

## Lost Wolf Chapter 3 - Tips

Blake stepped off the bus in Trapper's Landing in front of the shack that passed for a bar. Across the street was a tinier shack that passed for a gas station.

He'd been to Trapper's Landing on hundreds of occasions over the decades. It had barely changed in all that time.

Blake hefted his backpack over his shoulders and strapped on his snowshoes. He had a long walk to his cave, but he had all the supplies he needed.

Once he got to the cave, he'd have time to get the lay of the land and decide how to approach the Snow Queen.

This was the time of year when the snow flower bloomed, and she would emerge soon to harvest and eat it.

The year he'd been cursed, there was a terrible storm. His mother was deathly ill, and it was impossible to get her to a doctor. The only solution was to climb the mountain and steal the magical flower to save her life.

He and his brothers had barely made it up the mountain alive. When the Snow Queen caught them in her ice garden, she cursed them, destroyed their homes, and killed their mother. Anger blazed in his chest at the memory.

He walked for ten miles along the narrow highway that led to his parents' land. Only three cars passed in all that time.

When he arrived at the turn off to the property, he balanced his backpack straps and took a deep breath.

It was a long trek through the wilderness to the homestead, but he was prepared for the walk. He could run much faster as a wolf, but he had no adequate way to carry his supplies. Wearing them on his human shoulders was the only option.

He walked another ten miles along the overgrown dirt road. It was late afternoon, and he hadn't eaten since leaving Anchorage that morning.

His backpack grew heavier with each passing mile. He would have to stop soon because it was better to set up camp while it was still light.

There were dangerous creatures in the woods. Not that Blake was worried he couldn't take them on—he was much stronger than a regular wolf—but he hadn't felt the weight of his lone wolf status so much until that moment.

Blake found a place near a half-frozen stream and set up his tent. He scavenged for firewood, and then soon had a fire blazing near the entrance to his tent. It radiated heat into his body and hands.

Blake pulled his phone out of his backpack, thinking of his brothers. They still hadn't contacted him when he'd left Anchorage. He turned on his phone, knowing he wouldn't get cell reception.

He'd bought a solar cell for charging his electronics so he could document his journey. If something happened to him, at least there would be a record of these last days.

He cooked dehydrated food in a pot over the fire. When it was done, he ate the reconstituted chicken alfredo and stared into the flames.

It was eerie to be home, knowing someone else now owned it all.

A strange fog descended over the land as the night fell. A great horned owl hooted in a snow-covered black spruce tree. Blake opened his travel log and wrote about the bizarre sensation surrounding him in the gathering fog.

I just can't help but feel like I'm walking into something monumental. Like it's the most epic moment of my life.

Blake needed to sleep to get a good start in the morning. He would wake before dawn and walk the many miles to the homestead. He put out the fire, zipped himself up in the tent, and settled into his sleeping bag for the night.

When Blake's alarm went off in the morning, he woke, growled and stretched. He climbed out of his sleeping bag, strapped on his boots, and stepped out into the predawn haze.

He fixed himself a cup of coffee and treasured the flavor and pleasant buzz, knowing that, little by little, the comforts of civilization would slip away.

He packed up his camp, buckled his snowshoes, and slung his backpack over his shoulder. Trekking off into the snowy forest again, Blake's mind turned to happier times, before he and his brothers had been cursed to their wolf forms.

They were men then, ready to find their fated mates and start families on the homestead.

Rex had been looking for his mate for the longest time. He often went into Trapper's Landing to sniff out the scents.

Finding a mate had been much harder then. Rex had even gone to Anchorage but had no luck. Back then, humans didn't even know shifters existed.

Blake hadn't known dragons existed until he'd moved to Fate Island. The first dragon he'd ever seen had been his 78% match on matedotcom. It had completely floored him. He'd had to get an explanation from Patrick Doolittle. Dragons had come out to the public less than a decade ago, but more dragons were making themselves known all the time.

Blake hiked through the woods and familiar landmarks became more frequent. Dark gray slate formations jutted up from the ground, covered in snow. A bald eagle screeched from the top of a giant black spruce.

Blake's steps became a rhythmic march as he pounded out the miles to his home.

He stopped to eat at midday, resting with his backpack against the bare trunk of a bald aspen. He ate a protein bar and drank sips of water.

He could hunt for much better food, but Blake was reluctant to shift until he was closer to his home territory.

Blake grew more nervous as the day wore on. He stopped in his tracks when he came to the ruins of his mother's home.

The Snow Queen had thrown ice spikes that froze and shattered the logs into dust. Small sections of the house still stood as a testament to what had happened there.

Blake looked away. The memory of his mother's death was still fresh in his heart.

He was getting closer to the cave now. The land was vast, but the buildings of the homestead had been clustered close together.

He and his brothers had built their own houses as they moved out of their parent's place, one by one.

He and Damian had been sharing a home when their father was killed in an avalanche.

So much tragedy had befallen his family, and Blake had felt surrounded by a gray cloud ever since. That would end now.

He started to walk away from his mother's house when he heard his cellphone ding with a notification. Blake squinted in the dusky afternoon haze. It started to snow.

Did his cellphone just buzz? He thought about unpacking the phone and checking, but there was no way there was cell reception all the way out here.

It must have been something automated from an offline app. He'd check it when he bedded down for the night.

He continued walking, and several more notification noises buzzed from his phone.

Confused, Blake stopped, unstrapped his backpack, slid it down to the ground, and dug into an inside pocket for his phone. He almost fainted when he read the message on the screen.

“Congratulations. We’ve found your fated mate.”

He fell to his knees in the packed snow as misty flakes swirled around him. His hands trembled. What was happening? How was this possible?

He tapped the screen with a gloved finger, bringing up her profile.

Princess.

Her profile name was Princess. She had a perfect oval face. Warm tan skin and enchanting almond-shaped brown eyes. Her sleek black hair hung long around her shoulders. She had a strong jaw and rosy red cheeks.

In her single photograph, she wore a simple dark-colored suit jacket and a white shirt underneath. He felt she was more suited to a royal regalia.

He rubbed his eyes, too stunned to believe what he saw before him.

Princess. Mate.

His inner wolf growled. This was not part of Blake’s plan. A beauty like hers was worth a thousand lives and deaths.

He pulled himself out of the snow and attempted to glean as much information as possible from her sparse profile. There was a single stunning photograph and a generic bio about long walks on the beach.

There weren’t many beaches around here. Unless you counted the frozen lake in the basin under the mountain.

He was in a daze as he pulled his backpack over his shoulders. He had to keep moving. There was nothing else he could do.

Blake’s thoughts whirled around him like the weightless snow that seemed to cling to the air as he walked. He made it to the foot of the mountain where a well-worn trail led up to the cave.

The snow thickened like soup, making it hard for him to see more than a few feet in front of his face. It clung to his clothes and cheeks.

Blake pulled a scarf up over his mouth and nose to keep his face warm. His human body could not withstand the cold as readily as his fur-insulated wolf form.

The cold now seemed to sink into his skin, reminding him of its dominance. When he made it to the cave, he was relieved to get out of the clinging, wet snow.

He collapsed against the wall, looking into the gloom, and his eyes adjusted to the darkness.

Everything was still where they'd left it months ago. The straw bedding and furs. The fire pit and pile of logs against the far wall. Ready and waiting for his return.

Blake pitched his tent inside the rock cave, allowing him to stay out of the worst of the weather. He built a fire in the well-used pit, sat on a pile of dusty pelts, and warmed his hands over the flames.

Blake was home.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He wasn't sure how to feel now. Everything had turned upside down when he'd received that notification on his phone.

After unpacking his equipment, he boiled water for coffee, and checked his phone. He had been too stunned to consider responding to Princess when he'd found the notification. Now that he was settled into his camp, smelling the scent of coffee brewing in his cup, he wanted to contact her.

But he knew that the moment he did, there was no going back. If he never reached out to her, it would never go any further than this.

He would be happy just having seen her beautiful face. He could take that with him until the end of his life. Which could be soon if he was unable to defeat the Snow Queen.

Blake had no reason to believe he could defeat her. What mattered to him was trying. Rex had given up so many decades ago. But during all that time, Blake had been waiting.

Rex would never try to take the flower a second time. He'd blasted Blake with so much alpha power the one time he'd mentioned it, Blake had never brought it up again.

But Blake had many questions, and he wanted answers.

What would happen to the Snow Queen if she didn't eat the flower? Would she be weakened if she didn't receive her yearly dose? Would she die?