# Loved by the Alpha -- Chapter One

“You’re sure you don’t mind?” Mary asked, as she watched Kristen across the little round table at Café Shack. Her friend’s lean, five-foot-ten frame and blonde hair was the polar opposite of Mary’s short curvy body. They weren’t anything alike, not that it mattered. Kristen had been her best friend in the world for years. She was also the only person who knew the truth about the dark past Mary had tried so hard to forget.

“It’s just sitting out there collecting dust, sweetie. You’re doing me a favor. Trust me.”

Mary smiled, feeling better than she had in months. “I promise I’ll leave it in pristine condition. Not a cobweb in sight.”

Kristen laughed. “I’m not sending you there to clean, dummy. It’s meant to be a break. To destress. You need it.”

All the air left her lungs at once and she had to fight to breathe. Seconds passed before she replied, “Sarah’s gone. And I’m still trying to process that.” She looked toward the front of the little shop. “I keep expecting her to breeze in here and order her usual.”

Kristen snorted. “A triple shot and a bear claw.”

The words instantly took Mary down memory lane as she pictured her sister licking icing off her fingers while rambling on about her latest boyfriend. “Yep. It’s not fair, Kris.”

Her friend reached across the table and took her hand. “Listen, sweetie, Sarah wouldn’t want this for you. She’d want you to be happy.”

Kristen was right. “She used to say I was too serious. That I needed to loosen up.” Her sister’s bright blue eyes sparkling with mischief came to mind. “She’d offer to take me clubbing. I always refused. Why couldn’t I just once go with her.”

“*Don’t* blame yourself,” she shot right back. “A drunk driver took your sister away from you. No one saw that coming, Mary.”

She forced the tears back. “I think I do need a break. I need to clear my head.”

Kristen patted her hand. “That’s the spirit. The cabin is only a two-hour drive from here. Cohen Pass is a quaint little area. You’ll love it, I swear.”

She smiled and sat up a little straighter. “Thank you for this. It means the world to me.”

Kristen reached into her purse and pulled out a key with a happy face keyring, then slid it across the table toward her. “Just remember to bring food with you. And probably fresh bedding. You’ll need to take your laundry into town to wash it. But there is Wi-Fi, a flatscreen, a stove, and fridge. And the best view you can imagine.”

“Running water?”

She nodded. “And a flushing toilet. The shower takes a minute. The water heater is small so get in and get out.”

She laughed. “I can handle that as long as I don’t need to use an outhouse.”

Kristen’s eyes widened. “Do you think I’d ever own something so primitive?”

Her friend was right. Even Kristen’s car got traded in for a new one after it hit the five-year mark. “I don’t know what I was thinking,” Mary replied with a grin.

“I’ll let Boone know you’ll be using the cabin for a bit.”

Mary instantly pictured a gray-haired old man with a flannel shirt and beard. “Who is Boone?”

She shrugged. “A local. He looks after the place for me.” She tapped her chin with her index finger and said, “He’d like you; I think.”

Mary’s face fell. “I’m going there for solitude, not company.”

“Of course. He’ll keep to himself.” She pulled out her cell phone and held it up. “I’ll pass you his contact info just in case you need anything.”

“I won’t but thank you,” she answered. Help wasn’t what she needed. She needed her sister back. But life had taught her one fast rule. Never make wishes. They don’t come true and you’ll only be left disappointed.

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“What the hell are you bitching about now?” Boone had heard enough to give him a damned headache.

His brother stomped into the room and glared at him. “She’s a pain in the ass. All I said was her top was too skimpy. She nearly took my head off.”

“Then quit complaining about her clothes. She’s not a child any longer, Mio. Leave Aerie alone.”

“Did you see what she’s wearing? She’s heading into town in that!”

Boone got to his feet and went to the coffee pot. He drank too much of the stuff, but he couldn’t seem to help himself. “What part of she-wolf makes you think Aerie can’t handle her own. Any man that touches her will lose a hand.”

Mio ran a hand through his short, closely-cropped black hair, then pointed toward the half-filled carafe. “Pour me a cup, would ya?”

Boone pulled another cup from the cabinet. It was going to be a long day. After filling it, he handed it over, then brought his own mug to his lips and blew. “You need to lay off Aerie. I mean it, Mio. She’s having enough problems without you constantly scolding her as if she were a child.”

Mio plopped into one of the straight-back kitchen chairs. His hazel eyes blazing with fury. “She is a child!”

“No, you want her to be, but she’s not. She’s twenty-two years old and she’s about to hit her heat cycle.”

He slammed a fist against the table. “And you think it’s okay for her to look for a mate in town? A fucking *human*?”

“She’s not looking for a mate. She’s looking for sex.” He paused, then added, “And I never said anything about a human.”

“To hell if she’s going to ride out her cycle with a Bennet. They’re all crazy.”

“Maybe, but they keep to themselves, and they know better than to disrespect us. If she chooses one of them, they’ll be gentle with her. I promise you.”

“If they aren’t I’ll take their head,” Mio grumbled as he clutched onto the cup. Boone was afraid the fragile porcelain would shatter under the strain.

“This is my territory and the last time a Bennet screwed with me, they lost three of their pack. Trust me, they’re terrified of Aerie. They know what she means to us.”

“You mean they know she’s our baby sister and we’ll kill to protect her.”

“Damn straight.” He stared at his brother. “We need to talk about the real issue here.”

Mio’s back stiffened and he shot him an icy glare. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Claim her, dumbass. If you do then you won’t have to worry about her spending another heat cycle with anyone else because she’ll be in your bed.”

“She’s our sister!”

“Not by blood. And don’t pretend you feel brotherly toward her. You know as well as I do that there’s nothing wrong with mating her.”

He swallowed hard and stared at his half-finished coffee. “It still feels wrong,” he mumbled.

Boone could see the anguish. Having your mate so close and not be able to claim her had to be hell for Mio. And Boone knew deep down that Aerie and Mio were meant to be together. Unfortunately, they both fought the attraction. Usually with claws. He recalled the day they’d found Aerie and his chest warmed at the memory. “She was so tiny. A runt. I thought for sure she’d die that first year.”

Mio’s face softened and a small smile curved the corners of his lips. “Yeah, but she was a fighter. Always has been.”

He got to his feet and put his cup in the sink, then turned to stare at his youngest brother. “Give her some space, Mio. She’s struggling with her inner demons. And she doesn’t need you riding her so hard.”

“What demons?” When Boone didn’t answer Mio slowly stood. “Tell me.”

Mio’s attitude bordered on disobedience, but Boone let it go. This time. “That’s Aerie’s business. Ask her.”

“Jesus, Boone, you can’t drop that bomb then clam up.”

“I only brought it up to warn you. She’s not in the mood for your usual condescension. Ease up or I promise you’ll regret it.”

He threw his hands in the air. “Fine, whatever!”

Boone’s cell phone chimed and he picked it up from the table, reading the message. “I need to go,” he bit out.

“What’s up?”

“Kristen is having a guest at the cabin. I need to get it ready.”

Mio picked up his coffee and downed the last of it before putting his cup in the sink. “Why do you even care?”

“She’s a sweetheart and it’s no trouble.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Have you two ever…”

“No,” he replied. “She’s just a friend. Her dad and ours go way back. Charlie helped out quite a bit after Dad…after he passed.”

“Killed himself you mean.”

Boone saw red. He slammed a fist into Mio’s jaw, knocking him on his ass. “Do not ever say that,” he warned, his claws extending.

Mio scrambled to his feet, his face red, breathing hard. “You always defend him. He ended his life and left us nearly helpless. He abandoned his pack, Boone. His family! He doesn’t deserve your loyalty.”

Mio was young and hurt by their father’s choice so Boone chose to cut him some slack. He grabbed his brother by the shirt and yanked him up close. “You have no idea what it’s like to watch your mate die right before your eyes. Dad’s grief stole his ability to reason. It happens, Mio. Dad wasn’t the first to join a mate in death. He won’t be the last.”

He yanked out of his hold, then lowered his head. “I hope I never find a mate,” he muttered, stalking out of the room.

Boone stared after him for several seconds, wondering if his brother would ever come to terms with the truth. He’d already found his mate. Aerie. His refusal to claim her was causing them both pain. What would it take for him to wise up? Another chime on his cell tore him out of his musings. He stared at the screen and smiled.

SHE’LL BE THERE THIS AFTERNOON. THANKS, PAL. I OWE YOU.

She? Intrigued by Kristen’s message, Boone sent a text of his own.

DOES SHE HAVE A NAME?

Seconds passed before he received a reply.

MARY. SHE’S MY BFF SO BE NICE!

Boone chuckled. Oh, he could play nice. Heat unfurled inside him as an image of a sweet, fair-skinned human female sprang to mind. Yeah, he’d gladly play nice.