

CHAPTER FIVE

AMBER POV

As Vic's car pulled away from the driveway, her taillights disappearing into the early evening mist, I stood for a moment on the wooden porch of our cozy little cottage. The icy chill in the air nipped at my cheeks, but it wasn't the cold that made me shiver. It was the weight of the day, the humiliation, the sticky memory of whipped cream sliding down my hair and face.

"Don't forget to text Christian about the limo!" Vic's voice echoed in my ears even after she was gone. Freaking obsessed with it.

I lingered on the porch, casting a wary glance upstairs. The light in the twins' room was still on. Great. Just great. I bet Alan is still playing video games with them. The last thing I wanted was to run into him—or any of them—looking like this. My hair was sticky from whipped cream, and my pride was still bruised from the humiliating milkshake incident at the café.

I sighed, my breath visible in the freezing air.

Mom and Dad still weren't back, which was probably for the best. At least I didn't have to explain why I looked like a walking dessert. I could already hear my mom's gasp of horror and Dad's angry muttering about teenage antics.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it out, my thumb hovering over Christian's chat. Might as well get this over with now. Better a text than trying to ask him in person tomorrow while he was laughing at my face plastered all over j*****..

Hey, Vic was wondering if we're still renting the limo together for prom? If not, no big deal—we can meet there, or I can walk, or even bike. Whatever works for you!

I hit send, then cringed. *Smooth, Amber. Really smooth.* Did that sound desperate? It sounded desperate. I wanted to chuck my phone into the snowbank and call it a day, but no. Instead, I shoved it back into my pocket and decided I needed to clear my head.

Ugh, why is talking to guys so hard?

Trying to shake the feeling, I stepped off the porch and headed toward the trail leading to Great Bear Lake. The sun was setting, casting a ery glow across the snow-covered trees. Winter in the North had its brutal moments, but evenings like this reminded me why I loved it here.

The lake, frozen almost completely now, looked magical in the fading light. The towering evergreens lining the shore only added to the effect, their snow-dusted branches glowing faintly under the rst stars of the night. This was my spot. My sanctuary. The only place where everything else—bullies, mean comments, social media disasters—just faded away.

The ice creaked softly as the current shifted beneath it, and the faint sounds of wildlife carried on the wind. Often, on sunny days, I'd bring my easel and paints here, letting the scenery guide my brush. I'd lose myself in the strokes of vibrant color, capturing moments like the northern lights dancing across the horizon—aurora borealis in vivid streaks of color, shimmering reections on the water, or just abstract chaos when the day had been especially rough.

But today wasn't one of those days. I didn't have the energy. I stood there until the last rays of sunlight disappeared, leaving only the silvery glow of the moon to light the lake. With the darkness settling in, I turned back toward the house. My phone buzzed in my pocket, and my heart skipped. Christian?

Nope. Just a weather update. And still no response from him. Guess he saw the meme. Great.

By the time I got back to the cottage, the house was still except for the soft hum of the heater. Pulling out my phone, I checked for a reply. Nothing.

I trudged toward the back door, brushing snow off my boots, when I saw a gure stepping out of the house. Alan, his tall gure shadowed against the porch light. s**t.

I froze, instinctively ducking behind the corner of the porch, holding my breath. *Please don't see me. Please don't see me.*

Peeking around the edge, I watched as he paused, his sharp green eyes cutting through the darkness, scanning. His gaze landed on me. Crap.

My heart thudded in my chest as he stared, unmoving. I braced myself for whatever cruel comment or sarcastic jab was coming. *Great, here we go.*

But he didn't say anything. Instead, his expression shifted—something wild ickering in his eyes. And then, in one uid motion, he tore off his shirt, and I almost fainted.

I know, I'm not so proud of it. He might be a jerk, but he does have a twelve-pack, and I'm just a teenager, ya know—hormones and stuff.

In a swift motion, he shifted, his wolf exploding out of him in a blur of dark fur.

Dang. So freaking majestic.

Before I could process what was happening, he sprinted into the forest and disappeared among the trees.

"What the—" I whispered to myself, shaking my head. Weird. Really weird. But at least he was gone, and I was spared whatever torment he'd had in mind.

Shaking off the strange encounter, I slipped into the warmth of the house, brushing the snow from my boots at the door. I trudged up the steps, careful not to make a sound. The last thing I needed was for Mom or Dad to see me like this, covered head to toe in whipped cream and looking like I had just escaped a food ght. They'd ask questions, and I wasn't in the mood to explain.

As quietly as possible, I slipped off my boots and tiptoed up the stairs, avoiding the creaky spots I knew too well. The twins' laughter echoed faintly from their room. At least they were distracted.

Once in my room, I closed the door and let out a long breath. My reection in the mirror was... horrifying. Sticky streaks of whipped cream matted my hair, my sweater was ruined, and the faint smell of vanilla clung to me like bad perfume. This day ocially sucked.

I grabbed my towel and bolted for the bathroom. The hot water was a godsend, washing away the mess and calming my nerves. As the steam lled the room, I felt a sliver of peace return. Scrubbing my skin clean, I tried to push the embarrassment of the day out of my mind.

Back in my room, I pulled on my favorite eece pajamas—soft, warm, and comforting. Much better. I ran a brush through my damp hair, avoiding the mirror this time.

Feeling more human, I made my way downstairs. The smell of lasagna hit me before I even reached the kitchen, and my mood lifted instantly. A smile tugged at my lips. Mom must've come home while I was at the lake. The day might've been a disaster, but lasagna always made things better. Finally, something good about today.

I followed the smell into the kitchen, the warmth of the oven greeting me as I stepped inside. There she was, humming softly to herself as she layered pasta, sauce, and cheese in the pan.

"Hey, Mom," I said, my voice softer now, the tension of the day easing just a little.

She turned to me with a warm smile, the kind that made everything else fade away. "Hi, sweetheart. Hungry?"

"Starving," I admitted, plopping down at the kitchen table.

"Good," she said, sliding the dish into the oven. "Dinner's almost ready."

A wide grin spread across my face. "Lasagna? Yes! You're ocially the best mom ever."

She laughed, turning to me with a knowing smile. "Rough day?"

I plopped onto a stool by the counter, resting my chin in my hands. "You have no idea."

Maybe today hadn't been a total loss after all. For now, I could sit here, enjoy the smell of lasagna, and pretend the rest of the world didn't exist.