

## Mated To An Enemy - Chapter 9

Ashleigh woke to the sound of the birds outside her window.

She was supposed to have gone directly to see Renee and Bell for a report on whether all the guests had arrived without issue. Still, she had been too tired by the time her patrol had ended and gone straight to bed.

She got up and thought about getting into the shower before heading out to find the girls, but as she looked at the clock, she realized it was way too early. Though she had only been asleep for three hours, she had woken at the time she normally would for a morning run. It was too early.

Neither of the girls would be awake yet. She considered going back to sleep, but she knew it was pointless.

“Well, I guess I have no choice,” she whispered to herself with a smile.

The truth was that she loved her morning run. Every day she would run several miles in her standard human form and several in wolf form.

This was when she felt most free and at ease.

She went down the stairs and found her mother already awake.

“Mom?” she called to her.

“Ashleigh, I expected you to sleep in this morning.” Corrine smiled, giving Ashleigh a kiss on the cheek.

“Yea, that was the plan, but gotta get my run in,” she laughed, heading toward the door.

“Have fun, my dear,” Corrine replied, waving to her, before suddenly remembering something. “Oh, Ashleigh, wait!”

She was already out the door. Corrine looked outside but didn’t see her anywhere.

“Oh well, I’m sure he’ll find her,” she said to herself as she closed the door.

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It had been a long time since Caleb had been within the borders of Winter. Even before his father’s death, he hadn’t been to the North in a long time. PANDA-NOVEL.COM

He could remember coming for training. But, of course, it wasn’t required for the other wolves. Still, his father had believed that an Alpha should always know more than his own wolves, especially in learning about protection and defense. So, Caleb had been sent to Winter for three months. To learn how to fight and defend in the snow and on the rocky terrain of the mountain.

He had enjoyed it; he had enjoyed his time with Alpha Wyatt.

Caleb felt his jaw tighten as he thought of Alpha Wyatt, a man he once looked at with respect and awe. But now, he considered him as an enemy to his pack.

There had been quite a fuss made when Caleb announced his intention to attend this weekend. He made it clear his purpose was to maintain peace and nothing more. Still, many wolves of his pack felt their presence here was an insult to his father’s memory.

Caleb wondered if they were right. Would he have made the same decision a month ago?

His self-reflection was disrupted quickly by a scent he would recognize until his dying day. It was hers. It was faint, so he knew she wasn’t near, but it lingered as though it had been here in this place for some time.

Caleb looked around, following the faint aroma until he came across a small duffel bag. He pulled the zipper, and her scent circled around him, teasing his senses. He reached his hand in and pulled out a shirt. He brought it to his nose and breathed it in.

“Goddess help me,” he whispered to himself as the warmth of her filled him. His hand gripped the shirt tightly.

The scent was intense, overwhelming. Caleb’s skin was prickling with an energy he couldn’t suppress. He shoved the shirt back into the bag and dropped it to the ground, taking a few steps away.

It didn’t fade. Instead, it actually seemed to get stronger. His head was clouded with thoughts of her. The scent of her, the movement of her body, the sound of her voice. He dropped to his knees and did the only thing he could think of to wake himself.

He grabbed a handful of snow and crushed it against his face. The cold against his skin was a welcomed shock. Finally, finally, he could breathe again, he could think, and he could hear.

He could hear her.

“Excuse me...” Ashleigh called, her voice coming from behind a tree.

Caleb turned in the direction she had called from.

“No! No, don’t turn around. Please,” Ashleigh yelled quickly. PANDA NOVEL

He turned back the other way as instructed.

“So, uh, you have something of mine over there that I really, really need.”

He looked around, remembering the duffel bag. He reached for it. Then, realization struck him why it was here and why Ashleigh would call from behind a tree. He swallowed suddenly as he felt the flush race through his body to the tips of his ears.

He took a deep breath and called out to her.

"I am going to turn around so I can toss it in your direction. I will turn back around immediately. I promise I will not look."

"Ok," she replied with uneasiness.

He stood up and turned around, tossing the bag near the tree he thought he had heard her voice coming from. He held a moment and saw her hand snake out to grab the bag. He turned quickly so as not to break his word.

"What are you doing out here?" Ashleigh asked after a few silent moments passed.

Caleb wasn't sure if he should turn around or not.

"My team came out for morning drills. When we were done, I felt like a walk," Caleb replied.

"It's safe," she said, walking past him to a fallen log she sat down on.

The running shorts she had put on only served to emphasize her long muscular legs as she walked by him.

His traitorous eyes continued their journey up her shapely waist to the curve of her breasts that the sports bra and t-shirt failed to hide.

"Debatable," he commented under his breath as he looked away, words Ashleigh hadn't caught.

“So, you make your wolves train even on vacation?” she asked.

“There were no events planned at four this morning. So they didn’t miss anything,” he stated frankly.

Ashleigh looked at him with surprise.

“What about at the Blood Moon Gathering? Did you make them train then, too?” she asked curiously.

“They got a workout in, but it was not a scheduled training,” he sighed. Feeling uncomfortable remembering their last encounter.

She noticed, and the memory came to her as well.

“What about you? What are you doing out here?” Caleb asked, trying to change the subject.

“I was out for my morning run.”

“Do you always run naked?” he asked quietly.

“It’s not like I planned it! I was shifted!” she cried out as the blush crept into her cheeks. “I ran straight to my clothing stash; I didn’t expect anyone to be here.”

“Do the wolves of Winter not have access to skin mesh?” Caleb asked, looking away from her so she wouldn’t see his own reddened cheeks as he remembered finding her clothing stash.

Ashleigh sighed. She was irritated by his implication that Winter would not have access to basic supplies. For example, skin mesh was a magically infused fabric that allowed for shifting while wearing it. This permitted them to wear armor in their human form and retain it in wolf form.

“Of course, we do! But we only use it in our armor. It would be a waste of resources to use for everyday clothing. Not to mention, I happen to enjoy running wild and feeling the wind in my fur, which is something you can’t do in a skin mesh!”

“Fair enough,” Caleb replied with a smile. It was fun for him to hear Ashleigh so passionate. The feeling of the wind in his fur was one he also enjoyed.

Ashleigh huffed. She felt embarrassed for getting so worked up.

“Sorry,” she said quickly, “I am being very rude right now.”

“What?” he asked, honestly confused by her statement.

“I was on patrol last night, so I didn’t even greet you.” She smiled.

She stood from her log, placing her fist to her heart, and bowing gracefully, she spoke.

“Alpha Caleb, I welcome you to Winter.” She raised her head to him with a warm smile.

He felt his heart skip.

“Thank you, Ashleigh.” He said softly, returning her smile.

She felt her heart skip.

“This is your first time here, right?” she asked quickly, pushing down against the feelings and sensations that were trying to force their way to the surface.

“No,” he replied. “I was here about twelve years ago.”

“You were? I don’t remember that.”

“No reason to.” He responded. “I was just a ten-year-old here for a short while to train.”

“Well, I was eight. I probably would have been excited by someone around my age coming to visit.”

She laughed.

“Ashleigh, why am I here?” he asked bluntly. The trip down memory lane guided him in a direction that would only lead to his anger. He wanted to avoid scaring her.

“What?” Ashleigh asked, confused by the sudden switch in the subject.

“Why did you invite me?” He looked carefully at her now, looking for any hint she might give.

She avoided his gaze.

“Why did you come?” She asked. Not entirely sure why those were the words that came out of her mouth.

He looked away now.

Ashleigh felt her heart pounding in her chest. She felt as though she would start having a hard time breathing soon. She had opened herself up just a sliver, and it felt like a flood was coming.

“I invited all the Alphas,” she stated.

He looked up at her again.

“I thought it might be an olive branch,” her confidence was waning. She knew already that this was an answer Caleb would not like.

“An olive branch?” his mouth twitched into a forced smile as he choked out a laugh. “An olive branch for what, exactly.”

“Winter and Summer have been in a stalemate of bitterness and anger for over two years now.”

“And you think inviting the Alphas to your birthday party will fix it all.” Caleb laughed bitterly.

PANDA NOVEL “Obviously not,” Ashleigh stated through gritted teeth. “But if you won’t take the first step, it’s on us to do so.”

Caleb shook his head in anger.

“There is only one step that needs to be taken, and that is by Alpha Wyatt.”

“My father is a good man who has done nothing—”

“So was mine!” His voice reverberated against the trees and sent the birds fleeing from their nests.

She took a step back from him. He looked up at her just long enough for her to recognize the tears in his eyes.

“Damn it!” he hissed to himself before turning and running into the trees.

Ashleigh fell to her knees, letting out the breath she did not realize she had been holding. She took deep breaths to slow her racing heart. Until she felt the presence of someone else coming closer.

Quickly she wiped away the tears and got up off the ground, just in time to see Granger emerge from out of the trees.