for me to let someone else into my life who has so much impact on my emotions. I feel like I'm losing control. But I know that's not your fault."

Heather read his text over ten times. It occurred to her that she hadn't even considered what it must be like from Thorne's perspective. Since he was a shifter, she was the only woman that he could ever truly love.

She also supposedly was the answer to breaking his curse. That gave her a tremendous amount of power over him. Power she didn't want or ask for, but it was there nonetheless. She had to be gentle with this man. Not just because she feared for herself, but because it was what any decent human being would do in this situation.

"I never thought of it that way," she finally replied.

"I don't want you to feel responsible for me."

"I don't." But deep down she knew it would be impossible not to. She was his fated mate and the means to the end of his curse. There was no way for her to not feel responsible for him.

"Maybe we can meet up at the bookstore tomorrow," she typed.

She stared at the message before sending it. She would have to come up with an excuse to leave Maggie with Pearl. Even if she was willing to spend more time alone with Thorne, she was not in any way ready to introduce him to her daughter.

"I will be there anytime you want."

"How about around noon? Then we can have lunch at River's Bakery."

"That would be perfect," he said.

"Good night," she typed before setting her phone back on the bedside table.

There was one more message notification on her screen. "Good night, beautiful."

A shiver went down her spine, thinking about his intense eyes taking in every little detail of her face and figure. He was beautiful. Like a god etched in marble. Thinking of him telling her that she was beautiful felt ridiculous.

Heather didn't consider herself unattractive. She had always been fit and healthy. But she was no beauty queen. Her curly hair got frizzy anytime it rained, her mouth was too wide and her eyes too big for her face.

Not to mention her tiny breasts and curvy hips that didn't get any smaller no matter how much she exercised. Imagining a man like that thinking of her as beautiful was strange.

Most men she dated had been on the same level as her intellectually, and they had bonded over ideas. Thorne wanted her for another reason. A more primal reason that made Heather's blood run hot and desire rise in her core.

## **Fierce Wolf Chapter 7 - Tips**

Relief washed over Thorne, and he felt his body relax for the first time in longer than he could remember. Heather had agreed to see him again, and this time he would control his temper.

He'd had time to think and reflect on her willingness to go meet Luna. That showed that she was open to the possibility that he was telling the truth. The possibility of them being together. He lay on his bed in the darkness, thinking about her hips and her eyes and her beautiful curves.

He wanted to run his hands through her silky curls and pull her body against his. The images of her were so vivid in his mind that they carried deep into his sleep and his dreams. He imagined them running together in the forest, and when he woke the impressions of his dreams were still at the forefront of his mind.

She was the first thing on his mind when he woke in the morning and the last thing he thought about before he fell asleep. She was already occupying so much space in his brain it was hard to imagine that he hadn't even known her until yesterday.

The woman that he had seen on public access television had become a reality in his life, and she was slowly taking over.

He jumped out of bed and landed on all fours on the ground. There was a dose of potion on a piece of raw steak on the floor waiting for him. He gobbled it up and seconds later he was able to shift into his human form.

He stood naked in the middle of the room, his feet on the cold floor, his skin pricking from chill air his wolf was used to. His human form could barely tolerate it.

He went to the thermostat and turned it up to a comfortable temperature before walking into the bathroom to take a hot, steamy shower. As the temperature in the bathroom rose and the steam filled the air, his muscles loosened, and his manhood unfurled to its full length.

He looked at himself in the mirror, running a hand over his chest. He wondered what Heather saw when she looked at him. Did she see the attractive man staring at him now, or did she see a monster who ripped limbs from his prey and fought with his pack for bloodied morsels?

He stood under the warm stream and washed his hair. He enjoyed the musky scent of the shampoo and the feeling of hot water on his skin. Being a human was still something he was getting used to again.

It felt good to be warm and clean. To think clearly and to reason. To have patience and to be driven by something other than instinct. To understand the future and past in a way that his wolf never could, even when his human mind could have some influence.

He stepped out of the shower and dried himself off with a big fluffy towel. The feeling of the silky fabric on his skin aroused him as he imagined it was Heather's soft hands.

He closed his eyes and thought of her mouth. Those big, beautiful lips he wanted to kiss. He felt himself stiffen and he instinctively gripped his length with his large hand. He wanted to relieve himself of the deep tension in his loins, but he also wanted to save everything he had for her.

He let go of his cock and willed it to relax as he stepped out into his warm bedroom and grabbed clothes from his drawers. Since he spent every night in wolf form, there was no reason to have a bed in his house, but he liked having furniture. Also, if he ever brought his mate here, they could make love in the sheets and cozy blankets.

He growled at himself. "Down, boy," he said to his manhood. He needed to get himself under control, especially since he was going to see Heather today.

He dressed in black jeans and a black T-shirt. He finished drying and brushing his hair before applying a dab of the cologne he'd grown to enjoy at Patrick Doolittle's house.

It had cost him quite a bit at a specialty shop downtown, but it was totally worth it. So far, he had saved most of his money and had only purchased the essentials: A truck

that he'd paid for in full, his one-bedroom apartment in a moderately-priced building, his furniture and housewares, and nothing else.

Splurging on cologne and body products was his one luxury. It made him feel more human to smell and look good—for his skin to be smooth and silky and for his face to be moisturized.

He hoped that Heather would appreciate his efforts, but he would take her raw and dirty like the beast he was right below the well-groomed surface.

He spent the morning tidying his apartment and washing his laundry while he watched hockey on TV. It had become one of his new obsessions.

Rex had the bookstore to run with Luna, and Damien and Venus were starting a photography business. All Blake ever talked about was going back to the family land. Felix had become completely enamored with computers and technology. Tate spent most of his time joking around and having fun. He liked to watch funny movies and visited the theater as often as he could.

Thorne, however, had become obsessed with hockey and wanted to learn how to skate. He had no idea where to start, but in this new modern world, he was sure that the answers were just a few clicks away.

After he finished his laundry, he sat down with his phone and searched for information about learning to skate. He found a skating rink nearby in Selkie where they gave adult skating lessons year-round. He thought about going on a skating outing with Heather, wondering if she would like to join him today.

He would ask her after their lunch at River's Bakery, and he hoped she would say yes. An hour later, he was parked outside New Moon Books, wondering if Heather had already arrived. He hadn't talked to Rex since he'd told him off two days ago, and the idea of facing him now was not the most pleasant thing he could think of.

He finally climbed out of the truck, zipping up his thick black sweatshirt. He opened the door of New Moon Books to the gentle sound of the tinkling bell. Luna greeted him from behind the counter.

"Hi, Luna," he said. "Is Heather here?"

"She hasn't gotten here yet. Rex is restocking the herb section."

"Okay. I think I should probably talk to him."



Thorne found Rex replacing the little amber bottles. Thorne cleared his throat and his brother looked up at him from his work.

“I’m sorry about the other day on the phone.”

“This is an adjustment for all of us, Thorne. We all have our individual challenges. Blake is spending more and more of his time in wolf form, and I’m afraid he might just disappear one day and never come back.”

Thorne gritted his teeth, thinking about his younger brother’s inability to accept they’d sold the land. Without the money from the sale of his family’s property, he never could have afforded his truck or his apartment or his sweet-smelling cologne. Thorne needed his new life if he was going to stay sane, but Blake had chosen a different route. A route that Thorne did not agree with.

The doorbell tingled as someone walked in, and Thorne looked around the bookshelves to see Heather wiping her feet at the front door.

His heart burst in his chest and his inner wolf howled. He walked toward her as if in a dream. Everything in his being pulled to her like a magnet. He reached out his hand and she placed hers in his palm. She had accepted his invitation, and his heart swelled.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the backs of her knuckles. Heather gasped and then giggled and blushed as she lowered her hands to her sides. She began to fiddle with her fingers.

“Hi,” she said awkwardly.

“Good to see you,” he said in a low voice. “I’m so glad we could have this time.”

“I suggested we come here because I wanted more information about magic from Luna.”

“What do you need to know?” Luna asked from behind her.

Heather turned to her. “Maybe this is insensitive, but if you know other witches who can do more obvious magic, maybe you could introduce me to them.”

“That would be fine,” Luna said. “Usually, we are forbidden from showing our powers to humans. But since you’re Thorne’s mate, this is a special situation. Thorne never should have told you about the curse until he knew you a little better. I’m sorry if it shocked you.”

“It was a little unnerving,” Heather said, giving another awkward laugh.

“Luna has been a godsend,” Thorne added. “Just like the Doolittles. The people of this town are good.”

He had so much more to say about his gratitude to the people who had helped him and his brothers, but he couldn’t form the words.

“Why don’t we go get some lunch?” Luna said. “Unless you want to buy some books?”

“Can you suggest anything?” Thorne asked Heather.

Heather walked over to the round table near the entrance and picked up a brightly colored hardback with bold text. “I love thrillers. This is by my favorite author. Maybe you’d like it too. I’m reading it right now, so we can talk about it if you want to.”

Thorne took the book from her hand, so glad she’d given him something to connect with her over. And the word “thriller” made it sound like a genre he would like.

He placed the book on the counter and Luna waved him away.

“I’ll just call you over the next time I need some snow shoveled,” she said.

He growled at her softly and took the book.

“I’m not shoveling your snow. Make your mate do it.” He threw \$20 on the counter and Luna laughed, putting it in the register.

“You hear that, Rex? You’re going to have to keep shoveling the snow yourself.”

“I’ve lived in the snow for seventy-five years—I can handle it,” Rex hollered back.

Thorne and Heather walked out onto the sidewalk, and she let out a pent-up giggle.

“You have an odd relationship with your family,” she said.

“We give each other trouble, but we’re closer than any brothers could be. We are a pack. And Luna’s part of it now.”

She looked at him and smiled softly, as if seeing him for the first time.

“That’s the way I feel about my Grandma Pearl and Maggie. They are everything to me.”

He reached out and brushed a stray lock of hair away from her cheek and then pulled his hand away, realizing he’d been too intimate. “I love that you love your family so much. My deepest hope is that someday we can call each other’s family our own.”

Heather let out a long breath and smiled, pursing her lips and wiping her eyes. She looked over at River's Bakery and cocked her head. "Let's go get something to eat. All this talk is making me hungry."

She took his hand and led him through the door. The smell of pastries was tantalizing. They ordered ham and cheese croissants with lettuce and tomato and sliced apple on the side, as well as a pot of tea and two brownies for dessert. They chose a table by the window, looking out onto the street, and a moment later the café worker brought it by their table.

Thorne bit into his sandwich, relishing the subtle savory flavors. The perfect combination gave every simple ingredient more flavor. Eating human food was amazing. After seventy-five years of eating only flesh and blood and bone, a simple ham and cheese sandwich was like heaven.

"I love this place," she said, taking a bite of apple. "I've never been disappointed."

She took a sip of tea from the porcelain cup and smiled as she inhaled the spicy scent. Thorne felt his life flash before his eyes, imagining spending decades sitting across the table from her, enjoying a meal and looking into those big, hazel eyes. The vision was so intense and so real that he had to take a deep breath and sit back in his seat.

He wanted to tell her what he'd seen, what he'd felt, but he could already sense he was moving too fast for her; wanting her too much. Talking about sharing each other's family was not a second-date conversation from what he'd read online about how to start a serious relationship in the modern age. But he didn't care about anything but Heather and winning her heart. Whatever it took, he would do it.

## **Fierce Wolf Chapter 8 - Tips**

Heather gazed at Thorne as the early afternoon sunlight beamed through the big windows in the front of River's Bakery. She sipped her tea, enjoying his company far more than she would have expected.

She realized that Thorne was quite charming, if she got past the fierce exterior. He told her stories about how he and his brothers had run hundreds of miles across the state from the center of Alaska to the coast, where they hid until the full moon and then took a ferry to arrive on Fate Island.

It was a harrowing story, and one she was glad had a happy ending. Luna's potion allowed him to remain a man, and he had been learning about life in the modern world ever since.

"I have my own apartment on the docks with a view of the water. I've discovered I enjoy watching hockey on the television. It is a very entertaining sport. I'd like to play some day."

“You’ve never seen hockey before?”

“I lived deep in the Alaskan wilderness. We didn’t have a hockey team out there. There was very little technology and a sparse population. Our family didn’t own a TV. Living with the Doolittles was the first time I was exposed to it.

“In the years that we were cursed, we took turns going into town to pick up supplies, and sometimes we would stop at restaurants and bars, but we had to conserve what little money we had. It became so difficult that by the end we were starving.”

Heather shook her head in disbelief. Thorne’s story had sounded so crazy to begin with, but now all she could think was how horrific it must’ve been for him and his brothers to live through something like that.

She had finished her sandwich and couldn’t eat the last of the apple because she lost her appetite. Her heart was in her stomach. The logical side of her brain still couldn’t believe that magic was real, but she believed that Thorne had lived this reality. The more she knew him, the less she believed that he could possibly be insane.

“I do want to learn how to ice skate,” he said, popping the last apple in his mouth.

“You don’t know how to skate either?”

“We didn’t own ice skates. When a stream or river was frozen, we used crampons to get across if necessary. Usually, we went around in snowshoes.”

“That makes sense.”

“There’s a skating rink right outside of town, and I wanted to go there to learn to skate today. I would love to go together, if you’d like to.”

“I’m not sure I can. I have to get back to pick up Maggie.”

She looked at her watch. She had told Gran she’d be gone for only two hours, but she also wanted to spend more time with him. She wanted to get to know him better and to make the decision for herself whether he was a suitable man for her and an appropriate addition to Maggie’s life.

She didn’t want to lead him on. Since she was his fated mate, dating him was all or nothing. She had to decide soon, but she also needed to take her own time. Just going out to eat again with him had been a compromise, though, and she thought it was time for her to get back home to think.

“Would you be free tomorrow?” she asked.

"Anytime you are. I don't have a job yet. I spend most of my time folding laundry and watching hockey."

Heather giggled, imagining the scene. "That's good to know. You like to keep your home tidy."

"It is things like that that separate us from animals," he said, his face completely serious.

"It's a good habit to have. Not everyone does."

Heather was beginning to see there was more to Thorne Winter than she'd originally believed. She liked the idea of a man who liked to be tidy and fold laundry. She also appreciated his freshly shaven skin, the slight aroma of spicy cologne, and the effort he put into styling his hair. It all said a great deal about him.

If his story about his cursed life was true, he had made all these decisions in only a few months. She thought about how torturous it must've been for him to be an animal for so long. How hard re-socializing himself as a human must've been. Her empathy for him swelled and she knew from now on it would be hard to think negatively about him. He was trying. Not only with himself, but with her.

"Then it's a date," she said, reaching out to take his hand where it lay on the table. She squeezed him gently and then pulled away. She grabbed her coat and purse as she stood and slid them back on and over her shoulder.

They walked together out of the café and onto the street. Low clouds had rolled in off the ocean and the air felt like rain. He walked her to her car around the corner from the café on a quiet residential street. She grasped her keys in her hand as they faced each other beside her car.

"It was nice to spend time with you," she said, watching the light flicker in his eyes.

"I wish I could say everything I want to say. But I know it's all too much."

"I know this must be hard for you. I can't say I fully understand what you're going through—there's no way that I could—but I'm here now and I'm willing to try to make this work."

She watched his chest swell and his shoulders go back. She felt the sudden urge to kiss him. Her lips parted and her knees felt weak. She stepped toward him, and he wrapped his arm around her waist.

They gazed into each other's eyes, and he slid his other hand up her back and cupped the nape of her neck. She placed her hands on his chest, her lips quivering.

“Thorne, I—” she murmured.

He growled, and his lips crushed against hers. She melted into his embrace, allowing her lips to part and greet his tongue. He made a low rumble in his chest and kissed her more deeply. She quivered and gasped at the intensity. Desire flooded between her legs and her nipples pricked. She mewled sadly as she pulled herself away. Catching her breath, she stepped back and looked up at him, still in his embrace.

“Did I...”

“No. I wanted you to kiss me. I’m glad you did.”

“So am I. So glad.”

She gasped as he pulled her closer again, capturing her mouth in a passionate kiss. She allowed herself to be swept away by it, pulled into the power of his strong arms, feeling the hardness of his body pressed against her softness. Then she thought of all the eyes around her and pulled away again with a giggle.

“I should go,” she said, looking down at the pavement so as not to meet his hungry eyes. She stepped back again and out of his embrace.

“I will see you tomorrow. What time should we meet?” he asked. She looked up at him and looked down at her watch.

“I usually have Sunday dinner at my grandmother’s house, but maybe she wouldn’t mind watching Maggie and having Sunday dinner without me.”

“I don’t want to interrupt your family dinner. I understand how important that can be.”

She thought about bringing Thorne to her Sunday dinner—about having a man in her life to share her love before her Gran passed away. There could be more children, more joy to share. She gasped at the vision of it and her eyes went wide.

“It will be okay just this once,” she said. “Who knows what the future will bring?”

Thorne growled in agreement and nodded his head. She bit her lip and turned away, trotting around the car to the driver’s side door. She climbed inside, willing herself not to look at him. Every instinct in her body was telling her to jump into his arms and throw her legs around his waist while he kissed her and held her in his strong hands.

She turned on the car and put it into drive, giving herself permission to glance in the rearview mirror as she pulled out of her parking space. She watched Thorne for a second as she drove away. His hands fisted his hips. He watched her until she stopped at the stop sign and turned the corner.

She felt breathless all the way back to Gran's house. She hadn't anticipated kissing him. In fact, she had specifically expected not to. The moment had just seemed right, and she didn't regret having done it. It was objectively the best kiss she'd ever had. There wasn't a single thing wrong about the entire experience.

And if the kiss on the corner in the coming rain was that good, she could just imagine how good it would be to go all the way. Heather bit her lip as she turned into Pearl's driveway. She hadn't been with a man in five years. It was hard to imagine doing it at all, let alone with a man like Thorne. She blinked several times and climbed out of the car.

She had to focus on the here and now. Getting so absorbed in the kiss and a fantasy of what could come next wouldn't help her make a rational decision about her relationship with Thorne. She needed to talk to Gran about it and get some perspective.

Gran and Maggie were on the back porch watching whales out on the horizon through binoculars. It had started to rain and water droplets fell rhythmically on the metal roof over the porch.

"How was it?" Pearl asked, looking Heather up and down as if she could see the excitement in her without her having to say a word.

"Better than I expected," Heather said, her voice betraying her enthusiasm.

"Why don't you tell me about it over some tea?"

The three went into the house and Maggie settled into the big, fluffy couch with a picture book and some toys while Heather and Pearl went into the kitchen for privacy. Heather sat at the table while Pearl started the kettle.

"What do you mean, better than you expected?" Pearl poured hot water into two mugs.

"He's really quite charming."

Pearl grabbed cream and sugar and set them on the table. Heather poured cream into her tea and took a sip.

"Charming?" Pearl asked.

"He's a good man. He told me the story of his brothers' journey from their family's land in central Alaska to Fate Island. They suffered a great deal in the many decades they were cursed."

"And you believe he's telling the truth?"

"It's a very detailed story," she said.

“He could have made it up.”

“Thorne doesn’t seem like that kind of person. He’s in love with hockey and likes to keep his home tidy. He came freshly shaven and smelling divine.”

“I suppose those are good qualities, but his story is still wholly unbelievable. Maybe he read it in a novel.”

“I suppose that’s possible. We made another date for tomorrow night at six. I was hoping you could watch Maggie again. I need to know for sure whether Thorne is a man who can be part of my family. I can’t lead him on, but I need to make a good decision.”

“That sounds wise of you, Heather. And I will watch Maggie for you. I think that you know your own mind and you can see things clearly. If his story about magic and curses is true, then that makes a big difference, don’t you think?”

“It does. Luna Linwood from New Moon Books offered to introduce me to witches who can do more obvious magic like fire spells and such.”

“Interesting. Very interesting.”

## **Fierce Wolf Chapter 9 - Tips**

Thorne was too full of energy to return home. He started walking down the street away from the bakery as the coming rain rolled in off the water. He was wearing nothing but a hooded sweatshirt and waterproof sneakers to protect him from the coming storm. He didn’t know where he was going or what he was doing.

He had kissed his mate for the very first time, and it had sent his mind into a tailspin. His wolf growled to come out, and Thorne took another dose of potion. He would stay a man. He would be who Heather needed him to be. He wouldn’t allow his animal to dictate his life anymore. He deserved to live, he deserved to love, he deserved the family he’d only dreamed about for so long.

When the sky finally opened and poured down on him, he was high on a hill in a quaint neighborhood. He heard children screech and run indoors as the first heavy raindrops fell from the sky. He pulled his hood up over his head and plunged his hands into the pockets of his sweatshirt.

He continued walking, charging up the street, going nowhere as fast as he could. His mind ran in a million different directions, fragmenting and jumping down different thought lines.

He didn’t know who he was or what he was supposed to do. His new identity as a human being living on his own, apart from his brothers—his cologne and his hockey, they were all so new.



The truth was that Thorne was an animal. He knew that he couldn't deny who he'd been. He ran his hand over his face, wiping away the water. He sniffed the wet air and broke into a jog. He had to bring his wolf into this body. He had to remember what it had been to run free in the wild, to hunt his prey and sleep on the cold forest floor or the rock of the cave.

He wanted his body to feel his wolf as his human legs pumped and flexed. His lungs expanded and contracted, filling with the cool, wet air. He made it to the top of the hill on the corner of the street before it dead ended into a cul-de-sac. There, he stopped and caught his breath.

He had charged several miles at top speed up the hill and his body burned with adrenaline. It felt good. Very good. The best he had felt in a long time.

As he started a jog back down the hill, the parts of himself he'd been trying to separate began to merge into one.

He knew he shouldn't be ashamed of the animal inside him. He should allow it to drive him to become a better man—who could reach his full potential.

He was soaking wet when he reached the car and was glad he'd gone for leather seats when he slid inside. Back at home, he wiped his plush new seats with a hand towel from the back seat and closed the door. It felt good to take care of his things. To take care of himself.

He returned to his apartment and started a hot shower. Bathing had become one of his favorite things, and he thought about finally sharing the experience with his mate. The vision of her filled his mind and he felt her again in his arms, her soft curves pressed against him. His manhood flexed and rose. He growled deep in his throat as he grasped himself.

He stroked his thick length, fist pumping. He imagined kissing her lips, tasting her tongue, stroking her tight breasts. Her thick thighs spread before him, the pink folds of her pussy open and moist.

In his mind, he thrust into her, and she arched her back with a needy groan. He split her open and her juices poured around his dick.

"Take me, my love. I'm yours," she moaned and licked his ear.

He came in a blinding flash of heat, semen gushing in a torrent against the shower wall. His mouth dropped open with release and he gasped, still feeling her in his arms. In his imagination, she kissed his cheek, his neck, and fell into his arms, his seed buried deep inside her. She stroked his chest and told him a thousand ways how she loved him.

Thorne let out a light sob as he washed away the last of his sweat and seed. When he stepped out of the shower, he felt renewed. He wanted to talk to her, to tell her how much he wanted her and what he wanted to do to her body. How he wanted to kiss her and fuck her and make her come in a thousand ways.

He sat on the couch in his bathrobe and picked up his new tablet. He wondered if there were any hockey teams he could join in the area. Very quickly, he found that there was a college team at the university where Heather worked. He bit his lip, wondering if he should go to school.

College had always been Felix's dream. Thorne had wanted to spend his life hunting and fishing and making babies with a beautiful woman. He still wanted the same things, but he knew that he needed a purpose and a profession.

Playing professional hockey would take him away from Heather, and he didn't want that. He started researching the catalog, trying to find some field of study that seemed interesting. There was a degree in game and wildlife management, and Thorne's eyes widened with interest.

He had been an avid hunter even before the curse had made him a wolf. He had a deep respect and bond with the prey and the other predators that roamed the wilds.

He read the additional information available on the website about the degree and decided that he would discuss it with Heather tomorrow night. He picked up his phone and sent her a text message.

"Do you want to go to dinner after skating tomorrow?" he asked.

"I'd love that," Heather said.

Thorne let out a deep, happy sigh. He hoped that after dinner they could come back to his place and enjoy each other's company in a more intimate environment. He found a fine dining seafood restaurant not far from his apartment.

The air would be clear and warm tomorrow night, so they could walk. He rubbed his chin and wondered if he was being too sly about everything. But if she came back to his apartment and didn't want to kiss him, it would be just as enchanting to spend time with her watching something on TV.

Rebecca had told him that many women enjoyed romance and comedy, but Heather said she liked to read thrillers. That's when he remembered the book that she'd recommended and grabbed it out of the bag on the kitchen counter.

Thorne spent the rest of the day reading on his couch, wearing a set of silky sweats and fluffy socks. He thumbed through the pages, his heart racing with each plot twist. He certainly enjoyed Heather's taste in fiction.

He had a light dinner of steak and carrots and went to sleep feeling hopeful and calm. He dreamed he was in his wolf form, running through the forest. He smelled the scent of prey on the air and charged into the underbrush. It was a doe, and she fled as he and his brothers gave chase.

Saliva dripped from his fangs and the bloodlust surged within him. They caught the doe and pulled her to the ground. He snapped her neck with his strong jaws and blood ran over his tongue. When he stood back, ready to take the next bite, the body that lay there was Heather's. She stared up in shock as her brothers devoured her soft, tender flesh.

Thorne gasped as he sat up in bed, his heart racing. He was still human, as the potion hadn't worn off yet. Adrenaline surged in his blood. He jumped to his feet and paced the room. He couldn't believe what he had just seen. The grotesque guilt sat heavy in his stomach.

He could still taste her blood on his tongue. How could he bring his damage into her beautiful life? No matter how many books they read in common, no matter how many pleasant lunches they had at the café, he was still a vicious killer at heart. How would he ever be anything else to her?

It was two in the morning, but Thorne couldn't go back to sleep. He spent the next two hours doing calisthenics. Hundreds of push-ups and sit-ups and squats. He even taught himself to do a handstand against the wall in his bedroom.

When he was done, his body was aching, but it felt so good. He was calm again and ready to face his day. Tonight could make or break the rest of his life. He had to be the best he could be for the woman of his dreams.

## **Fierce Wolf Chapter 10 - Tips**

"Are you ready?" the text read on Heather's phone.

It had come from an unknown number, and she squinted at the text, trying to decipher if it was spam selling energy pills or cryptocurrency.

"Sorry, this is Luna. LOL."

"Oh. Hi Luna," she typed. "Ready for what?"

"Ready to meet the coven?"

"Do you really call yourselves a coven?"

"A bit too on the nose? LOL."

“Maybe a bit. But who am I to judge? When can I meet them?”

“How soon can you come over?”

“Can I bring my daughter?”

“If you want her to know magic is real. To be honest, we have policies about showing humans our powers. It’s a whole thing. But since you are Thorne’s mate, we can make an exception.”

“I told my grandmother already.”

There was a long pause where there was no activity in the chat bar. Heather bit her lip, thinking she’d really screwed up already. Or maybe they didn’t want anyone to know because they needed to brainwash people into a cult to convince them it was real. She’d heard about that sort of thing in college. Luna didn’t seem to be the cult type. But who did, really?

“That’s fine. Just don’t share it with anyone else outside your closest family.”

“I can do that. I’ll be over in about half an hour with my four-year-old, Maggie.”

“See you then!”

Heather clicked off her phone and sighed, sliding it into her back pocket. She had been washing the breakfast dishes before she’d heard the phone notification. There were only a few more dishes to wash and rinse before she was done. She finished up her chore and went to find Maggie in the living room watching cartoons on TV.

“Do you want to go for a drive? We’re going to meet some new friends.”

“Yay!” Maggie said, her curls bouncing. She jumped to her feet and ran to the front door to grab her boots.

Heather helped her daughter lace and tie her shoes before sliding her arms into her coat and zipping it up. When they were both warm and ready, they hurried outside to the car.

With Maggie buckled in her car seat, she started off through town toward New Moon Books. Anxiety played with her brain and her heart thumped in her chest. What was she walking into? Maybe she should have left Maggie with Gran. But she was already asking Gran to watch her for so many extra hours so she could spend time with Thorne—it didn’t seem right to ask her for even more. Besides, they were just going over to a local bookstore she’d been to a million times before.

After Luna showed them whatever she had to show, she'd take Maggie for a quick bite at River's Bakery, get a coffee and go across the street to the park. There was a nice little playground there that they hadn't been to in a while. It was important for her to maintain quality time with her child, especially now that dating was taking even more of her already stretched time.

She parked in front of New Moon Books and helped Maggie out of the car. She could see through the front windows of the bookstore that it was full of a bunch of people milling around. It still wasn't tourist season, so she had to assume the crowd was the so-called coven.

Heather took Maggie's hand and they walked into the bookstore. As soon as Luna saw them, she squealed with delight and trotted over to them, her long blonde hair bouncing around her shoulders.

"Heather. I'm so glad you've come. And this must be Maggie! What a beauty you are."

"Hi," Maggie said with a shy smile.

"I'm Luna. This is my shop. Guess what?"

"What?" Maggie asked.

"I'm going to have a baby this winter. And I hope she's half as pretty as you."

Luna smiled up at Heather as she stood to her full height.

"Congratulations," Heather said, taken off guard.

She felt a pang of jealousy. Luna seemed so happy, so content. All the things Heather had believed herself to be until a few days ago, before joining mate.com and meeting Thorne.

She knew that she wanted love in her life. She wanted a bigger family, more children, and a man to share all the joy with. If she could just settle this big gnawing question, she might be able to allow herself to move forward with the fierce wolf she was slowly falling for.

"We have an amazing selection of children's books. Would you like to see them?"

Maggie nodded her head in agreement and Luna reached out to take her hand.

"Is it okay?" she asked Heather.

“Yes. Good idea.”

Luna led Maggie to a brightly colored corner with a few toys, a rocking chair and some bean bags, hemmed in by an L-shaped bookshelf full of picture books.

“I just got this one in. It’s about a little girl almost as cute as you.” Luna handed the book to Maggie, who settled into the beanbag to read it.

“Will you be okay here for a few minutes?” Heather asked her daughter.

“Mm-hm.” Maggie nodded.

Heather turned to Luna with expectation in her eyes. “Okay. Show me what you’ve got.”

“Come.”

This time Luna took Heather’s hand and led her back into the main section of the bookstore. The rest of the people, who she hadn’t really had a chance to take in yet, were gathered around the round table right inside the front door. It was covered with the latest hardback bestsellers.

Heather took in the crowd. They spanned all ages, races and genders, each remarkable in their own way. There was an elderly lady in a wheelchair flanked by a beautiful brunette woman and a tall, native American man with long brown hair, broad shoulders and graceful eyes.

The group closed their eyes, and the old lady began to chant softly below her breath. The others started the same chant, including Luna. Heather felt like she was watching something out of a bad TV show and narrowed her eyes at the strange behavior.

Suddenly, the table in the center of their circle began to rise slowly off the floor. Heather gasped and took a step back, bumping into a bookshelf. It sent several paperbacks tumbling onto the ground.

“What the…” Heather gasped.

The table began to rise higher as the pace of the chant increased. Finally, the table came back down with a clatter and some of the books fell to the floor. Heather shrieked and Maggie came trotting over.

“What happened?” she asked, tugging on her mother’s hand. Heather picked her up and rested her on her hip, rubbing the child’s back for comfort.

“It was nothing, sweetie. Why don’t you go finish your book while I help Luna?”

“Okay, Mommy.”

Maggie slid down to her feet and toddled back to her beanbag around the corner.

"That was quite the display," she said, bending over to pick up James Patterson's latest thriller. She placed the book on the table and then bent down to inspect the table, checking it for wires or strings. She waved her hand around and over the table, finding nothing.

"We have one more for you," Luna said, as an old Asian man walked toward her, his eyes bright with inner fire. He held a piece of newspaper between his hands.

"Look," was all he said, showing her the paper.

She saw the concentration and effort running through his form and down his arms and through his eyes. A stream of smoke came from the newspaper. Her eyes widened. Without warning, the paper burst into flames, turned to ash and disappeared.

"Oh my God," she said, gasping for breath and backing into the same bookshelf for the second time.

"I'm afraid that's all we've got for you today," Luna said, giving the coven a sly smile.

"I have no idea what to say." Heather stumbled over her words.

"If that doesn't convince you, I'm not sure what will."

"Mommy, can we get a donut?" Maggie asked, walking around the corner.

"Sure, sweetie. Do you want to buy that book?"

"Yes!" Maggie bounced on her feet and ran back to get the book for her mother to purchase.

As they headed out of the store, Heather was still not sure what she'd just seen. It could have all been sleight of hand. Some kind of magic trick like on TV. The whole point of those tricks was that they distracted you so you couldn't figure out how it worked.

She thought of all the people in that room. The old woman in the wheelchair, the old man with the newspaper. They didn't seem like typical stage magicians from Las Vegas. They all seemed as genuine as Luna. It was hard to believe any of those people were purposefully tricking her. And why would they want to?

She and Maggie walked into the bakery and up to the counter where they ordered blueberry muffins, a smoothie for Maggie, and a latte for Heather.

They took a seat by the window and looked outside at the brightening day. Maggie was overjoyed to have an outing with her mom and raved about the muffin. Heather had to

admit, the muffin was delicious. She sipped her coffee, enjoying the bitter, creamy flavor, thinking about what had just transpired next door.

What exactly had she seen? Was it really magic or just a trick? She still didn't know. So how was she supposed to decide if Thorne was telling the truth or not?

She took another sip of coffee and watched her daughter enthusiastically devour her treat. Sunlight streamed through the window and over their table. It warmed her face and hands, making her feel relaxed.

She had to decide what she was going to do about Thorne. She had to get her mind in order to make a good decision. The truth was, she had no logical explanation as to why he or Luna or anyone else would go out of their way to fool her into believing any of this.

Mate.com had such a solid reputation, she had to believe that Thorne was truly her mate. Given that reality, she also had to give him the benefit of the doubt in everything else. Having a shifter fated mate was a big deal. It meant something. Even for a human. Humans didn't have the kind of instinct that shifters had, but most of them had the same desire to have a happily ever after with the perfect person. She knew she did.

After they were finished eating their snack, she took Maggie across the street to the park to play at the playground. There was a wonderfully maintained jungle gym and children from the ages of one to twelve were playing happily on the equipment while their mothers looked on.

She pushed Maggie on a swing, loving the sound of her daughter's squeals of delight as she kicked her legs and tried to reach the sky. She thought about what it would be like to bring Thorne on one of their little outings.

At first it seemed like it would be ridiculous, but the more she fantasized about having him here with her and Maggie, the more perfect it seemed. He might have a rough exterior but that was only skin deep. Underneath his fierceness was a man who took care of himself and his home. A man who was open to new things. A man who wanted nothing more than to take care of her and to love her. How could any of that be wrong?

Heather decided then and there that she would allow Thorne into her heart. She'd believe the things he told her about his life and stop questioning everything. She wanted to protect her daughter but walling herself off from love wasn't the way to go about doing it.