

Chapter Two

Garrett

“I am so sorry,” she gasps. “Let me just —”

Her full pink lips open and close as she stares at my chest in horror. The coffee has already soaked through my shirt, but I don’t care. I’m too busy staring at the angel before me.

Her straight dark hair is pulled back into a careless ponytail, but a few silky wisps have fallen down to frame her heart-shaped face. She’s petite — her head only comes up to my chest — and she’s got this cute little beauty mark beside her mouth that I have the insane urge to bend down and kiss.

I blame the absinthe — both for the splitting headache and the weird impulse to kiss a stranger.

I inhale deeply, but an industrial citrus fragrance is suffocating the woman’s natural scent and aggravating my hangover. The chemical concoction makes my wolf recoil, but underneath all that, I catch the faintest whiff of sweet vanilla that seems to ease some of the tension throbbing behind my temples.

Suddenly, all the smells and sounds of the coffee shop that my animal usually finds overwhelming seem to fade into the background. All of my heightened shifter senses zero in on her.

There’s a plastic name tag pinned to the top of her apron — Ava.

I avert my gaze so she doesn’t think I’m staring at her breasts, though I can’t help appreciate the soft curves hidden beneath the green polyester.

This close, I can hear her heart pounding as her big green eyes dart from my shirt to my watch to my shoes — obviously calculating my net worth in her head while simultaneously calculating her odds of getting fired.

My immediate instinct is to reassure her, but I can’t seem to form a reply. A single thought is pinging around in my head on repeat.

My mate.

My mate.

Mine.

I shake my head to try to clear it, but Ava is pulling a fistful of napkins out of her apron pocket, awkwardly attempting to pat my shirt clean.

I snort as she fumbles to sop up the mess and instantly regret it. Her brow is furrowed with anxiety, and when she presses her lips together, I can see she's trying not to cry.

"It's okay," I say quickly, my voice coming out oddly strangled.

"No. I wasn't looking where I was going, and —"

"Miss!" An angry little man in a hideous argyle sweater comes storming up to my girl, and I have to resist the urge to body-check him for getting too close to her. "Is that my drink?"

Ava's bottom lip wobbles, and a low snarl rumbles up my throat. My wolf hates seeing her upset, and he's ready to rip this guy apart.

"I-I'll make you another one right away," she stammers, dropping her gaze as she blinks back tears.

My heart aches for her, and my wolf's growls intensify.

"Ugh. Forget it," the man snaps. "The incompetence in this place —"

"Excuse me," comes another voice — a high-pitched female one. "We've been waiting forever."

I whip around to see two tween girls standing at the counter, glaring at Ava. I can hear my girl's heart rate ratcheting up a notch — sense her overwhelming panic and embarrassment — and something inside me snaps.

"Why don't you fuck the fuck off?" I growl at the man in the ugly argyle sweater.

The man blinks at me, and I can see his furious little mind working to make sense of what just happened. He isn't used to being spoken to like that.

See, there are two types of people in Aspen — people with money and people with fuck-you money. This guy might be loaded — loaded enough to make him accustomed to being an asshole — but he doesn't have my net worth.

I'm talking lose-nine-mil-in-a-poker-game kind of money.

Private-island-in-the-Bahamas money.

Lighting-cars-on-fire-for-fun money.

The man's face scrunches in an expression that says he's about to let me have it, but then he studies my face some more. He's trying to decide if he recognizes me.

I'm sure he does, but I got so shit-house wasted last night that I'm probably giving more crashed-daddy's-yacht vibes than billionaire-oil-money vibes this morning.

"You heard me," I say, louder this time. "Fuck — off."

The man jerks his head back and blinks at me, and I see Ava straighten up ever so slightly. Her bottom lip is still trembling, but my flagrant rudeness seems to have given her the time she needed to pull herself together.

"Can you make it or not?" whines one of the annoying tweens, brandishing a bejeweled smartphone.

"Shouldn't you two be in school?" I yell, causing the girls to look around in embarrassment.

"It's spring break," the one with the phone mumbles.

"Then get back to daycare," I snarl.

The girls exchange an incredulous look, and I can see the two of them making the same mental calculations as the little man in the sweater.

If I were anyone else, they'd probably give me some middle-school mean girl shit right back, but even humans can sense the powerful alpha-wolf vibes I'm putting off, and it's making them uneasy.

Finally, the two roll their eyes and slouch out of the café, and I hear a tiny sigh escape Ava.

"I'm Garrett," I say, redirecting my attention to the gorgeous creature in front of me.

"I'm really sorry about your shirt," she bursts out, her cheeks flushing the most adorable shade of pink.

I scrunch up one eye, which does something to relieve my pounding headache. "That's an unusual name."

Her eyes dart back and forth in confusion, and then she breaks into a smile that hits me like a punch to the chest. A feeling like warm sunshine floods my insides, and I swear that if this feeling were some drug I could do lines of, I'd be an honest-to-god junkie.

"Ava." She chokes out her name with a laugh.

"It's nice to meet you, Ava." I glance down at my ruined shirt and grimace. "Uh, you'll have to excuse me . . . I don't normally leave the house like this."

She presses her lips together and smiles shyly, and that glowy feeling in my chest intensifies.

Mine.

My wolf growls the word with such intensity that it rocks me.

I've done a lot of stupid shit in my life, but I'm smart enough to listen to my wolf. My animal is never wrong.

"Ava!" growls a guy from behind the counter. "Some help?"

A flustered look comes over Ava as she crashes back to reality. I open my mouth to say something — anything — but she just smiles and scurries back to her post behind the counter.

I watch her go with an unfamiliar ache in my chest.

My girl.

My mate.

Mine.



I'm still floating on a cloud as I drive back to my family's chalet, which is tucked along the side of the mountain. It's just a short jaunt from The Ponderosa, the exclusive billionaires-only club my family and I have belonged to for over a century.

The giant granite-faced structure looms from the evergreens like some medieval fortress of doom. It's ski in, ski out — naturally — and the place where dreams go to die.

I pull up in the circle drive and get out of the car, taking a moment to breathe in the cold mountain air before I enter the suffocating vortex that is the Von Horton family abode. The musical sound of Ava's laughter rings in my ears, and I can still smell her sweet vanilla scent.

Maybe I'm still a little drunk, because I can't seem to think straight. My every instinct was to plant myself at a table in that café and stay there until her shift ended, but I didn't want to come across as a creepy stalker, so I resolved to go back tomorrow and ask her out on a date.

Part of me — the wolf part — has already decided that Ava is mine. The other half — the rational human side — knows I still have to convince her. Woo her or whatever.

It's a foreign concept to me, though not an unwelcome one. As the son of a billionaire oil tycoon and the alpha of the Burnt Mountain pack, I'm not used to having to pursue anything. I'm actually looking forward to the challenge.

The second I walk through the door, Henry appears to take my coat. Our long-time man servant takes rapid-fire inventory of my ruined shirt and shoes but says nothing.

Henry was with our family through my sloppy drunken teens and early twenties. He's discreetly ushered my one-night stands out the door at indecent hours of the morning and scraped my dried puke off the tile enough times that a little spilled coffee doesn't faze him.

"Good day, sir," he says with a polite incline of his head.

"You know, Henry, it really is." I beam and give the old man a slap on the back as I stride through the foyer.

"What's got you in such a good mood?" drawls an annoyed voice from the drawing room.

Squinting through the gloom, I see the shadowy form of my sister Hyacinthe reclined on the antique settee, looking like some miserable Victorian lady in her long silk robe. The shades are all drawn against the anemic morning sunlight, which tells me that she, too, is hungover.

"Oh, you know," I say, bouncing on the balls of my feet. "It's just a beautiful day, don't you think?"

Hyacinthe makes a disgusted noise in the back of her throat, and I hear the telltale rattle of a pill bottle. She jerks her head back as she dry-swallows something and replaces the little eye pillow that's slipped down her bony cheeks. "Father called and asked for you," she mutters.

I freeze. I might be forced to breathe the same air as my siblings when they come to Aspen, but my family and I generally avoid one another.

"What did he want?" I ask, the tightness in my voice betraying my nerves.

Hyacinthe lets out a low evil chuckle. "You know, I didn't ask. I just told him you were out gambling away your inheritance and besmirching the Von Horton name. Should I not have told him that?"

"Hyacinthe . . ." I growl, throwing a little alpha intimidation into my voice.

My sister's mouth twists in a cruel expression. "I'm sorry. Are you worried he might decide to cut you out of his will?"

I roll my eyes and turn to go, but then my brother Anders breezes in. “Oh, if it isn’t the walking cliché himself,” he drones, pulling a half-amused, half-constipated smile. “Some people are so poor, all they have is money.”

I flash Anders a warning look as my wolf rises to the surface.

Anders smirks. My older brother has always been adept at pushing my buttons, and he knows I won’t kill him because we’re related.

It’s annoying as fuck.

My position as alpha compels my siblings to obey me on pack matters, but they still strut around this house as if they own the place. I know they’re all just waiting for the day I do something really stupid. They think that if I piss off my father enough, he might install one of them as CEO instead.

It’s not going to happen.

My father is a shifter, too, and he enjoys the power his alpha son affords him too much to disown me. It’s a depressing thought.

I don’t want to be CEO, but I also don’t want to give any of my siblings the power that comes with controlling the Von Horton fortune. Just the thought of Hyacinthe dangling my allowance in front of me like a scrap of meat is enough to raise my hackles.

But then I remember Ava’s smile, and my wolf settles inside of me. The mere memory of her emerald eyes and musical laughter fills me with a sense of calm.

Anders gives me a strange look, but I pull a placid smile and stride past him toward the stairs, replaying my interaction with the cute barista over and over again.