

Chapter Five

Ava

I awake with a foreign soreness between my legs. It's a dull, pleasant kind of ache, and it's not one I've ever felt before.

My mouth is dry, and my temples are throbbing, but the hangover isn't bothering me. I'm warm and naked and pressed up against —

Oh!

Heart thudding, I peel my eyes open as the memories come crashing back to me. Muted morning sunlight is filtering in through the floor-to-ceiling windows, illuminating the soft gray color scheme of Garrett's bedroom.

His arm is locked possessively around my waist, and the hard bar of his erection is pressed against my back.

I smile as I remember the tender way Garrett touched me when he took my virginity, and the ache between my legs takes on a sweet new meaning.

I'm no longer a virgin.

Replaying the previous night, it all feels like an incredible dream. Garrett striding toward me at the nightclub and kissing me in front of everyone. Garrett giving me a mind-blowing orgasm and then laying me down on his bed and making love to me.

The mere memory sends a fresh gush of heat surging between my legs. My skin feels suddenly much too hot, and I have to stop my treacherous hips from grinding against his erection.

My body is aching for a repeat of last night, and yet I can't shake the sinking feeling in my gut.

In two weeks, ski season will be over, and my lease will be up. I'll leave Aspen and move to Denver, where a friend of a friend set me up with a well-paying waitressing job. I'll find something else when I get there, and after that, I leave for Asia.

I have every week of my life planned perfectly leading up to September first, when I board the plane for Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. All my classes will be over. I'll finally have my diploma. There'll be nothing holding me here.

Up until this moment, I'd been prepared to make a clean break. But my feelings for Garrett complicate things.

I still don't even know his last name, but after our night together, I know that if he asked me to stay, I would.

I would stay despite the years of hard work that have brought me to this point.

I would stay despite all the disgusting toilets I've had to clean to be able to afford this trip.

I would stay, even though traveling the globe has been my dream ever since I was a little girl.

My mom let a man derail everything she'd ever worked for. She dropped out of college and gave up her dream of becoming a marine biologist so she could afford to take care of me.

We've both worked too hard and sacrificed too much to throw it all away.

Carefully peeling Garrett's arm off me, I slip out of bed and cast around for my clothes. I find my borrowed dress lying in a heap on the carpet, inside out from when Garrett peeled it off my body. I turn it right side out and shimmy into it, picking my underwear and heels off the floor.

Pulling up the ride-share app on my phone, I request a ride and slip quietly out of Garrett's room. Sunlight is casting down the hardwood floor from a window at the very end of the hall, and I realize I didn't get a good look at his place last night.

The walls are lined with what appear to be original works of art. Thick wool rugs cover the hardwood floors, and an antique vase accents the spindly little table at the top of the staircase.

Leaving my shoes off to avoid making any noise, I pad down the steps to the lower level and gape at my surroundings. Dark exposed beams crisscross the tall ceiling and draw the eye to the many trophies that line the walls in the foyer.

In the sitting room, a huge stone fireplace reaches all the way to the ceiling, and a portrait of a man who looks like a much-older Garrett stands sentry over the mantel.

Behind me, someone clears their throat, and I whip around to find an old man in slacks and a sweater standing by the front door.

I swallow. I know what he must be thinking. But who is this man? Is this his house?

"Uh, good morning," I rasp, wishing I'd had the chance to grab a drink of water.

"Good morning." The man's tone is stiff and formal — not exactly friendly.

“Are you —”

“My name is Henry, miss. I work for the Von Hortons.”

“Oh.” My eyebrows go up. I’ve never known anyone who had their own live-in butler . . . or whatever he is.

“May I offer you some breakfast, miss?”

“No, thank you,” I say, flushing from the roots of my hair all the way down to my toes. I’m sure Henry can guess why I’m here. I certainly look like someone about to take the walk of shame. Technically, I suppose that’s what this is. “I-I should be going.”

“Then allow me to pull the car around, miss. Our chauffeur can take you anywhere you’d like to go.”

“Uh . . . no thanks,” I say. “I already called a car.”

It feels extremely rude to refuse, but I can’t bring myself to use Garrett’s chauffeur — not when I’m sneaking out of his house while he’s still sleeping.

“Then perhaps I could offer you a jacket?” Henry’s gaze travels pointedly to the short hem of my dress, and I shift my weight awkwardly from one foot to the other.

“A jacket would, uh, be nice,” I mumble.

I know the butler’s motives aren’t purely altruistic — he doesn’t want the neighbors to see me sneaking out of Garrett’s place looking like a prostitute — but it snowed a few inches during the night, and I’m not at all dressed for the weather.

Henry produces a long wool coat, and I gratefully slip it on. It’s a man’s jacket and reaches all the way to my knees, but it’s extremely warm and covers all the scandalous bits.

As I pull the front closed, Garrett’s scent wraps around me, and I feel an unexpected pang of remorse. I’m not proud to be sneaking out like this, but it’s what I have to do.

My phone dings to tell me my car has arrived, and I’m grateful that I don’t have to prolong this awkward interaction with Henry. I thank him for the coat and flash a quick smile before rushing out into the snow.



GARRETT

For the first time in a long time, I don't wake up with that familiar pit in my stomach. For the first time in forever, my life doesn't feel like one long death march to the day I take over the Von Horton oil empire. For the first time in a long time, my life has meaning.

Her.

The sheets are cold on my side of the bed. I reach over to pull Ava closer, but my hand just brushes soft Egyptian cotton.

I sit bolt upright in bed, looking around the room. The sun is shining, and there's fresh snow on my balcony, but Ava is nowhere in sight.

I jump out of bed and grab my jeans off the floor, not bothering to hunt for my underwear. Ava's dress and shoes are missing, which means —

Swearing to myself, I throw open my bedroom door and thunder down the staircase. I storm into the kitchen and look around, but there's nobody here. Dragging a frustrated hand through my hair, I stride back down the hallway — looking for something I know is already long gone.

"Where is she?" I snarl as soon as Henry emerges from the dining room.

"To whom are you referring, sir?"

It should be noted that, over the years, I've come to appreciate Henry's aloofness. He's cleaned up more of my messes than I can count, and the man has the uncanny ability to pretend that I'm not a man-whore.

But in this moment, I want to choke the guy out for playing dumb with me.

"The girl — Ava. Did she leave?" I ask, my voice shaking with desperation.

"I did not catch her name, sir," Henry replies calmly. "But yes. Your lady friend did depart quite early this morning."

"Did Robert take her? Where did she go?"

"The young lady declined my offer to have Robert drive her. I do not know where she might have gone."

"Fuck!" I whip around in a violent rage, planting my fist through the nearest door. It goes right through the wood, showering the rug in splinters and lodging several in my skin.

Henry doesn't jump or appear even the slightest bit fazed. He almost looks bored.

"What's the matter?" drawls Chaston from the drawing room. "Your little snow bunny run off, did she? I do hope she didn't make off with the silver."

The sound of his voice is like nails on a chalkboard, and I whip around to see Chaston's mat of short blond curls protruding from the back of a chair.

Normally, my wolf doesn't bother with my sniveling younger brother, but this morning, I'm in no fucking mood.

I cross from the dining room to the drawing room in three quick strides and grab Chaston by the front of his bathrobe. Hauling him out of his seat, I upend the steaming cup in his lap — coffee laced with bourbon. I slam my brother against the nearest wall, making the elk trophy above his head rattle.

"The fuck did you say to me?" I growl, allowing my wolf to shine through in my voice.

Chaston plasters on his signature look of haughty indifference, but I scent my brother's fear.

"I was merely implying that there hardly seems any point in utilizing a home-security system if you insist on fucking every slutty service worker you meet on the mountain."

I don't think.

I don't respond.

A feral howl escapes me as I turn and ram Chaston headfirst through the window. Glass showers the hardwood floor, and Chaston yelps in surprise. The iron tang of blood spurs on my wolf, and I narrow my eyes in cold satisfaction.

There's a tense beat of silence as my brother braces one hand on the window frame and pulls himself through the Chaston-sized hole. More glass rains down, spilling over the front of his robe and onto the Persian rug.

Long rivulets of blood streak his face, and my brother's eyes have lightened from their normal baby blue to a silver that nearly matches my own wolf's eyes. He bares his teeth, shoulders tense, and I sense that he's beginning to shift.

Perfect. I'm dying to sink my teeth into something, and Chaston has a rare gift for pissing me the fuck off.

My skin itches as my wolf rises to the surface, and my body succumbs to the familiar mix of pain and relief as I shed my human form.

My back bends as my bones start to break and muscles and sinew tear free from my joints. My jeans rip as I hit the rug on all fours, back arching as the change overtakes me. Feet and hands become paws, and I shake like a dog to ward off the last tingles of the shift.

Chaston, true to form, is quick to finish, and I find myself staring into the silver eyes of his white wolf.

My brother has always been overeager, and I let him make the first move.

He pounces, but I jerk out of the way. He crashes snout-first into the coffee table, upending a ceramic vase that dates back to the Yuan dynasty. It topples to the floor with a loud crash, and Chaston whips around.

I bound forward, aiming for his neck, and my brother lets out a high-pitched yelp as my fangs sink through his thick fur. The taste of blood excites my wolf, and I shake my head back and forth, whipping him around like a rag doll.

When I finally release my brother, he slides across the hardwood floor and careens into the grandfather clock. Chimes clang as it tips back on its legs, and my sister comes tearing into the room, dressed in nothing but a skimpy silk nightdress and matching silk robe.

“What the fuck?” Hyacinthe yells, her gaze snapping from the broken vase to the window. She’s got some weird blue patch things under her eyes and a mostly empty bottle of vodka in hand.

I barely have a second to register my sister’s fury before a large gray wolf bounds in out of nowhere, catapulting into my side.

Anders.

The two of us land in a heap by the window, and Chaston lunges forward. His jaws lock around my neck. Opportunistic bastard.

I thrash and growl until I’m free of Anders and land a nasty swipe across Chaston’s ribs. The white wolf yelps as blood stains his fur, and I jerk around to nip at his leg.

Panting, I drag myself onto all fours and square off against my two brothers.

“Stop it!” Hyacinthe yells. “Fucking — stop! I’m too fucking hungover to deal with this bullshit.”

I ignore Hyacinthe and glare at my two brothers. I swear I see Anders’s wolf smirk. He knows I’m no match for the three of them.

Drawing Chaston's blood wasn't nearly as cathartic as I'd hoped. He's young and impulsive, which makes him easy to best in a fight.

I narrow my eyes as I stalk out of the room, snarling at Hyacinthe as I pass.

The giant doggie door doesn't exactly match the decor, but it's necessary when you have an entire family of wolf shifters living under one roof. The alpha in me is loath to retreat, but my siblings aren't worth getting maimed or killed.

My breath forms a cloud around me as I step out into the snow.

I need to run. I need to escape. I need to not think.

Taking off into the trees, I head up the mountain until my lungs start to burn. If only the frigid mountain air could burn off the regret for how I behaved last night.

By some incredible stroke of luck, I found my fated mate. And I dragged her back to my place the first chance I got and mauled her like a drunken asshole.

No wonder Ava left this morning without saying goodbye. She probably hates me for taking her virginity when we were both so wasted.

I reach a crest of snow-covered rocks, and the despair is suddenly too much to contain. I lift my head and howl into the wind — crying for Ava, the love I lost. For the mate who will never be mine.