

Chapter Seven

Garrett

Four months later. . .

My head is pounding as I shove through the doors of the coffeeshop. The stench of vehicle exhaust and sewage gives way to the rich aroma of espresso, though it's somewhat ruined by the chemical mix of cologne, deodorant, and laundry detergent smells from so many different people.

I hate Denver. Real-estate is ridiculous. Parking is obnoxious, and the traffic gets worse every year.

I wouldn't even be here if my father hadn't summoned me to attend a company meeting. He's been circling around retirement the last five years or so, and he's been putting me and my siblings through our paces.

Navigating around the knot of hipsters and corporate bros standing inside the entrance, I weave toward the front counter and order my usual latte. Some tattooed chick with gauges in her ears takes my order, and I shuffle over to the pickup counter to wait for it to be ready.

A familiar scent drifts over the crowd, and I inhale deeply.

Holy shit.

I suck in another gulp of air as though I've been drowning and have just come up for oxygen. Underneath the strong aroma of espresso and cologne is a sweet complex vanilla fragrance that stirs my wolf to life.

I cast around desperately for the source of the scent, but I don't see her.

Then my gaze lands on the woman behind the espresso machine, who's busy adding frothed milk to a paper cup. Her long dark hair is plaited in a loose braid that falls down her back, and the mere sight of her turns my blood to fire and makes my throat go dry.

It can't be.

But then she turns, and I see her — kissable pink lips, huge emerald eyes, and a tiny beauty mark that makes my cock twitch. Her mouth falls open when she sees me, and my gaze drifts past her full breasts to the little bump making her T-shirt stick out.

Ava sees me notice, and her eyes go wide as she fumbles for something to say.

Everything else fades into the background. I'm no longer aware of the crowd pressing in on all sides, the cloud of nasty cologne, or the busy grumble of the espresso machine. All my attention is focused on her.

"H-how are you?" she asks. She looks terrified to see me.

I just stare at her and shake my head.

How am I? What kind of question is that? How the fuck does she think I am?

The two of us shared the night to end all nights, and then she just disappeared. I've spent the last four and a half months wondering where she went, and the entire time, she was here in Denver, jerking lattes for these assholes.

But I can't focus on anything except her belly, which looks suspiciously like . . .

I have to shove the thought away before it sends me into a murderous tailspin.

Ava has moved on.

While I was torturing myself over what I should or shouldn't have done these last four months, she was busy loving someone else. Someone not me.

"How far along are you?" I croak, because I don't know what the fuck else to say.

"About twenty-one weeks."

I'm still so shocked that it takes me a minute to do the math in my head. Twenty-one weeks is a little over five months, which would mean . . .

Ava's throat bobs, and I can tell she's waiting for my reaction. Her eyes go wide when the realization hits me. But it can't be. Can it?

"It's not . . ." I clear my throat, but it's gone so dry I can barely speak.

Tears well up in Ava's eyes as she nods, and my wolf whines at seeing her so emotional. I have the sudden urge to leap across the counter and pull her into my arms, but there's another part of me that's furious. How could she keep this from me?

"You've been here the entire time?" I rasp.

"I was subleasing a place in Aspen. I had to move out a couple weeks after we . . ." She swallows. "Coming here was always the plan. I didn't know when I left that . . ." She reaches down to touch her stomach and looks away from me.

Fury and sadness are swirling in my gut, sending my wolf into a frenzy. The pain is too much for me to deal with right now with all these people around. I want to scream and put Chaston's head through a wall, but I can't unleash my monster here in the middle of a coffee shop.

"When did you find out?" I ask.

Ava swallows again but doesn't look at me, which tells me she's known for quite a while.

"And you didn't think I deserved to know?"

"I didn't think you would want me to keep it," she bites in a low whisper.

"You — what?" I am seething at this point — so furious I can barely speak.

She shakes her head. "Why would you? We don't even know each other."

"Don't know each other?" From the moment I met Ava, I felt as though I knew her, but I can't exactly tell her that I'm a wolf shifter and she's my fated mate.

"It was just one night," she continues in a breezy tone. "There was no reason for me to upend your whole life."

"Isn't that for me to fucking decide?"

Ava winces, glancing around, and I realize that I shouted. People are staring, but I don't give a fuck — not with all this hurt and rage pounding through my body.

My skin itches with the urge to shift. I have to get out of here.

Breathing hard, I turn on my heel and shove past a hipster dude with a long beard. I nearly send another guy flying through the window in my haste to escape the café.

By the time I find my car parked along the street, my whole body is thrumming with violent energy. The fact that Ava assumed I wouldn't want to be involved in our child's life is the worst kind of insult. It shows what she really thinks of me, and she doesn't even know me.

That's when it hits me — Ava doesn't know me.

She might have done some digging and found out who my family is, but she doesn't know anything about me. Even if she gets to know me and decides she doesn't want me in her life, that doesn't change the fact that she's pregnant with my pup.

Mine.

A surge of protectiveness rises up inside me, followed by exhilaration.

I have a child — almost. He or she is growing in Ava’s womb — in the belly of the woman I love. My mate.

That thought sobers me instantly. I have a mate. A pup. A family. And I almost ruined everything.

Glancing back toward the coffeeshop, I’m overwhelmed by a sense of urgency. I can still salvage this. I have to.

It wasn’t a coincidence, running into Ava here, of all places. The two of us are meant to be — I just have to make her see it.

My mind is set by the time I burst back through the doors of the café. I whip my head around to find my mate, but she’s nowhere in sight. A young blond woman is making the lattes, and her eyes grow wide when she sees me.

“Where is she?” I growl. My wolf is desperate to be with Ava, and he’s ready to tear this place apart to get to her.

The blond doesn’t speak. She just points a shaky finger toward the back, and I shove my way behind the counter into the “employees only” area.

Ava is sitting by herself in the dark store room, slumped on a bag of coffee beans. She looks up the moment I walk into the back room, and her brow scrunches in confusion. Silent tears are streaming down her cheeks, and the sight of her crying because of me feels like a knife to the gut.

“What are you —”

“I’m not walking away,” I blurt. “From you or our baby.”

This time, I can’t help myself. I haul Ava to her feet and crush her against my chest. Her dark hair smells like vanilla and sunshine, and I inhale deeply to drink it in.

My mate.

“But —” Ava pulls back to look at me, those emerald eyes shimmering with unshed tears. Tiny beads of water cling to every perfect dark lash, and for one gut-wrenching moment, I think she’s going to send me away. “How can you even want to be with me after . . . after what I did?”

“What you did?” I whisper, bringing a shaky hand up to her face and tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m the one who fucked everything up.”

I drag in a long shuddering breath, and for the first time it hits me that Ava is here. After all the searching, all the PIs, all the dead ends, my mate is right in front of me.

“I should never have slept with you that night,” I murmur.

Ava’s face falls, and I realize how that must have sounded.

“I mean, I wanted to — obviously.” I flash a lascivious grin and cup her soft cheeks with my hands. “But I should have taken things slower with you.”

Ava lets out a shaky breath, chuckling darkly to herself. “I figured you just forgot about me,” she whispers.

But behind her little laugh, I detect a well of pain and lots of lonely sleepless nights. She really thought she meant nothing to me?

“What? No!” I shake my head, desperate for her to understand without coming out and telling her what I am. I lick my lips, searching for the right words — any words that could even come close to explaining what she means to me. “You’re . . . everything I’ve been looking for,” I finish finally.

Ava lifts her eyebrows in a hopeful expression.

“I went to the coffee shop to look for you after,” I add. “For weeks, actually. It was a little creepy.”

My mate giggles, and I see a spark of real happiness in her eyes that lights a fire in my soul.

Standing here with her, it feels so right, but I know there’s still a lot we need to work out. Ava felt our connection — I know she did — but that doesn’t mean that she loves me or that she trusts me to take care of her and our unborn child.

I need to do this right.

“Have dinner with me,” I say in a rush. “Tonight.”

Ava shakes her head, and disappointment sinks into my stomach like a brick. “I have to work.”

“So quit,” I say, taking her hands. “Fuck — work. I’m gonna take care of you, Ava — you and the baby. You don’t have to worry about anything ever again.”

My mate cocks her head to the side, giving me an adorable look that says she thinks I’m full of shit. Maybe she didn’t Google my family. Maybe she has no idea that I’m loaded.

“I’m not going to quit.”

“Fine. Tomorrow night?”

Her pause tells me there isn't any good reason for her to say no, but she's hesitant nonetheless.

“Let me cook you dinner,” I coax. “We can talk, get to know one another, and . . . work all this out.”

Maybe it's my mention of talking rather than taking her back to my place for mind-blowing sex, but she suddenly looks as though the weight of the world has been lifted off her shoulders.

“Okay,” she says, going over to a bank of lockers and pulling out a scrap of paper. She jots down an address and phone number, and I get a flicker of panic at the thought of leaving her — of being away from my mate for basically two full days and a night.

But I need to act like a gentleman and not an obsessive creep, so I tuck the paper into my pocket and take a step forward. I long to pull her into my arms again and devour every inch of her, but I sense Ava putting up walls between us, as if she's trying to protect herself from future disappointment.

I settle with leaning in and giving her a soft peck on the cheek, but on my way out the door, I turn back to look at her one last time. “Do you know what it is yet? Boy or girl?”

She smiles, and it's a real one. “Not yet. I-I'll find out at my next appointment.”

I nod. So I haven't missed everything.

Standing there in the doorway, I can hardly believe my luck. After all this time, I've found my mate, and she's carrying my pup.