

1. MORGAN

Morgan Walsh struggled to get the map open over the steering wheel, preferably without detouring into the ditch. It really wasn't a maneuver to be attempted by someone who hadn't driven in almost two years. When a horn blasted, he glanced up to see headlights in his lane. He cursed and yanked the wheel as the pickup roared past, kids shouting out rolled-down windows.

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered.

He shoved the map onto the passenger seat and peered out the windshield. There had to be a town along here somewhere. It was ninety miles to Syracuse, and he was starving. He *shouldn't* be starving. He'd spent the last two years in Alaska, living as a wolf, only eating every few days. Now he couldn't seem to go a few hours without his stomach threatening to devour itself.

He glanced at the side of the road. He should just pull over and check the map, but the shoulder was slick with snow. Snow. In early November. Even Anchorage didn't see this much of the white stuff so soon.

As he thought that, more began to fall. He flicked on the wipers and heard his brother's voice, from their call, three days ago.

"Got a foot of snow last week. If you're coming home, you should do it soon. You know how it can get."

Oh, yeah. Morgan knew. Compared to winter where he grew up in Newfoundland, Alaska was positively balmy.

"You *are* coming home, right?" Blaine had asked.

"Maybe for Christmas."

They both knew it was a lie. It wasn't the shitty weather that kept him away. Even in the breathtaking wilds of Alaska, he'd dreamed of rocky coasts and pounding surf and winds that could knock the breath from your lungs and set your eyes blazing.

But he *hadn't* dreamed of the life he'd had there, up before dawn with his father and his brother, fishing for cod whose stocks had been depleted twenty years ago by factory fishing. And he hadn't dreamed of long nights in their cabin, far from any semblance of civilization, listening to his father rage against the Department of Fisheries and Oceans—and rage against Morgan, too, when he'd suggest it might be time to find a new livelihood. Walshes were fishermen and, by God, that's what they'd keep doing until it killed them.

Morgan had decided it was not really the way he cared to die. Or to live. So, at twenty-four, he'd packed a bag and set out to see what else the world had to offer. Four years later, he was still looking.

He hadn't told his brother where he was going. If he'd even said the words "New York State," Blaine would have flipped out. Might even have come after him. Which wasn't such a bad idea—it might be the only way to get Blaine off the Rock.

To the Walshes, as to most North American werewolves, New York meant one thing—the home of the American Pack. Growing up, Morgan had heard stories of the Pack the way other kids heard stories strangers in white vans. The Pack. Madmen and murderers, every last one of them, endlessly scouring the country for innocent, peace-loving werewolves and slaughtering them for sport. *Stay in Newfoundland*, his dad had said, *or the Pack will find you*.

Nearly eighteen months ago, the Pack did find him. They'd been in Alaska hunting other werewolves. Not for sport, but because those others were exactly the kind of wolves his father claimed the Pack were. Madmen and murderers. Rapists and man-eaters.

The Pack had invited Morgan to visit when he was done his experiment—living as a wolf in Alaska. They wanted to recruit him. They hadn't said that exactly, but he'd gotten the hint—come and hang out with us, and if we still think you're a decent sort, we'd like to sign you up.

Was that what Morgan wanted? He had no idea. But it couldn't hurt to stop by. He'd say he was just passing through, remembered they were there, decided to call and say hi, maybe take them out to dinner.

Speaking of dinner . . . His stomach rumbled again. In the distance, he could see what looked like a town sign. He peered through the falling snow until it came into view. Then he blinked. And laughed.

It was indeed a town sign . . . with a snarling wolfman welcoming visitors to Westwood, home of the champion Westwood Werewolves. Across the bottom, the sign declared "Westwood Loves Its Werewolves!"

Morgan chuckled again. "That's just too good to pass up."

He found a diner at the end of the main street. There were only two cars in the lot, both covered in snow, but the light seeping through the diner windows gave him hope.

It was open. Empty, though. Through the window he could see a server reading a paperback novel. As he walked in, he noticed the sign on the window: 10% off for all Werewolves and their families.

Wonder if they'll give me the discount.

He went in and sat. The menu offered what he guessed you'd call home-cooking, but it wasn't the kind of fare he ever got at home. His dad was a meat-and-potatoes man. Heavy on the potatoes, usually, unless he'd been lucky enough to hunt up moose or rabbit. Tonight's dinner

was meat-and-potatoes—meatloaf with scalloped potatoes—but it was a damned sight better than anything his father ever cooked. And the apple pie was delicious. Morgan was finishing his second slice when the server stopped by to ask how he was enjoying his meal.

“Hungry, I see,” she said.

He flashed her a big smile. “Always.”

She returned the smile and gave him a good view of her cleavage as she cleared his dishes. She hadn’t shown much interest in her novel since he’d arrived. He got the message: there was more than food on the menu tonight, at least for him.

She was cute, in a dyed-blonde, being-Homecoming-queen-was-the-best-day-of-my-life way. Comfort food, like his dinner. He was seriously tempted to partake. A hunger for food wasn’t the only appetite that’d slammed back as he returned to human life. This one surprised him less—there hadn’t been much opportunity for sex as a wolf. Sure, one of the females had thought he looked mighty fine, but *that* experience had definitely not been part of his experiment.

So he’d been making up for lost time, and he’d have been happy to let the cute server help, but he really did need to hit the road. Being in New York State meant he was technically trespassing on Pack territory. He couldn’t afford to linger.

“Anything else I can get for you?” she asked, standing close enough for him to smell her rich, soapy scent.

“Just the check,” he said with regret. “I need to hit the road before this snow—”

A wave of nausea rocked him. The room seemed to swirl, lights dimming. He gripped the edge of the table and blinked hard.

“You okay?” the server asked.

“Yeah.” He took a deep breath and straightened.

“Maybe that second slice of pie wasn’t such a good idea?”

As he nodded, his back started to itch. He looked down at his hands. The skin bubbled, like something was trapped under it. He yanked his hands out of sight under the table.

Damn it. He needed to be more careful. Take things slower. Like not embarking on a cross-country trip when he was so used to living in wolf form.

He reached for his wallet and slapped a twenty on the table. Then he rose, his hands shoved in his pockets.

““You sure you’re okay?” the server asked. “You shouldn’t be driving if you’re not.”

“I’m fine.” That came out a little too close to a growl, and he coughed to cover it.

“We’ve got a couch in the back.” She slid in front of him and smiled up. “Or my place is just down the road. I make a pretty good nurse.”

He shook his head and started to walk away. She caught his sleeve. He wheeled, eyes blazing, fever coming fast.

“No,” he said, in what was definitely a growl, deep and guttural, barely human.

She staggered back, and he hurried out the door.

Morgan wanted to move his car, considering that he’d just said he was leaving. But he was in no shape to drive. He needed to Change. Now. Luckily, the diner, being on the edge of town, backed onto forest. He headed straight there, cursing himself as he tramped through snow up to his knees.

He should have Changed last night. He should Change *every* night until his body got used to being human. Sure, willingly transforming nightly was akin to volunteering for anesthesia-free

surgery. But he could not take chances. Seeing the look on that server's face, he knew he'd taken a chance. And on Pack territory, too.

Goddamn it!

The snowfall lightened as he trudged deeper into the forest, but he barely noticed, too caught up in his thoughts. What exactly had the server seen? Had his face started Changing? Or was she only startled because he'd growled at her? God, he hoped that was it.

A branch slapped his face, and he shoved it aside, growling, only to smack into a tree trunk. He blinked and rubbed his eyes. Everything looked slightly out of focus. He blinked harder.

He felt disoriented, like he had in the diner. That wasn't normally part of the Change. How long had he been driving? He calculated. Shit. Too long. No sleep. No exercise. Not nearly enough caffeine. That might explain this sudden need to Change.

He stumbled into the nearest clearing. Off came the clothing, shivers turning to near convulsions as he tried to hang it in branches, up off the snow.

Then he got down on all fours and started the transformation.

2.

The process went faster than usual. No less painful, but the compressed timeframe made it seem better.

Lies we tell ourselves.

At least he was warmer, with the wolf coat. His fur was dark red, like his hair. Once, when he'd been spotted by hunters in Alaska, they'd mistaken him for an Irish setter, which was

kind of insulting. Despite his coloring, he was clearly a wolf. But being mistaken for a setter was better than having the hunters return to town with stories of a massive, dark-red, green-eyed wolf.

He chuffed and looked around. Normally, it would be time to run. Work off the excess energy that came with being part canine. But he was still woozy and dinner felt like a dead weight in his gut. A nice, leisurely evening stroll seemed more his speed—

“Are those footprints?” a distant voice said.

“Looks like it,” a second man answered.

Shit. Rule One of Changing in a populated area? Get away from the damned population first.

Morgan had barely leapt from the clearing before he stumbled and plowed into a drift. He pushed up, shaking snow from his fur and looked back at the branch that had tripped him.

Where'd that come from?

He blinked and when he looked again, he saw two branches, blurred.

Where did they both come from?

Shit. He was really out of it. He should get farther into the forest and rest until it passed.

A branch cracked to his left. He peered through the trees. He could make out a bulky shadow about twenty feet away. Hunter? Bear? He wasn't in any condition to deal with either.

He ran. The snow had stopped falling, leaving the forest pitch-black, the dense treetops barely allowing any light from the quarter moon. His night vision had kicked in, but everything was blurred.

He stumbled over another branch and pitched headfirst into a gully, his skull cracking against a half-buried boulder as he fell. When he hit bottom, he managed to get to his feet. He teetered a few steps and then dropped as everything went dark.

Morgan surfaced to the sound of a woman's voice. He groaned and struggled to remember the night before. Something about a woman. A server in a diner?

“Come on. Wake up!”

Obviously she was in a damned hurry to get him out the door. Was she married? Shit. He was usually careful about stuff like that.

It took some effort to pry open his eyes, and when he did, a blast of light almost made them close again. He squinted and saw a blurred figure bending over him. Then an icy wind blasted over his bare skin.

“Jesus,” he muttered. “Someone close the damned—”

The figure above him came into focus. It was a pretty, dark-haired, dark-eyed woman, his age or a little older. Huh. He'd lucked out last night. Now if he could actually remember—

“Get up!” she said.

He blinked and rose on his elbows. Damn, it was cold. Why was it so—?

He got a good look at the woman. She wore a dark-brown parka over a khaki shirt and trousers. It looked like some kind of uniform. And there was a gun in her hand. Pointed at him.

A ray of sunlight glinted off a police badge on her parka.

Morgan sat up fast, realizing as he did that he was lying in the snow. Naked. Surrounded by cops.

“Uh . . .” he began, as he looked around.

His gaze fell on the tracks in the snow. Wolf tracks.

Shit.

Westwood Police Chief Jessica Dales stood inside the station house door, struggling to close it against a gust of wind. She finally won the battle and paused to stamp the snow from her boots. A blast of furnace-hot air greeted her. She closed her eyes and let her cheeks thaw before she stepped into the office.

Wes Kent looked up from his paperwork at the front desk.

“Weatherman’s right,” Jessica said. “Another storm’s blowing up. Crazy weather.” She swiped snow from her hair, then hooked her thumb at the holding cell, just past an open doorway. “Speaking of crazy, is our stalker talking yet?”

“Nope,” Kent said. “No ID either. I ran the plates. Seems he bought the car in Vancouver for a grand last week. Guy let him ‘borrow’ the plates for a few hundred more.”

“Nice of him.”

Jessica walked to the open doorway and looked into the cell. Their new prisoner—their *only* prisoner—sat with his back to the bars. Before they’d located the car, they’d found his clothing in a nearby tree. It’d been soaking wet. They’d offered him a dry shirt and pants from some extras they kept in back, but he’d refused, putting on the wet ones instead.

“If he bought the car in Vancouver, he crossed the border,” she said. “So he must have a passport.”

“Should. By that accent, I’m guessing he’s Scottish.”

It was an odd accent, not one she remembered hearing before. She supposed it could be Scottish, but that seemed a strange fit for a guy who looked like he had a generous dose of Native American blood, despite the red hair and green eyes.

“I’ll head back out and search his car,” she said. “We know where he started his trip. If we can figure out where he was going, that will help. A place. A name. Anything.”

“How about both?” Kent asked. “Plus a phone number.”

He held out a map with a thick black circle around Syracuse, New York. Beside it, someone had written “Elena” and a phone number.

Jessica took out her cell.

3. ELENA

I stood just beyond the study doorway, out of sight. The low-burning fireplace tried to lure me in, with its inviting crackle and pop, rich smoky smell and tendrils of heat. Clay's voice was an enticement, too. After three days of snowstorms, I just wanted to curl up on the sofa with him, drowse in the firelight and—

“You already moved!”

“I didn't take my fingers off it!”

“Doesn't matter. That counts. Dad! Tell her it counts!”

Three days of snowstorms. One sprained ankle. Two serious cases of cabin fever.

“Let's go outside, guys,” Clay said. “I'll pull Kate on the toboggan.”

Make that three cases.

I steeled myself and walked through the doorway. Clay was on the couch, leaning over as the kids played chess on the floor. Logan and Kate had just turned five in September. With every birthday, there's a part of me that hopes this is the one where their energy levels will drop a little. I might as well hope that the moon will turn purple. They're the children of werewolves—those energy levels aren't dropping until they're a *hundred-and-five*.

“I don't wanna get pulled,” Kate said. “I wanna walk!”

“You can't,” Logan said. “You sprained your ankle, stupid.”

Kate jumped on her brother. “I'm not stupid!”

Clay grabbed Kate's sweater and lifted her off her brother, snarling and spitting, more wildcat than wolf.

“Logan,” I said as I walked in. “Did you forget the rule? Call her stupid and you earn an hour in your room.”

He looked up at me. “That’s not the rule. The rule is an hour if we call each other an *idiot*.”

“Logan . . .”

He scowled. “It’s her fault we can’t go outside. She’s the one who fell.”

“Because you pushed me off the slide,” Kate said.

Logan leaped up. “I did not! You fell, and I grabbed your coat. I was trying to *help* you.” He spun on me. “I wouldn’t push her. Tell her, Momma.”

“I know. She does, too. She’s just angry.”

I scooped him up, ignoring his wriggling, and sat on Jeremy’s recliner with him on my lap. I looked over at Clay, holding an equally-squirming Kate.

“I’ll grab the duct tape if you find the rope,” I said.

He chuckled.

“I heard that,” Logan grumbled.

I kissed his cheek and got a scowl in return. We sat there for a minute, just holding the kids. Cuddling and calming them. Or restraining them. It’s a fine line some days.

I looked at Kate, her blond curls swinging as she struggled to get free. Clay bent down to her, whispering. There was no mistaking them for anything but father and daughter, with matching blue eyes and golden curls, Kate’s down past her shoulders, Clay’s cropped close. Similar in temperament as well as looks. Jeremy says that Clay was more like Logan as a child, quiet and serious, but Kate definitely takes after him now, squirming and shooting furious glances his way, refusing to be still until she damned well wanted to be still.

Logan had already stopped squirming, saving his energy for the glares he kept firing at his sister. He has my dark blue eyes and my straight hair, though his is a deeper shade than my

silver-blond. I'd like to think his off-the-charts IQ comes from his mom, but I have to cede that to his PhD father. As for his uncanny ability to maintain long, angry silences, I have no idea where that comes from. Really.

“Okay,” I said. “We need a plan. How about some apart-time? Dad will take Logan for a walk while—”

“That’s not fair!” Kate said. “I want to go for a walk, too!”

“I was going to suggest you help me bake cookies.”

“But I want to bake cookies!” Logan said. “And we haven’t finished our chess game. You can’t let her quit just because I was winning—”

“You weren’t winning,” Kate said. “I had a plan.”

Her brother snorted.

“I did!” Kate said. “You’ll see.”

She jumped back onto the floor. Logan scrambled down beside her.

The phone rang. Clay and I collided pouncing on it. I won, grabbing the receiver and jogging away. Yes, it’s a sad day when getting to answer the phone is a victory. Especially in a household where it normally rings through to voice mail, with three people sitting within reach of a receiver.

“Is this Elena?” said a woman’s voice when I answered.

“Yes . . .”

“This is Jess Dales, chief of police for Westwood, New York. I have someone here . . .”

I listened as she explained. When I hung up, Clay said, “Trouble?”

“Maybe. I need to talk to Jeremy.”

Clay shuttled the kids to the kitchen and left them there to make peanut butter and jam sandwiches while he followed me to Jeremy's studio.

"Do you think that's such a good idea?" I nodded toward the kitchen. "There are knives."

"I don't think the situation has reached that point." He glanced back. "The really sharp ones are locked up, though, right?"

"They are. It'd be butter knife injuries. Or more likely, a jam-flinging fight."

"After which we can make them take turns having baths and cleaning the kitchen, which means at least twenty minutes of apart-time." Another glance over his shoulder. "Should I go back and get out the honey, too?"

"Tempting."

The door to Jeremy's studio was closed. Well, not exactly—he'd left it open a few inches, but for Jeremy that was a clear "do not disturb" sign, and one even the kids would respect. I rapped first, and he called, "Come in."

Jeremy was standing at his easel, with his back to us. His shirt sleeves were pushed up, feet bare, a pair of clean socks lying on a nearby chair. We'd gone for a walk outside earlier talking about Alpha business, and he'd got his feet wet. When we'd come in, I'd grabbed him a dry pair, but obviously he'd gotten too wrapped up in his painting to remember to put them on. Just like he'd gotten too wrapped up to realize he really shouldn't push back his hair when his hands were dappled with paint. There were blue streaks through it. Maybe I'd tell him about them; maybe I wouldn't.

I couldn't see what he was working on, and I didn't try to peek. He'd show it when it was ready. For now, he just lifted a finger and finished his brushstroke. Then he pulled out his

ear buds. Jeremy never paints to music. Yet another sign that the chaos around here had become a little too much even for our unflappable Alpha.

“Remember Morgan Walsh?” I said as I perched on the window seat. “Newfoundland werewolf in Alaska?”

“The mutt who was living as a wolf?” Clay said. “Kinda hard to forget.”

True. It wasn’t something that happened very often. So rarely, in fact, that we’d added a page for Morgan to the Legacy—our book of Pack and werewolf history. There was a section for oddities. While his “experiment” was unusual, the guy himself had seemed normal enough. Until this call came.

“He was *what*?” Clay said when I finished explaining. “On Pack *territory*? Did I say the guy was a little crazy, darling?”

“He’s not crazy. Just young. Trying to find himself. Some guys go backpacking in the Himalayas. He tried living as a wolf.”

Clay’s snort said “a little crazy” described it. This from a guy who was himself more wolf than human. As much as he loved being in wolf-form, though, it wasn’t anything he’d choose long-term. I wouldn’t either, but I could better understand Morgan’s identity crisis. Clay has always known exactly what he was. It took me a lot longer to figure it out. Some days I’m still trying.

“We can overlook the trespassing,” I said. “It seems he was heading to see us.”

“And the rest of it?” Clay said. “Being found by the cops? Naked? In the snow? Surrounded by paw prints?”

“That might require intervention.”

“You think?”

I shot him a glare and then looked back at Jeremy, who'd been quietly listening. "We could ignore this. Let Morgan dig himself out of the mess. But considering it's on Pack territory . . ."

"We should handle it," Jeremy said. "If he had your phone number, he was planning to announce his visit. That means his detour was a youthful indiscretion, not a deliberate one."

"The guy's older than Reese," Clay grumbled. "That's not *youthful* enough to excuse it."

"How old is he again?" Jeremy asked me. "Twenty-seven, twenty-eight?"

"About that."

Jeremy took off his music player and wrapped the ear bud cord around it. "I seem to recall that's isn't too old to do something rash and impulsive. Something that might have far-reaching consequences."

Clay flinched, despite Jeremy's casual tone. It was a subtle reminder that Clay had been that age when he bit me.

"I'll drive up and take care of it," Jeremy said.

Clay and I both stared at him.

"Yes?" he said, pocketing his player.

"You're still Alpha," I said. "You make decisions and send out your trusty minions to enforce them. That would be us."

Kate shrieked from the kitchen. "Give that back!"

"I believe I should handle this," Jeremy said. "You've been preparing to take over as Alpha. Likewise, I should prepare to resume duties as a Pack member."

"Nice try," I said. "No adventures while you're Alpha. That's the rule."

"I don't believe I ever said—"

Clay clapped him on the back as we headed out. “Don’t worry. We’ll take care of this.”

“It’s not a matter that requires both—” Jeremy began.

Logan raced past the open doorway, a sandwich in each hand. Kate stumped after him, limping on her bound foot.

“The Alpha-elect needs a bodyguard,” Clay said. “That’s another rule. Sorry. Love to stay. Gotta go.”

We snuck to the front door and grabbed our coats and boots. Jeremy followed.

“Enjoy it while you can,” he said to me. “Once you’re Alpha, no more adventures.”

“Pfft. That’s *your* rule. When I’m Alpha, I’m changing it. That’s the beauty of being the bitch in charge.”

Clay grinned and handed me my gloves. At the sound of footsteps, Jeremy stepped into the foyer with us. We all stood silently watching as Kate clomped past down the hall. She had both sandwiches mashed in one hand and was taking a bite. When she didn’t notice us, I exhaled in relief and grabbed the door handle.

“Mom!” Logan shouted.

“We’ll be back before bedtime,” I whispered to Jeremy.

“You’d better be,” he said as we made our escape.