

Mated To An Enemy - Chapter 6

It had been three days since they returned from the Blood Moon Gathering. In those three days, Ashleigh had returned to her everyday life. She trained with the Cold Warriors and held council on her father's patrol schedules and border reports. In addition, she had private time with Granger whenever she could.

But her life had not returned to normal as she had hoped. Her distance from Caleb tempered the feelings of desire, but it did nothing to keep him out of her mind. Of course, it wasn't all-consuming or even consistent, but at some point in every day, those grey eyes would find a way into her thoughts.

Even now, as she sat with her friends filling out the final invitations for her eighteenth birthday, her mind drifted. Wondering about what he was doing or what he might be thinking about.

"Ashleigh, did you hear me?" a voice called, drawing her back from her thoughts.

"What? Sorry," she began, "I was thinking of the patrol rotation."

It wasn't an outright lie. Ashleigh had been wondering if Caleb oversaw his patrol routes the same way her father did or if he went on patrol himself.

"Patrol rotation? Seriously?" another asked.

Ashleigh glanced at her friend, Renee, catching her lavender eyes. Her hair was parted by three small braids of red separating the half that folded to the left, falling just above her shoulders, and the right side that was completely shaved down.

“Oh, come on, Renee, you know Ashleigh gets serious about her duties as a Warrior,” called back the one that had spoken first. A long-haired brunette with hazel eyes that sparkled with friendly sarcasm.

“And why does that still feel like an insult coming from you, Bell?” Ashleigh asked with a smile she couldn’t hide.

They all laughed together, and Renee and Bell continued to make jokes at Ashleigh’s expense as she watched them with a smile. PANDA-NOVEL.COM

These were her two closest friends in the world.

Renee was a couple years older, but they had grown up together, children of the same shifting group. They both had struggled to reign in their strong personalities when following orders. However, Ashleigh had managed a little better than Renee.

Bell, or Annabelle, was a late addition to their friendship circle. Her mother was a member of Autumn; her parents had met at the Blood Moon Gathering and recognized their bond right away. So her father applied for permission to join Autumn, and there they lived until Bell was fifteen.

Unfortunately, both her parents had been killed in an attack by rogue wolves.

PANDA NOVEL A year after their deaths, Bell chose to come live with her father’s parents and become an official member of Winter. Though she struggled with her new Pack’s harsh rules and restrictions, she still claimed she wouldn’t wish to be anywhere else.

Of all the people in her life, Ashleigh felt most at ease with these two, yet here she sat lying to them.

“What’s wrong, Ash?” Renee asked, reaching a hand to touch Ashleigh’s knee.

Ashleigh shook her head and smiled.

“Nothing, I just have too many things on my mind, that’s all.”

“Liar,” said Bell, taking a bite out of an apple. PANDA NOVEL

“We know something is going on, and we know it has something to do with Granger.” Renee dared Ashleigh to deny it.

“What do you mean?” she replied, looking away.

“Come on now, don’t play dumb. Tell us what’s going on,” Renee urged.

“We already know you pushed back the wedding, Ash. Just tell us what happened,” Bell stated. She held Ashleigh’s eye contact to let her know she was honestly concerned.

Ashleigh took a deep breath.

“Look, I just have so much going on, I mean with the birthday party and—” Ashleigh began.

“Eeehhhh! Wrong!” Bell called out, making a buzzer sound as though Ashleigh were a contestant on a game show. “The ‘I’m too busy to plan my wedding’ excuse won’t work on us; we’ve seen the binder.”

Renee nodded in agreement.

“I forgot about the binder.” Ashleigh sighed out loud as she sunk in her chair. Thinking back to the binder she had hidden under her bed, she had spent the better part of two years filling it with ideas and hopes for her dream wedding to Granger.

Renee and Bell moved closer, sitting on either side of their friend and each taking a hand. padding

“Secrets are hard to keep when we share everything.” Renee smiled.

“Plus, we are very nosy and very annoying,” Bell added.

They all laughed, even Ashleigh.

“Just tell us what’s going on. I promise, it will make you feel better,” Renee offered, squeezing Ashleigh’s hand.

“You’re probably right,” Ashleigh sighed, “but I don’t think I can. Not yet.”

“Just tell me this,” Bell opened, “do I need to hurt Granger?”

“No,” Ashleigh laughed. “Granger is wonderful. He has been very patient and understanding. I just have some things on my mind I need to work through, is all.”

“We are here for you whenever you’re ready,” Renee reminded.

“I know, thank you.” Ashleigh smiled before standing up. “But I do actually have other things I need to do, so can I leave the rest of this in your capable hands?”

“You know it.” Renee smiled.

“Yea, but can you not be a total slacker and get those invitations over to the maildrop?” Bell poked at Ashleigh.

“Ok, ok.” Ashleigh laughed. Picking up the stack of completed invitations.

“Oh, don’t forget this one.” Renee reached for the last envelope Ashleigh had been working on.

Renee’s brows furrowed when she looked at the name written on the envelope. Her questioning glance turned up to Ashleigh.

“Alpha Caleb? Of Summer?” she asked.

Ashleigh felt her heart leap into her throat. He hadn't been on the guest list, but he had been on her mind.

'Did I write him an invitation without realizing it?' she wondered to herself.

"That's weird. I don't remember him being on the guestlist... not sure why he would be since he hates us," Bell replied, also looking at Ashleigh curiously.

"Yea... it was um an idea. Like an olive branch. Not just him, each of the Alphas are invited. Alpha's daughter, you know, diplomacy and all that."

"Right..." Bell responded, still eyeing Ashleigh as though she wasn't convinced.

"Anyway, I'll take that." Ashleigh grabbed the invitation from Renee and made her way to the door.

"Thanks again, guys. I'll see ya tomorrow, ok?"

Ashleigh hurried out without waiting for a reply.

In the end, Ashleigh had dropped the invitations off for delivery but held on to the one for Caleb. She had never intended to invite him anyway, so what was the point? But as she lay in bed, tossing and turning, she couldn't help but wonder.

"Maybe I should. For diplomatic purposes," Ashleigh whispered to herself in the dark.

Then, she frowned, shaking her head at the thought.

"No," she told herself firmly, turning over to go to sleep.

But her mind was unsettled. How could she sleep with so many thoughts and questions, and those grey eyes, running through her head? Finally, she got up and opened her bedroom window, climbing out onto the ledge before jumping down into the snow below.

Ashleigh ran until she reached the edge of the thick trees that signaled the beginning of the forest. She looked back over her shoulder before diving into the woods with the cracking and snapping sounds of her bones breaking and realigning.

The sensation of the shift always retained that white-hot fire that tore at the flesh, but the pain was something that she had gotten used to after almost ten years. But, on the other hand, the freedom that came with running through the trees on all four paws was something that always felt fresh and new.

She ran through the forest, jumping from rocks and fallen trees into the snow. The wind rushed through her soft white fur, making her feel like she was flying. This was the feeling she loved. No restraint, just freedom in the wild.

Sometimes she felt as though she could run forever.

The sky was filled with red and purple hues when she finally crawled back in through her window. As she pulled on a new set of pajamas, she glanced down at the invitation that lay on her desk. Quickly she grabbed it and hurried down the hall to the office.

Ashleigh took a deep breath before dropping the envelope into the outgoing box.