

FAITH GIBSON



REBEL MOON SHIFTERS

CLASH
KINGS OF

BOOK III TWO

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REBEL MOON SHIFTERS
BOOK 2

By Faith Gibson



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Author's Introduction

Welcome back to the Rebel Moon Shifters series. Each of the Rebel Moon books are written to be standalones, but there will be topics mentioned from previous books. If you haven't read *Strands of Gold*, you will encounter minor spoilers. For those of you new to this world of shifters, the series is set sixty years after a near apocalypse. The main characters were introduced in *The Stone Society* and *The Hounds of Zeus MC* series. They are the children from those books and are now grown and protecting humans as well as each other while they find their mates.

As with *Strands*, I am including a list of characters in the beginning of the book, but only if they are present in the story. There are close to 50 children, but some of those are humans and adopted, and some are still too young to find mates. The names below include their parents and in which book they were first mentioned. Di Pietro was the original last name of some of the Stone Clan. While Dante and his family still use the family name, most have changed it over the years, and Stone is the most current surname. When you live for a thousand years, you have to reinvent yourself.

Cast of Characters

Stone Society Clan

Sebastian Stone – Gargoyle King (Rafael Stone & Kaya Kane
– *Rafael*, SS Book 1)

Mate – Dakota Young, Wolf Shifter

Sibling – Stefania “Seven”

Anthony Stone - Gargoyle (Gregor Stone & Tessa Blackmore
– *Gregor*, SS Book 2)

Sibling – Tabitha (twin)

Lydia Stone - Gargoyle (Nikolas Stone & Sophia Brooks – *Nikolas*, SS Book 6)

Locke Stone - Gargoyle (Nikolas Stone & Sophia Brooks – *Nikolas*, SS Book 6)

Carleigh Stone - Gargoyle (Julian Stone & Katherine Fox – *Julian*, SS Book 6)

Harlow Montagnon – Gargoyle/Gryphon hybrid (Tamian St. Claire Montagnon & Lucy Ball – *Tamian*, SS Book 11)

Deklan Di Pietro - Gargoyle (Dante Di Pietro & Isabelle Sarantos – *Dante*, SS Book 3)

Jon Hartley – Gargoyle (Frey Hartley & Abbi Quinn – *Frey*, SS, Book 4)

Torfinn Sorensen – Gargoyle (Urijah Aldobrand & Banyan Sorensen, *Urijah*, SS Book 10)

Bodi Sorensen – Gargoyle (Urijah Aldobrand & Banyan Sorensen, *Urijah*, SS Book 10)

Hounds of Zeus

Maveryk Lazlo – Gryphon (*Double the Mayhem*, Hounds Book 2)

Major Lazlo – Gryphon (Maveryck Lazlo & Natalia Jones – *Double the Mayhem*, Hounds Book 2)

Nikita Lazlo – Dire Wolf (Kyllian Lazlo & Quinn Shepherd – *Master of Kayos*, Hounds Book 6)

Mate – Madsen Payne, Wolf Shifter

Kayden Lazlo – Gryphon/Dire Wolf hybrid (Kyllian Lazlo & Quinn Shepherd, *Master of Kayos*, Hounds Book 6)

Bridgewater Pack

Dakota Young – Wolf Shifter, Bartender (Parents Arthur and Diana, brother Phoenix)

Kingston Bridgewater – Alpha of the Bridgewater Pack,
Panther WV

Sloane – Kingston's Second-in-Command

Jolee – Dakota's best friend

Charleston SC Pack

Knox Millard – Alpha of the Charleston pack (*Strands of
Gold*)

Madsen Payne – Nikita's mate

Chapter 1

FASTER, DAMMIT. DAKOTA urged her Wolf to put even more distance between them and the large animal chasing her. Pack runs used to be fun. Now they were a test in endurance and determination to stay several steps ahead of the male who made it his mission to best her every time. Kingston reveled in the chase and snarled whenever he caught her beneath his large body, which wasn't often. She refused to make it easy on him, even if he was her Alpha. Dakota submitted to no one. She was her own wolf and would never show her belly willingly to any man she didn't want.

Except him.

Yes, except him, whoever the hell *he* was. Or had been. Dakota didn't know if the teen had lived. It had been ten years since her brother attacked the human. Ten years since her parents packed their shit and moved from Utah to West Virginia, all because her brother, Phoenix, took his protectiveness too far. They had been out for a run when they encountered two humans jogging, and Dakota had been struck by the male. Not literally, but time slowed to a stop, and nothing and no one existed but the dark-haired stranger, which didn't make sense. Wolves didn't have fated mates, but if they did? She would have thought he was hers. Before she knew what was happening, Phoenix attacked the teen, and Dakota lunged at her brother, knocking him off the guy. It wasn't the first time Nix had taken things too far, but it was the first he inflicted enough damage to kill someone. Why the hell couldn't he protect her from King?

Speaking of, Dakota shook herself from thoughts of the past and focused on the here and now. She knew the woods like the back of her hand, but so did her Alpha. Probably better since he'd grown up in the area. Still, she waited until the last moment, and then she banked a hard right, her claws digging

into the ground, and launched herself between two thick red oaks. The bark scraped her fur, but she didn't let that stop her. Dakota turned another sharp right and raced back the way she'd come. A loud growl was followed by a long howl, and it was all she could do to stay on her paws. That howl was the Alpha's call. Her Wolf whimpered, but Dakota demanded they ignore it. For anyone else, snubbing Kingston would result in punishment. For her? King would snarl and snap his jaws at her, then stomp off to find some other female to fuck. And there were plenty of willing bodies for him to choose from.

The Bridgewater pack was three times larger than the one they left in Utah despite their town in West Virginia being an eighth of the size. Panther, named after the creek and not the animal, was one of those forgotten towns after the near apocalypse in the early 2000s. Before civilization was brought to a screeching halt by a group of religious zealots known as The Ministry, Panther boasted a population of around six hundred. Now it was half that with all residents belonging to the Bridgewater pack. Her father was an old friend of Kingston's father, the former Alpha, so when it came time to move from Utah, Dakota's family was welcomed with the stipulation that Nix caused no trouble. And *that* was the reason her brother didn't protect her from King.

Dakota didn't stop running until she reached her cabin. She shifted to her skin before stomping up the three steps to her wooden porch, gathering her clothes, boots, and straw cowboy hat. Once inside, she slammed the door closed before throwing the deadbolt. Not that a measly lock would stop the Alpha if he wanted in. He could kick the door down, or he could use his Alpha voice on her. Been there, done that. She might ignore his howl, but she could not disobey a direct command.

Dakota was pissed off after every pack run because King always gave chase. Dakota prayed to the goddess he found one of the many females willing to get under him for the night instead of following her home. She was in no mood to spurn his advances again. It wasn't that King was a bad man or Alpha. He was a good leader. He was fair. He looked after the pack as well as his father, Davis, had. He was handsome and

strong and hers for the taking. But her Alpha wasn't who Dakota wanted. She hadn't saved her virginity on the miniscule chance she would one day find the stranger. She had needs after all. And maybe she was crazy for wanting a man who might not be alive, but she refused to bind herself to another if there was the slightest chance she would one day find him.

And how do you propose to do that?

It was an argument she and her animal had often. With Dakota stuck in Panther, the odds of finding the dark-haired stranger were slim to none. Her routine rarely changed. She slept late, then met her mom for lunch most days before heading to work. The Depot was a hole-in-the-wall tavern where Dakota tended bar. She had started as a waitress when she turned eighteen before training to pour beer and mix cocktails. Vernon, the owner, tried to give Dakota a job as manager, but she turned him down. She didn't want the responsibility. She enjoyed putting in her eight hours, then clocking out at closing, leaving the paperwork to someone else. Was it glamorous? No, but it paid what few bills she had. She didn't have rent or a mortgage since her cabin had been built by her father, brother, and several other pack mates. She had utilities, insurance, and a car payment. That was it. The rest went into a savings account.

Dakota was old enough to go back to Utah by herself, but she had never ventured farther alone than the next state over. Panther was close to both Kentucky and Virginia, but Dakota had only driven to Bristol, Virginia, one day when she needed to get away. It wasn't that she was afraid. She was a shifter, after all. No, it was a gut feeling. One that told her the man was no longer in Utah. If Dakota had learned anything in her twenty-five years, it was to trust her intuition. It told her not to give in to King. Not to give in to any male as far as mating went. If her gut was wrong, and the stranger was dead, she would end up alone for the rest of her days, but it was a chance she was willing to take.

Dakota's stomach rumbled as it did after a hard run, so after tossing her uniform in the laundry basket, she went to the

refrigerator and pulled out the steak she had cooked before work along with her favorite beer. She didn't bother heating the meat. Instead, she cut it into bite-sized pieces and ate it standing naked by the kitchen counter. Her cabin was small and perfect for one person. The downstairs was one open room housing the kitchen, a dinette table, and living area, with a combination bathroom/laundry room tucked away on the left side. The upstairs was her loft bedroom. A woodburning fireplace filled one wall of the living room, and a flat-screen TV was mounted above it. The television had been a gift from her brother, but she rarely turned it on. Dakota preferred to get lost in a good paperback. She had an e-reader, a Christmas present from her mother, but Dakota liked to hold a book in her hands. Smell the paper as she turned each page. One of her packmates owned a thrift store in the next town over, and she put aside any books she thought Dakota would like.

After eating her steak, Dakota licked the plate clean because she could. That was one of the perks of living alone – there was no one to witness her lack of manners. She washed the plate, fork, and knife, setting them on a towel to dry. Now to the good stuff. Her bathroom was nice if on the small side. The shower had amazing water pressure, and Dakota was ready to wash the day away. Normally, she bathed immediately after a shift at The Depot, but the pack run took precedence. As shifters, nudity was the norm when they got ready to take to their fur, dropping their clothes to the ground, then finding them once they returned to their skin, but Dakota preferred to shift at home. It wasn't as though she was ashamed of her body. Dakota was lithe with just the right amount of muscle, her boobs were average, and her tummy was toned because of her DNA. She looked fine naked; she just didn't want King staring at her.

Leering is more like it.

That too. When they first arrived in Panther, she was scrawny, and none of the males paid her much attention, Kingston included. Being a late bloomer, it was about the time King became Alpha that Dakota began filling out, and King noticed. He already had big dick energy, being an alpha male, but when he took over the pack, King felt he had the right to

dictate who his mate would be. Out of the dozen single females, he set his sights on her.

Nope.

Dakota started the shower. While the water heated, she unbraided her long hair. She worked behind the bar, but that didn't mean the grease from the kitchen didn't stick to every inch of her, and she hated the smell. Stepping under the waterfall showerhead, Dakota closed her eyes and sighed. Best part of her day, right there. Wiping the water from her eyes, she grabbed the shampoo, then lathered her hair and scraped her blunt nails over her scalp. Dakota had never been a girly girl. Her makeup was minimal, and she had never worn a skirt a day in her life unlike other females in her pack. They dressed to impress the Alpha, whereas Dakota dressed for comfort. If the grunge look from the 1990s ever made a comeback, she'd be set. Flannel shirts and ripped jeans filled her closet, along with cowboy boots, motorcycle boots, and sneakers for when she wore shorts.

She rinsed the suds and reached for the conditioner. Her hair took a beating having to wash it daily, but Dakota spent a little extra out of each paycheck on a special serum that kept the ends from drying out. After applying the detangling conditioner, she bathed, shaved her legs, then rinsed all over. The whole process took about fifteen minutes, but she stood under the hot water, tilting her head forward so it could beat against her neck and shoulders, letting the stress of the run swirl down the drain with the water. When it began to turn cold, she turned the shower off and pushed back the curtain, listening for any sound that shouldn't be in the quiet cabin. When she heard none, Dakota stepped out onto the bathmat and wrapped her hair in one towel before drying with another. She hung the towel on a hook before grabbing her robe off the back of the door. When she was snug, she brushed and flossed her teeth. That left the chore of detangling her hair and applying the serum. Her nightly ritual was necessary because she refused to cut her long locks.

Tightening her robe, she padded across the cabin to the living area and curled up on the worn but comfortable sofa

with the romance novel she was in the middle of. Dakota might not be the most feminine female in their pack, but she did believe in true love, and if she couldn't find it for herself, she could at least get lost in someone else's version of it.

After several chapters, Dakota set the book aside and slid down so she was lying on her side. As she did most nights, she closed her eyes and imagined what the teen from Utah might look like as a man. Their interaction had been brief, but his visage was burned into her brain. Dakota had no idea why she couldn't forget about him. It caused tension between her and her father. Arthur Young was more concerned about his friendship with Davis Bridgewater than he was his daughter's wishes. He didn't care about the teen from ten years ago or the fact that Dakota felt a connection with the stranger.

Her father slammed his hand on the table. "It's a privilege to be the Alpha Mate, Dakota."

Dakota pushed her chair back, scraping the legs across the floor, standing. "And I would be honored if my heart didn't belong to someone else."

Arthur also stood, leaning over the dinner her mother had prepared. "When are you going to let this foolish notion go? You're hanging on to this fantasy about a boy who's probably dead."

Dakota pointed at the empty chair where Nix should have been sitting. "And whose fault is that? I was in no danger from him. Nix attacked the boy for no good reason."

"Protecting you is your brother's job as much as it is mine."

Dakota slapped her chest. "Then he should be protecting me from Kingston."

"That's Alpha Kingston, Kody. You forget your place."

"I forget nothing, Dad."

"That's enough." Diana tossed her napkin on her still full plate. "Arthur, let it go. If Kody doesn't want to be the Alpha Mate, that's her decision."

And so it went. Dakota loved her father, but she didn't like him. She was an adult who could make her own decisions, as her mother argued. At least her mom was on her side. Diana was a good wife and mate, but she was Dakota's biggest champion and often stood between Arthur and Dakota, backing them into their neutral corners to keep harsh words from being said. Well, harsher. They had yet to say anything they couldn't take back, but the more her dad pushed, the more Dakota feared they were headed toward just that.

An owl hooted outside her window. Dakota had learned long ago to listen when other animals called out. This wasn't an "I've spotted a rodent for dinner hoot" but an alert to something bigger than the bird. Dakota sat up, opening her shifter senses. The hair on her arms stood on end, and she prepared herself for what was to come. Within seconds, footsteps sounded on the porch, and Dakota scrubbed her hands down her face. She didn't want King in her home, so she strode to the door, flipped the locks, and opened it before he could knock.

"You ran off," her Alpha griped. Dakota scrunched her nose when she caught a whiff of familiar perfume and sex on the male.

"You seem surprised. Why is that? I have made my intentions clear, yet you continue to ignore them."

King pushed the door back and strode in like he had a right to be in her space. As Alpha of the pack, he did, but Dakota didn't have to like it. Instead of following, she remained by the open door. If he wouldn't leave, she would.

Maybe that's not a bad idea.

The more her Wolf pushed for them to leave the territory, the more Dakota thought about it. She had money saved, and she could start a new life somewhere else, but she wouldn't leave her mom. Not yet.

"I don't understand you, Dakota." King sat in the middle of her sofa and stretched his arms across the back.

“I don’t understand you either. You reek of sex, which means you left the bed of a willing candidate, Tinsley by the stench of cheap perfume, yet here you are. Is it the thrill of the chase? If I said yes to your advances, would you add another notch to your bedpost and move on?”

Kingston arched a dark eyebrow. “Are you offering?”

“No. I don’t know how to make it any clearer to you that I am not interested in becoming the Alpha Mate, nor am I interested in becoming another one of your conquests. Don’t push me on this.”

King rose to his feet, stalking toward her. The male towered over her by a foot, and even if he didn’t, his power as her Alpha threatened to bring her to her knees. Dakota lowered her gaze, but it took every bit of strength she possessed not to bare her neck. The moment she did, it would be game over.

King reached out and snagged a strand of Dakota’s hair, twirling it between his fingers. “I could push you, Dakota. I could demand your submission.”

Her head snapped up. “You would rape me?” she whispered.

King snarled and released her hair. “Get some sleep, Kody.” King brushed by her, and as soon as he hit the porch, he shifted and bound off into the dark, his shredded clothes scattered. Dakota left them where they landed, slammed the door, and relocked it. She leaned against the wood and blew out a breath. Maybe it was time to go. She would miss her mother, but Dakota couldn’t keep spurning her Alpha’s advances before he snapped.

Her house now stank of someone else, so Dakota went to the kitchen and found the air freshener she kept for this reason alone. She sprayed the sofa, then set the can on the end table. It would probably take a few more applications before the stench was fully covered. Sighing, Dakota climbed the steps to her loft and plopped down on her bed, not bothering to pull the covers down. She already knew it would be a long night. Every night after a pack run ended the same way, with her tossing and turning. Her dreams would be a mixture of trying

to outrun her Alpha while desperately seeking the one she wanted to catch her. Dakota turned her eyes toward the window. Her room was situated so the full moon was visible. As she gazed at the orb, she prayed to her goddess that the teen had somehow been saved and he was now somewhere out there, staring at the moon as she was.

Chapter 2

SEBASTIAN SHIVERED AS he stood at the spot where his life nearly ended when he was a teen. The trees, the dirt paths, and the mountains hadn't changed. Bas couldn't say the same about himself. A lot could happen in ten years, and for him, it had. Bas was no longer a kid living in his father's shadow. His father, who was King of the Gargoyles, a successful business owner, father, mate, and friend to many. Bas was most of those as well, but the one he wasn't, the one that hurt the most, was mate. Coming back to Utah was bittersweet. Sebastian understood why his papa wanted to have the ceremony to hand over the crown somewhere large enough to accommodate their closest Clanmates, but this place had an impossible hold on Bas.

The first time he was there, Sebastian's life had been turned on its axis. *He* had been turned, or transitioned, as the Gargoyles called their initial shift. Being a half-blood, Sebastian's first shift didn't happen organically like it would if he were a full-blooded Goyle. Half-bloods transitioned soon after meeting their mates, and Bas had met his in a little she-wolf. Met was the wrong term since they didn't actually meet. He and Lydia were jogging through these very woods when Bas was attacked by a wolf. Since Bas had been down for the count dealing with a ripped open chest, he only knew what happened from his cousin's recounting of the event.

Over the past ten years, Bas and his parents had visited the hotel at the base of Mount Emmons several times on the off chance his mate was there. She wasn't, so he gave up on the notion of having a run-in like Connor had with Alyssa in South Carolina. Connor had met his mate as a child, and the gods brought them back together as adults. Bas wasn't going to get his happy reunion. Not that reunion was the right term either considering he didn't know what his mate looked like.

He hadn't even seen her wolf. Unless the gods stepped in, Bas would spend his life alone.

Ironic that his life was about to be changed again in the same location? Bas didn't think so. His papa probably wanted to swap a bad memory for a good one, but Bas wasn't sure it would happen. Becoming King of the Gargoyles was an honor, or it should be, but Sebastian wasn't ready.

You know that isn't true. He wouldn't hand you the crown if he didn't know you were ready.

Sebastian sighed. Arguing with his Goyle was a fruitless endeavor, one that happened more often than not these days. Bas had resigned himself to being mateless while his beast refused to give up.

When Rafael called Bas one day and asked to meet, Sebastian didn't think anything of it. His papa had said he wasn't planning on handing over the crown anytime soon, so when he told Bas he was ready to step down, it threw Sebastian for a loop.

"It's time, Son. The world is changing, and our Clan needs someone who can lead us through those changes. Besides, Seven is grown, and I want to travel. Relax with my mate without worrying about the phone ringing every ten minutes."

Things were changing. For most of Rafael's reign, he only dealt with other Gargoyles. Now, though, there were all types of shifters, and it was up to Sebastian to meet with the leaders of packs, prides, dens, and whatever the other species called their clans. The changes that were upon them weren't good in Sebastian's opinion. Bas thanked the gods he had plenty of cousins to help, just as his papa had brothers and cousins of his own to help him rule.

Speaking of cousins, Lydia stood quietly beside Bas. When Bas said he was going for a walk, it was she who followed. It made sense considering she was the one who'd been jogging with him the day he was attacked. Lydia understood better than anyone what that spot in the woods represented. Sebastian didn't mind having company. Even

though he was a badass Goyle, the memories of that day ten years ago had him feeling anything but strong. He could get lost in his thoughts knowing his cousin and one of his best friends would watch his back.

After several minutes, Bas said, "I guess it's time."

Lydia slid her arm around his waist and squeezed. "You're ready for this, Bas."

Bas tugged at the collar beneath his tie. "Ready or not, it's happening." Unlike his father, Sebastian wasn't a suit and tie man. He preferred his worn jeans, flannel shirts, and work boots. But today, he dressed the part of someone in charge. Someone important. Together, he and Lydia walked out of the woods and back to where a large portion of their family waited. Rafael's brothers and cousins along with their mates and kids were in attendance. That number alone was staggering, and when he added friends to the mix? It was overwhelming, but Bas got it. Crowning a new King was a big deal. Rafael wanted to invite more of the Clan, but at Sebastian's request, they had kept the number to less than two hundred.

With the hotel being closed to anyone other than their Clan, Rafael must have planned for this day well before he spoke to Sebastian about it. He should be pissed, but that would be disrespectful to his papa and his King. Rafael Stone was the best of the best, and Bas was beyond lucky to be his son. He should want to take the crown if for no other reason than to allow Rafael time to enjoy life with his mate without having to worry about leading their Clan. Rafael and Kaya had given so much of themselves, and they deserved to step down. Bas just wished he had a mate of his own to help him rule the way his momma helped his papa.

The last time so many of them had been at the hotel, it was summer, and they were in swimsuits or shorts and tees. It had been a celebration when Connor received his master's degree, but it was more like a family vacation. Today, everyone wore attire suited for a different type of celebration. It was the first time he'd seen some of his female cousins in a dress, but they'd done it for him. He looked around at

everyone in attendance, and his nerves settled. Growing up with so many cousins and shifters his age, they weren't merely family by blood. They were his family of the heart, and each one of them would lay down their life for him, as he would them. Gone were the days of the King leading only Gargoyles. His Clan was made up of Goyles, wolves, Gryphons, and hybrids. Those weren't the only types of shifters in the world, and Bas would welcome any species should they find their way into the fold.

Taking a deep breath, Sebastian wound his way through the myriad of people to where his parents stood waiting. His mother was stunning in her blue dress. His sister, Seven, was Kaya's spitting image and wore a similar dress in the same shade of blue. His papa was regal in his tailor-made suit with his sword strapped to his back. Bas walked up to him and dragged him into a tight embrace.

"I'm ready, Papa. I'm sorry for being an ungrateful ass these last few months."

Rafael gripped Sebastian's neck, pulling away so they could see each other. "No apologies, Son. I get how big a responsibility this is, and nobody is ever truly ready for a task of this magnitude. Now, let's get this done so you can get out of that tie I know you hate." Rows of chairs were set up in front of a stage, and when Rafael told Frey they were ready, he let out a sharp whistle.

"Please take your seats," Frey said when he had everyone's attention. While that was happening, Bas, his parents, and sister made their way to the stage. They paused at the steps where Julian waited. He attached lapel microphones to Rafael's and Sebastian's coats so the cameras would catch every word. They would also help the humans among them to more easily hear what was being said. Julian cupped Sebastian's cheek briefly before he found his seat beside his mate, Katherine, and their kids, Carleigh, Jacob, and Juniper. Rafael escorted Kaya up the steps, with Bas helping Seven. Once the females were seated, Bas took his place next to his father, and the crowd fell quiet.

Rafael cleared his throat. Sebastian sneaked a glance at his father and wished he hadn't. This strong male, King of their kind, had tears in his eyes. He gave Sebastian the same smile he had worn as long as Bas could remember. Not once in his life had his papa ever yelled at him. He'd never raised a hand to him that wasn't to offer a hug or a shoulder squeeze. He had given Sebastian words of wisdom, words of praise, and words of love. Even during teaching moments, Rafael's tone had been warm. Never condescending. Never hateful. He was the epitome of what a father should be, and Sebastian prayed he would be half the father...

"I love you, Papa," Bas whispered.

Rafael pulled him in for another hug and returned the sentiment. When Rafael faced the crowd once more, he laughed and shook his head. "I would apologize, but then I would need to be sorry for the tears. I'm not, and I have no doubt those of you with kids of your own know how I feel. Standing before you today, I am honored. Honored to have been your King these last two hundred and twenty-eight years. When I took over the throne, I wasn't given a choice. As the oldest son, the crown fell to me when my father was slain. I was certain I had several centuries before it would be my turn. I wasn't ready. Hell, some days I still feel like I'm not ready for the task.

"Some of you may feel Sebastian is too young to lead our Clan. He certainly does, but I have faith in him. I have watched him grow from this tiny creature into an amazing man. He has the fortitude, the intelligence, and mostly the heart to lead not only the next generation but all of us. As I had my brothers and cousins to stand by me and guide me, Sebastian has not only those same males, but their mates, his mother and I, his cousins, and his sister. As I told Sebastian, times are changing, and he is the perfect male to lead us through those changes.

"It has been an honor leading you, but I am even more privileged to present to you Sebastian Holt Di Pietro, your new King." Rafael removed his sword and held it in his palms, bowing when he did so. Bas took the hilt, turned to the crowd,

and raised it above his head. Everyone in attendance stood, fisted their hearts, and as one, said, “On my honor.”

Sebastian placed his father’s sword – his sword now – in the sheath on his own back. Once everyone was reseated, he addressed them. “As my father said, it is an honor to lead our Clan. I have some big shoes to fill. No one understands this more than I, but today, I make this solemn vow; I will rule our Clan with the same grace, fairness, and strength my father has. The world around us *is* changing, and the biggest threat is humans discovering our secret and exposing us, or worse. By now, you should all be aware of what happened in South Carolina, when one of Connor’s visions led him there. I have already begun gathering leaders from other species to form a council, including Alpha Knox Millard from Charleston’s wolf pack.

“We must be on guard. My first duty is to our Clan, and the biggest part of that duty is keeping us safe. Though I will be traveling, I will always be but a phone call away. Should there be a reason you need me immediately and I’m unavailable, I am appointing my cousin, Anthony Stone, as my second-in-command.” Bas glanced down at his cousin, and Anthony’s shock quickly turned to acquiescence. He nodded once, agreeing to take his rightful place at Sebastian’s side. “I appreciate each and every one of you, and I am proud to take up the mantel.” The crowd broke into applause and cheers. Sebastian held up his hand, and when the noise quieted, he continued, “The Baxters have prepared a feast fit for a King.” Bas smirked, and the crowd laughed. “Please enjoy yourselves.”

Bas turned to his papa who wrapped him in a hug. His momma and sister joined in. The four of them stood quietly for a bit, enjoying the moment. They were interrupted by Anthony, who gripped Sebastian’s shoulders.

“Dude, you couldn’t spring that on me before your big speech?”

Bas grinned. “And give you time to dwell on it? Hell no.” Anthony pulled him away from his family and wrapped a beefy arm around his neck.

“I’m honored to be your second,” Anthony whispered when he released Bas.

“Hey, that’s the King you’re manhandling,” Seven fussed, smacking their cousin on the stomach.

“Oof.” Anthony rubbed the offended spot. “What the hell, Goldilocks? You been eating your porridge?”

Seven held her fists up in a fighter’s stance. “Maybe I have. Wanna have a go?”

“Nope. I’ve seen you sparring with the others. I like my pretty face just the way it is.”

Stefania Seven Stone was like the other females in their Clan – fierce. A few of their cousins lovingly called her Princess, being the King’s daughter. “Okay, pretty boy, escort me down the steps and feed me.” Seven wrapped her hand around Anthony’s bicep, and he did as instructed.

Kaya placed her hand on Sebastian’s cheek. “I’m so proud of you, My King.”

Bas glanced at his father to see how he would react to no longer being king to his queen, but his papa smiled. “As am I. There is no one better to take my place, Son. Now, you should mingle and let the others wish you well.”

“Can I take off this damn tie first?”

Rafael grinned while removing the tie for him. Kaya reached up and undid the top button. “Better?”

“Much. I hope our Clan doesn’t expect me to dress this way all the time.”

“You do you, Bas,” his mom said.

When they reached the bottom of the steps, Julian was there to remove the microphones. Carleigh stood by her father, arms crossed over her chest. Like their other cousins, she was tough, having trained with Frey in the gym, but Carleigh took after her dad in the smarts department. She, along with another cousin, Harlow, and a dire wolf shifter, Nikita, had their own cyber security company called H3. The Trio, as they were

referred to, were badasses with anything digital. They scared the shit out of Bas, and he was glad they were on his side.

“What?” Bas asked.

“You had to go and make Anthony your second? Like his ego isn’t big enough?”

“I resemble that remark,” Anthony yelled from across the grounds like the heathen he was, and Bas shook his head.

“See?” Carleigh wrapped her arm through Sebastian’s and led him away from his parents and her dad. “Seriously, though. I’m proud of you, Bas. You’re going to be a wonderful leader.”

“Thanks, but I’m going to be great because I have you and the others helping.” And Bas meant that. He couldn’t do it alone.

As they wound their way through the masses, Bas was surrounded by Clan members once again fisting their hearts and pledging their loyalty. Carleigh remained by his side the entire time. When he had greeted everyone, they fixed a plate and joined several cousins who had saved them seats. The good thing about those he was surrounded with was they didn’t treat him differently now that he was their King. To them, he was still Bas. As the evening wore on, they ate, drank, laughed, and enjoyed being together. A DJ played dance music, keeping the mood joyous. Bas mingled amongst his Clan, talking and joking as he always had, but he sensed the shift in their perception. It was heady. Tangible. Was this how his papa felt for so long? Surrounded by family, yet alone?

Bas excused himself and left the tent, wandering back toward the woods. As he walked without purpose, his skin buzzed. Sebastian wanted to strip out of his shirt and let his wings unfurl. Wanted to soar among the clouds and just fly with no destination in mind. He chalked it up to the full moon. It called to him more than it ever had. A cool breeze ruffled his hair almost as if it were whispering to him. Sebastian stopped and turned his gaze upward. As he stared at the bright orb, he sent out a silent request.

Wherever she is, please keep her safe.

Chapter 3

“ORDER UP,” KENDRICK called from the kitchen window loud enough to be heard over the jukebox. Even with shifter hearing, the noise level made it hard to hear yourself think. The Depot served basic bar fare, but Kendrick’s wings were the best around. Unlike restaurants that served multiple flavors, Kendrick made one that was both spicy and sweet. Dakota didn’t know what he put in the sauce to make them so delicious, and he wouldn’t divulge his secret.

Jolee slapped a ticket on the bar before grabbing the basket off the window ledge and taking it to table three. Dakota’s friend was in a mood with Wendy, the other waitress, running late, and the best way for Dakota to help her was to fill the drink orders quickly. Vernon didn’t have an electronic ordering system for his employees. They had to do things the old-fashioned way, and that was using paper tickets. Dakota slid the ticket off the bar and filled the three different types of beer for table five. One thing Vernon did well was offer a variety of ales, lagers, porters, stouts, ciders, and sometimes sours. Those were Dakota’s favorite. After placing the filled glasses on the end of the bar for Jolee to pick up, Dakota stabbed the form onto the silver-plated receipt holder. Vernon would retrieve all the tickets at the end of the night to balance against the receipts. He didn’t mind a free drink being offered here and there, but he kept a tight rein on inventory. It was a headache Dakota didn’t want, thus turning down his offer to make her manager.

Instead of asking aloud, Dakota pointed to the empty in front of Tate with an arched brow. He nodded, and she swapped his glass for a frosty one out of the freezer. Dakota was a pro at juggling the various tasks required to keep the bar cleaned and stocked while ensuring the drink orders were handed out in a timely fashion. She was thankful nobody wanted fancy cocktails requiring three or four different

ingredients. Whiskey and soda was easy. Vodka and cranberry was easy. And unless the keg had just been tapped, pulling a beer without too much head was a breeze. After placing Tate's dirty glass in the washer, she flipped the switch, then double-checked all the other glasses and bottles in front of the various patrons seated at the bar. She knew each one of them. Had gone to school with some of them. Was friends with most of them. It wasn't unusual for mated couples to spend date nights on Dakota's bar stools.

Sunlight filled the room when the front door opened. Every head turned to see who entered, and Dakota sighed in relief as Wendy rushed in. She tossed her purse to Dakota, then made a beeline for Jolee to figure out where to start. Dakota placed the purse in the cubby under the counter for safekeeping. Dakota didn't bother bringing a bag to work. Everything she needed fit in the pockets of her jeans. Now that help was there for Jolee, it meant tickets would arrive faster. Dakota didn't mind, though. She'd been working alone long enough to keep up with the heaviest of rushes.

Dakota was pulling a stout when the door opened again. She didn't have to look to know who had entered. The energy shifted, talking ceased for the few seconds it took for everyone to acknowledge their Alpha, and then everything went back to as it had been. Dakota opened the freezer for another frosty glass and poured King's favorite. She placed a fresh stout in front of Sloane and the IPA next to him at the spot he had saved for King. Not only were the two males best friends, but Sloane was King's second.

"Thanks, Kody." King took a long pull off the hoppy ale, his eyes on her the whole time. She waited for his usual comment about her looking good, but it never came. Maybe their argument last week after the pack run had been effective.

Dakota inclined her head before walking over to the kitchen window. Kendrick slid a basket filled with wings onto the ledge, and she took them to her Alpha, providing him with a stack of napkins. Dakota usually ignored the male when he and Sloane were chatting, but their conversation caught her attention.

“Dad got a call from an old friend. Apparently, trouble’s brewing, and everyone’s on high alert.”

“What kind of trouble?” Sloane asked.

King picked up a wing and gnawed the meat from the bone before answering. “The kind that could expose us all.” If there were humans in the bar, King would know. It was rare since all members of their community were shifters, but occasionally, humans from the next town over happened up The Depot. Since there weren’t any present, he wasn’t bothering to keep his voice down, so Dakota didn’t pretend she wasn’t trying to listen over the loud music. She continued to fill orders while King told Sloane about the phone call. “Apparently, some type of seer had a vision regarding three dead wolf shifters, which led him to Knox’s territory. One of Knox’s pack had been killed, and when the medical examiner had the female on the examination table, he noticed her strange physiology and called someone at the GIA. Long story short, with the help of this seer and his friends, the pack got the female back and destroyed all evidence, but the agent was already aware something wasn’t normal about the victim.” King ate a few more wings and finished his beer. Dakota replaced the empty with a full glass and disposed of the used napkins. Kendrick’s wings were delicious, but they were messy as fuck.

Sloane tapped his index finger on his glass as he waited on King to divulge more information. When he didn’t, Sloane huffed. “That’s it?”

“No.” King downed half his beer, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, but before he could say any more, Tinsley sidled up behind them. She made it known to anyone who would listen that she wanted to be Alpha Mate.

“Hi, Alpha.” Tinsley was a beta, which meant she was stronger than most females. Not Dakota. Dakota could kick her ass ten ways to Sunday.

“Tinsley,” King acknowledged without looking at her.

When she didn’t take the hint, Sloane turned on his stool. “We’re in the middle of a conversation, so you’ll need to head

on back to your booth.”

Tinsley scowled at Sloane, but she wasn't foolish enough to argue. After she stomped away, King leaned closer to his second. Whatever he said to Sloane was too low for Dakota to catch. She moved down the bar to fill orders for Jolee and Wendy as well as those sitting in front of her. Dakota carried on with her shift, washing glasses, then placing them in the cooler so they could chill, restocking longnecks, wiping spills, and cashing out tabs. In between, she sipped her reusable tumbler filled with ice water. She only drank on the job if someone bought her a shot, but those were few and far between. The patrons would rather have their own drinks filled timely than have her waste even a few seconds to down a shot.

“Kody,” King called. Dakota held up a finger to let him know she'd heard while she counted change for Wendy's ticket. Once she'd handed the money over, she strode the few steps to where he waited. As Alpha, Kingston didn't pay, but he did tip. His hand was covering several bills, but she didn't reach for them. She wouldn't risk him grabbing her hand. King crooked his finger for her to lean over. Dakota refrained from rolling her eyes, but just barely. She placed her hands on the edge of the counter and leaned forward.

King's eyes darted to the edge of her tank top and back up. “If you were my Alpha Mate, I would have had this discussion with you instead of Sloane.” He slid the cash across the bar but didn't remove his hand.

Dakota kept her expression bored, not taking the bait. “Yeah, well, I'll find out about it at the pack meeting like everyone else. Have a good night, Alpha.” Dakota turned her back on his growl. Several heads turned to see why their Alpha was miffed, but most everyone knew the reason. Their song and dance was well-known throughout the pack.

Jolee appeared at the end of the bar with a ticket to cash out. “One of these days, you're going to push him too far.”

Dakota rang up the ticket, slid the credit card through the reader, then handed it back to her friend. “Or maybe he'll push me too far, and I'll leave.”

Jolee rolled her eyes as she took the receipt. “You’re like the boy who cried wolf.” Jolee snickered at herself, and Dakota smirked at her silliness, glad to see she was in a better mood. Instead of a rebuttal, Dakota yelled out, “Last call.” That shut her friend up. Everyone knew what time the bar closed, and they also knew as soon as the clock struck one a.m. the doors would be locked. They had twenty minutes to place their last drink order and either finish it or leave it when Malone, their bouncer, said it was time to go. Since Dakota knew who the usual suspects were, she began filling glasses and placing them at the pickup stand for the waitresses. As she was pulling a lager, she glanced at the mirror in the corner long enough to watch King fold her tip and place it beneath his empty glass. She averted her eyes at the last second. It wouldn’t do for him to catch her watching. She didn’t want to give him the wrong impression.

Twenty minutes later, the last patron walked past Malone. He shut and locked the door behind them before pulling the neon sign’s chain, turning it dark. Closing was a synchronized event. Kendrick stopped serving food half an hour earlier, so he had the kitchen closed down. He moved to the dining room and began stacking chairs as soon as Jolee and Wendy had the tables cleared. The two waitresses huddled empty glasses on the bar, and Dakota placed them in the washer. Thankfully, it was a sizeable one, and she only had to run two loads, which took less than ten minutes. She covered the unused fruit and placed it in the cooler, then proceeded to clean and restock so the dayshift bartender didn’t have to. Vernon came out of his office and closed out the cash register. Their tips went into a shared pot and were evenly distributed at the end of the shift.

Wendy tried to give Jolee part of hers since she’d been late, but Jolee waved her off. “It’s not your fault you got a flat tire.”

Wendy threw her arms around Jolee. “You’re the best.”

Jolee hugged her back, and the two women swayed back and forth. Being wolf shifters, they were all generous with affection. They were tactile creatures, and even Dakota needed

physical touch. It was one reason she visited her mom most days for lunch. Diana gave the best hugs.

Vernon's son, Wade, came through the back door, ready to finish the rest of the cleaning. The only area he didn't touch was the kitchen. Dakota took her tips from her boss, patted him on the shoulder, then walked outside with her coworkers. The hair on Dakota's arms bristled, and it wasn't because she was wearing a tank top. No, someone was watching her, but she ignored him. One day, King would get the message.

As with every night, Malone escorted Dakota and her coworkers to their vehicles parked at the edge of the lot. He was an unmated male, but he never hit on them even though his eyes tracked every move Jolee made during her shift. To Dakota and Wendy, Malone was more the big brother type, and they appreciated his protection. After getting hugs from Jolee and Wendy, Dakota shone the flashlight from her phone into the back seat of her little SUV. She'd watched too many scary movies not to check for strangers hiding in the dark. When she deemed it safe, she got in and locked the doors before starting the motor. Dakota checked her rearview mirror as she drove home. Most nights, King followed at a distance, but only as far as her driveway, then he continued to the pack house where he lived. If he wasn't a pain in her ass, she would find it charming. Tonight wasn't one of those nights. There were no headlights behind her. Dakota wondered if it had to do with the conversation King had with Sloane. She was curious as to what else they had discussed, but like she told him, she would find out when everyone else did.

More than once, Dakota had imagined what life as the Alpha Mate would be like. She couldn't help but wonder because whoever it was would have a place of honor in the pack. They would be revered and have all the privileges Kingston had. If things were different, if there wasn't a stranger from her past, Dakota could see herself in the role. That was the one thing that made dealing with King difficult. He was handsome, charming, and a good leader. Being with him would be easy. Maybe not easy since he could be challenged at any moment, but it wouldn't be a hardship other than worrying about his safety. Being with the human

stranger? Nothing about that would be easy, at least not for him. Pack members only mated with those of their kind. It was too dangerous to mate with a human who could tell others about the wolves. Those who couldn't find a suitable mate within the pack were allowed to travel and look elsewhere. None of the females she knew refused a male if she was chosen. None except her.

No one outside her family and Jolee knew Dakota's reason. She heard the whispers. She was aware that everyone thought there was something wrong with Dakota. Hell, she'd even been accused of being a lesbian. Not that there was anything wrong with wanting someone of your own gender. There were a handful of same sex couples in their pack. That was another thing she admired about King; he didn't care who paired up with whom as long as they were loyal to the pack. There were plenty of mated couples having pups and growing their numbers. Being twenty-five, Dakota was considered old for an unmated female. Jolee was twenty-three, and she was only single because she kept waiting for Sloane to claim her. Those vying for King's attention were younger than Dakota, and they were the worst when it came to talking smack. She didn't listen to their harsh words though. Why would she when the Alpha wanted her? They were jealous, and that did nothing but boost Dakota's self-esteem.

After entering the cabin, she hung her cowboy hat on the hook by the door, then went about her nightly ritual. She strode to the bathroom and undressed, dumping her clothes in the hamper. She then removed her silver rings. Dakota had several she rotated, and the ones she didn't wear were kept in a case in one of the drawers.

Most nights, she could keep her mind off the stranger from her past. If she wasn't going to return to Utah to search for him, she might as well forget about him. She understood her father's disappointment in holding onto a fantasy because after ten years, that's all it was. A silly dream that she would have a miraculous meeting with someone she had no idea what he looked like. For all Dakota knew, if he were alive, he could be married with a houseful of kids, not giving a moment's

thought to her, especially considering he had only seen her wolf. He had no idea Dakota was a person too.

Fuck. Maybe she should finally give up and bow to King's wishes. She waited for her Wolf to argue, but it was suspiciously quiet. She should be thankful, but Dakota wanted her beast to argue with her. At least then she wouldn't feel guilty about considering letting go of the notion of one day finding the man. There was only one thing that would help in this situation. Dakota went to the freezer and grabbed both the chocolate-cherry ice cream and the bottle of vodka she kept stashed there. She didn't bother with a bowl or a glass. Instead, she took both to her sofa where she ate the ice cream from the carton and swigged the alcohol from the bottle. Yes, she would hate herself in the morning, but in that moment, she let the booze cloud her mind. By the time she had polished off both, Dakota was numb. She didn't bother climbing to her loft. Instead, she slid down on the sofa, pulled her fuzzy blanket over her legs, and closed her eyes.

Her claws dug into the mucky earth as she tried to put distance between her and King. His Wolf was faster, but she didn't give up. Dakota pushed her beast harder. Their heart beat double time, and it felt as though it were going to burst from her chest. She slipped in the mud, and that was all he needed to overtake her. They rolled on the ground, and when they came to a stop, his larger animal had one massive paw on her chest. His beast snarled as his golden eyes flashed in the dark.

"Submit to me, Kody," King said in her mind.

Her Wolf itched to bare its neck. Their Alpha had commanded it. She was tired. Tired of running. Tired of fighting it. Tired of— A massive form flew out of nowhere, knocking King off Dakota. She pushed to her paws, searching for whatever had saved her. Shifting to her skin, she called out, "Nix?" Her brother didn't answer. Then again, he wouldn't have attacked their Alpha. No one in the pack would without risking retribution. So who was it? King rolled to his feet, fangs dripping saliva as he growled low in his chest. Dakota took advantage of his attention being elsewhere and shifted to

her fur once again. As she ran, a shadow covered her from above. The downdraft from a set of powerful wings caused her to stumble, but she found her balance and continued on. Dakota didn't dare stop to see what followed from above. She should be scared, but she wasn't. Her intuition told her the creature was safe. She was safe. She ran until she reached her cabin. Dakota didn't shift, just in case. Her Wolf rolled to its back, exposing their belly. This creature, whatever it was, he was their true Alpha.

Dakota gasped, sitting up quickly. Too quickly. Her head pounded. Whether it was from the vodka or the dream, she didn't know. She leaned against the back of the sofa and closed her eyes, letting her heart settle. It wasn't odd for her to dream about Kingston since he was a pain in her ass, but never had she dreamed about some type of flying creature. That had to be from the booze because as far as she knew, dragons weren't real, and Dakota didn't know of anything else with wings. No, that wasn't right. There were other types of mythical creatures that could fly.

Wolf shifters are real so why not dragons?

It could as easily have been a gryphon or a demon or a bird shifter.

His wings were leathery, so I'm going with dragon.

How the hell do you know what I dreamed?

Because I am you.

That made Dakota's head hurt worse. Shoving to her feet, she stumbled to the kitchen cabinet where she kept pain relievers. She popped four in her mouth, swallowing them with a handful of water from the faucet. Dakota walked the short distance to her bathroom to pee and brush her teeth. She'd still wake up with cotton mouth, but this way it wouldn't be as bad. After flipping the light switch, Dakota crossed the cabin and climbed up to her loft. As she slid under the covers, she prayed to her goddess for a peaceful sleep.

Chapter 4

SEBASTIAN HATED DREAMING. His nighttime escapades haunted him. He often saw snippets of things he couldn't explain. It could be days, weeks, or even months later when those images would manifest in the real world. He wouldn't call his ability a gift like Connor's visions. Bas would call it a pain in the ass. If he hadn't experienced his dreams coming true, he would consider last night's a figment of his imagination. Wasn't that what dreams were? The brain taking bits and pieces of real-life events and twisting them into bizarre scenarios one wouldn't think about while awake? Last night's dream was similar to the reality of the wolf attacking him as a teen. In this dream, though, Sebastian was the one doing the attacking. He knocked a black panther off a small wolf, and when the she-wolf ran, Bas followed, keeping her safe. He'd woken before she could shift into her human form, but that made sense considering he had no idea what she looked like.

It wasn't the first time he'd seen the female during his sleep. After his initial transition, Sebastian had nightmares about the incident for months. It had gotten so bad that his papa insisted he see a therapist. Bas eventually outgrew them. Or maybe his therapist had gotten through to him in their sessions. Either way, the nightmares eased, and in their place were fewer traumatizing situations where Bas was in control.

Scrubbing a hand down his face, he rose from the bed and got ready for his day. There was too much on his plate to dwell on something he had no control over. He was due at the office for a meeting with a client. Being King didn't mean Bas gave up his other job. Where his father had built commercial structures, Bas designed homes. He specialized in rustic cabins

made of log and stone like many of those the Clan lived in. Stone, Inc. was one of the largest architectural firms in the US, and Sebastian was proud he contributed to his family's business. Rafael had turned the commercial side over to Travis McKenzie, who was a brilliant designer. Travis was human, but he was mated to Brynna Holgersen, a full-blooded Norwegian Gargoyle princess. Her older brother, Banyan, was the Norwegian King. All their kids had dual citizenship, and if he were honest, Bas was a little jealous. He had traveled with his parents, but to have a home in the stunning Scandinavian country? That would be spectacular.

When he arrived at the Walnut Street Towers where the office was located and had been for over fifty years, Bas pulled through the secured gate to the company's private parking lot. He and Rafael had discussed opening a secondary office away from Atlanta. Being Gargoyles, they didn't age, and with their Clan having been in the area so long, it was time to find a new home base. His parents had decided to relocate to New York so they could be close to Anthony's parents. Bas was looking for somewhere between Georgia and New York, and when he studied a map of the country, he was drawn to West Virginia. He visited the state a couple months back, scouting out a location for the office as well as property where he could build his new home. Something about the area called to his soul, and when he and Anthony made the trip, Bas knew he'd found the right place. Now if he could convince some of his Clan to move with him, all would be right in his world. Well, maybe not all...

Grace was already at her desk when Bas walked through the office door. She had taken over for Willow, his papa's administrative assistant, who decided to stay home when she had her kids. Both females were human, but they were part of the Clan.

"You look like crap, Bossman," Grace greeted. That was one thing about his assistant; she didn't pull punches.

"Gee thanks. I didn't sleep well, so I'm going to my office and down some coffee. Let me know when Jefferson arrives, please."

“You got it.” Bas was almost to his office when the phone rang. Grace’s chiding voice switched to professional when she answered, “Stone, Incorporated. How may I assist you?”

Sebastian continued down the hall, knowing Grace had it handled. He appreciated the hot cup of coffee and the danish waiting on his desk. Bas hung up his sport coat before he sat down and devoured the hot drink and treat, needing the caffeine and sugar. He was wiping his hands when his phone buzzed. Grace knew he would hear her if she spoke aloud, but she insisted on using the phone. Bas pressed the button for the intercom. “Yes, ma’am?”

“That was Jefferson’s sister. He had to rush his wife to the hospital. She didn’t go into detail, but they’re scared they might lose the baby.”

“That’s awful. She isn’t that far along.” Jefferson had wanted to get their new house built before the baby arrived. Bas couldn’t imagine being in the man’s situation. Children were a gift from the gods, but sometimes the higher powers decided to take those gifts away too soon. Bas sent up a prayer for the family that both baby and mother made it through the scare.

“That it is. Since he was the only one on your schedule, are you staying or going home?”

“I’m meeting Anthony for lunch, so I’ll stay here.” Bas had plenty of research to do, and driving home then back across town would be a waste of time. “If you don’t have anything to do for Travis, you’re welcome to head out.”

“I came in early and got his files taken care of, so I’m done for the day. But if something comes up, don’t hesitate to call me.”

“Will do. Thanks, Grace.” The female was excellent at her job, and Sebastian was thrilled to have her as their assistant. He wasn’t one of those bosses who insisted someone hang out at the office when there was nothing going on. He could handle answering the phone, and Grace would respond to emails from home.

With his one meeting canceled, Sebastian could focus on his research. Before he got started, he went to the closet where he kept spare clothes and changed out of the dress pants and shirt he'd worn into jeans and a Henley. Once he was more comfortable, he opened the map on his browser to the areas of West Virginia he and Anthony had visited. The state was gorgeous with its various mountain ranges. It was also rife with lodges, cabins, and inns that survived the apocalypse or had been revamped in the last fifty-five years, but Bas was looking into those that hadn't.

Having lived in Atlanta his whole life, he was ready for a different type of scenery to call home. Instead of moving to another large city, Bas wanted to find a small town where he could make a difference while being away from so many people. His plan was to purchase one of the defunct properties and restore it to its former glory or make it into something even better. That would give the town new jobs as well as added income when he got the resort back up and running. Bas didn't know anything about operating a hotel, but he had plenty of Clan mates to help with his project. He planned on living onsite until he could build his own house. A home in the middle of the woods would be perfect. He could shift to his Gargoyle and fly without worrying about being seen. Anthony joked that Bas wanted to build a commune, and his cousin wasn't far off the mark. Sebastian would build homes for any of his Clan mates who wanted to move with him.

There were several properties for sale, and Bas wanted to visit them all. Since that would take weeks, he decided to choose the top three. When he figured out which location he wanted to purchase, Bas would bring Deklan, his cousin who was also his accountant, back into the conversation. Deklan was aware of Sebastian's intentions, and they had already met to discuss how much of Sebastian's portfolio was available without having to cash out stocks and bonds for this project. When Sebastian became King, Rafael transferred a sizeable amount of his own money to Sebastian, but Bas wanted to keep that separate. He wanted this investment made with his own funds.

Bas had a plan to start with one location, and when it was successful, he would then focus on another town, get that lodge remodeled and successful, then procure another. Failure was not an option in his book. His meeting with Anthony was to discuss the logistics of traveling back to West Virginia. If his cousin wasn't working on a case, Bas wanted Anthony to go with him. He could ask any number of his cousins, but Anthony was one of the most level-headed, even if he came across as a joker. The main reason he wanted Anthony with him was that there was a wolf pack in the state Sebastian planned to meet with and discuss the council he was putting together. He needed his second-in-command for that. Bas had also invited Lydia to join them. She had taken over as archivist for the Clan from her father, Nikolas. She was also a graphic designer, but Lydia was the perfect candidate to meet with other shifter groups if Bas wasn't available.

Sebastian spent a couple of hours digging into the locations, and when he pinpointed the three top candidates, he rose from his desk for something to drink. The break room refrigerator was filled with cans of soda and a jug of sweet tea Grace brought in specifically for Bas. To help the environment, they didn't purchase bottled water. Instead, they drank water from the filtered dispenser on the freezer door. Bas opted for sweet tea, and as he was pouring a glass, his thoughts flitted back to his dream, more specifically to the animal he attacked. When he returned to his office, Bas opened a new browser and typed in black panther, where he learned panther was not a singular species but a term often encompassing both black jaguars and black leopards. He couldn't discern which he had dreamt of, but the term panther stuck in his brain. Sebastian's phone pinged with an incoming text, interrupting his thoughts.

Anthony: *We still on for lunch?*

Me: *Yes. I'm ready whenever you are.*

Anthony: *I can be there in ten?*

Me: *See you then.*

While Sebastian waited for his computer to power down, he drained the last of his tea and took the glass to the break room. After washing it, he put it back in the cabinet. Grace was his and Travis's assistant, not their maid. Having lived alone for years, Bas was efficient at cleaning up after himself. Even at home, Bas did his own laundry, emptied the dishwasher, and tidied his house. He did have a housekeeper, but she only came in twice a month to do the deep cleaning.

After setting the office alarm, Bas made his way downstairs. Instead of driving to the restaurant, he decided to walk the few blocks. Weather in October was a crapshoot in the South. It could be a brisk thirty degrees with snow in the forecast, or it could be a balmy sixty-something. Today, it was in the low forties, and Bas welcomed it. Colder weather was another reason he was looking forward to moving. Humidity in the South was no joke, and West Virginia was north enough that the heat wasn't as oppressive, and there was more chance of snow. Real snow, not the few flurries on top of ice they tended to get in Atlanta.

Anthony was waiting in front of Colden's Key, a restaurant owned by Slade Ransom, one of the older Gargoyles, and his mate, Matthew. This location was the first of many the couple had opened, and it was Bas's favorite place to eat in the city. Slade and Matt ran the business for many years before branching out. Now, two of Bas and Anthony's cousins ran the location. Chelle Stone was the head chef, while her brother, Robbie, was general manager. Both were human and had been adopted by Sinclair, Rafael's next oldest brother.

After an enthusiastic bro hug, Anthony opened the door for Sebastian, allowing him to enter first. The hostess knew Bas and Anthony since they ate there often, and she greeted them warmly before escorting them to one of the tables Robbie kept reserved for family.

"Jessie is your server today. She'll be right over to take your drink order. I'll let Chelle know you're here." The hostess walked off without leaving menus. Chelle insisted on making special dishes for her family, and considering they were always delicious, Bas had no problem with that.

“I’m digging the new look,” Sebastian said. Anthony’s auburn curls were gone, and in their place was a shorter, sleeker style.

“Don’t get used to it. I cut it for the case I’m working. I even have to wear a suit and tie.” Anthony gave a full-body shiver, and Bas laughed. “I thought you had a meeting this morning.” Anthony gestured at Bas’s clothes.

“I did, but the client had to cancel. Family emergency. That gave me time to research some of the properties in West Virginia. I’ve narrowed it down to three.”

Their waitress arrived to get their drink order. Once she was gone, Anthony said, “When are you going?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. If you aren’t in the middle of a case, I’d like you to go with Lydia and me. I can look at the properties, and then we can go meet with the man Knox informed you about.” Even though they were seated well away from other diners, Bas didn’t take a chance on mentioning wolves.

“I am on a case, but I should have it wrapped up in the next few days. With Gannon there to help Tabby, I can take the next few days off after that, if you want to go that soon.”

Jessie returned with their drinks, and Bas squeezed lime into his tea. “I do. We can visit Knox’s friend first, that way if you need to get back sooner, the meeting will be out of the way. Where in the state are they?” Bas raised his glass and took a swig of the cold drink.

“It’s at the southern border near both Kentucky and Virginia in a little town called Panther.”

Bas choked on the tea, nearly spewing the liquid on his cousin.

Anthony narrowed his eyes. “You okay, there?”

Bas coughed and cleared his throat several times. “No, I’m not.” How did he explain his dream without sounding like a nut case? Then again, Anthony was used to Connor’s visions, and other Gargoyles had some type of gift. If he could trust anyone, it would be Anthony. Lowering his voice, Bas

explained, “I had a dream last night, and in it, an animal attacked a she-wolf. A panther, to be exact. I knocked the panther off the wolf, then followed her to make sure she was safe.” Sebastian kept his explanation generic enough that anyone who might be listening wouldn’t know he meant *his* she-wolf and not some random animal.

“That can’t be a coincidence. Wait, have you had dreams like this before?”

“Nothing like what Connor sees, but yes.” He looked around to make sure they were still alone, then added, “They’re usually snippets, not actual scenes playing out. It could be something as innocuous as a street sign or a tree ripped out of the ground. Then later, I see it in real life. They’re not omens, per se, and they don’t always mean something. Sometimes they’re just dreams, but remember the time Seven got caught in that storm and her phone died?” Anthony nodded, and Bas continued, “For whatever reason, I knew where to look for her. She was on Canberra Street, and that’s the street sign I saw in a dream a few weeks before.”

Chelle brought their food out, and they took a few minutes to chat with their cousin and thank her for the food she made especially for them. When she went back to the kitchen, Anthony asked, “What do you think this means? Is it possible *she’s* in Panther?”

Bas wouldn’t be that lucky. He picked his fork up and stabbed a piece of pork. “No. I think it means we are meant to go see those in Panther who happen to be like her.” He shoved the meat in his mouth and chewed. There was no way it meant anything more. Bas had long given up on ever finding his mate, and he wouldn’t let his fucked-up psyche make him believe it was possible.

Anthony picked up on Sebastian’s mood regarding his mate, so he let the topic go. After finishing their meal, Sebastian left a sizable tip for Jessie, then the two said their goodbyes to Robbie and Chelle. Anthony offered to drive Bas to the office, but he turned him down. “Nah. I’m good. I’ll see you soon.” Anthony squeezed Sebastian’s shoulder before walking away. As Bas headed the opposite direction, he

allowed himself a few seconds to think about the correlation between his dream and the town of Panther. It had to mean something, but until he arrived, he wouldn't know what.

Chapter 5

DAKOTA WISHED SHE'D stayed home instead of coming to the pack house for a meeting, but curiosity had gotten the better of her. She wanted to know what King and Sloane had been discussing at the bar. It was one of her nights off, and she had nothing better to do, so here she was. Dakota leaned against the back wall just inside the door, scanning the crowd. Not all their pack was in attendance since some people had to work, but it appeared most everyone else was there. Her parents were on the other side of the room talking to Davis. King's father was no longer Alpha, but he was never far from pack business.

"Why are you hiding back here?" Phoenix asked loudly.

Dakota sighed, not wanting to get into it with her brother. She knew what he was really asking – why wasn't she up front where Kingston was? She looked up at Nix from beneath her cowboy hat. "Why are *you*? All the single females are up there." Dakota motioned to where at least ten women stood at the front of the room, hoping King would notice them. She had yet to see their Alpha, but he was surely lurking somewhere.

"Not all of them. When are you going to get over yourself? If you wait too long, King'll choose someone else, like Tinsley."

"Good. Then he'll leave me the fuck alone," Dakota hissed, pushing off the wall. She didn't need this shit from her brother. She heard it often enough from their dad.

Nix grabbed her bicep before she could get too far, and Dakota jerked her arm from his grasp. "You need to leave me alone too."

"Is there a problem?" King stepped between the siblings. He frowned as he eyed Dakota's arm. It wouldn't be the first time she'd been grabbed by her brother. "Did he hurt you?"

Dakota took a step back, not wanting to be so close to the Alpha, especially when he was pissed.

“No problem here, Alpha.” Nix bared his neck like the good little wolf he was.

Ignoring Nix, Kingston focused on Dakota and repeated, “Did he hurt you?”

“No. I’m sure having a sister of your own you know how siblings are.”

“I do, but I have never once put my hands on Savannah in anger.” King took a step toward Nix, his eyes flashing golden. “And if I ever see Phoenix do it again, he won’t have a fucking hand.”

“What’s going on?” their dad asked as he, their mom, and King’s dad formed a barrier between them and the other pack mates.

Dakota crossed her arms over her chest. “Just Nix being a dick.”

“Dakota!” Diana grabbed Dakota’s arm, pulling her until she was standing between her parents. “Please forgive her, Alpha.”

Kingston narrowed his eyes at Diana. “What is it with everyone thinking they can put their hands on Kody?” Diana turned loose, then bared her neck the way Nix had. Her father bristled but kept his mouth shut. Dakota mentally rolled her eyes because King was the worst about touching her. Granted, it was never done with malice, but it was still unwelcome.

“I was just leaving, so if you’ll all excuse me...” Dakota knew better than to think she’d be able to escape, and when Kingston stepped in front of her, she looked at her feet and took a deep breath. She might get away with disrespecting him when they were alone, but she wouldn’t undermine his authority in front of their pack.

“Please stay. This meeting involves all of us, and I would like your opinion of the situation after I inform everyone what I know.” Dakota looked into King’s eyes, searching for any hint of subterfuge. Why the hell would he want her opinion? “I

want your opinion because you are one of the strongest and sharpest members of our pack. If not for me, do it for them.”

Oh, he was good. It was one of the reasons his father turned the pack over to him at such a young age. Granted, thirty-five wasn't that young, but it was when his father still had plenty of years left. When King's mother died, Davis didn't have the heart to lead without his Alpha Mate and handed the title to his son.

“Yeah, okay.”

“Excellent. Come with me.” King reached out to touch her, but at the last second, gestured toward the front of the room. Dakota skirted around their parents and her brother, ignoring them all. She really should have stayed home. When they reached the front, Dakota remained a few feet away. King raised his hand to get everyone's attention, even though all eyes were on him having watched the show between him and Dakota's family. All eyes except for Tinsley. She was glaring at Dakota.

“Thank you all for coming. An Alpha from South Carolina recently got in touch with Davis. One of their pack was killed, and when the medical examiner noticed the female's biology was strange during his autopsy, he reached out to a GIA agent. This agent took samples of the female to a private lab for testing. Alpha Millard wouldn't go into much detail, but he did share that some other shifters were in the area because one of them had a vision of three dead wolf shifters. This seer and some of his friends met with Alpha Millard and helped them recover the female from the morgue in some type of cloak and dagger mission. They also were able to retrieve all evidence from the lab.

“The seer's Alpha is interested in forming a council of leaders from across the country. I'm not sure what he hopes to accomplish with this council, but I expect to have a visit from him in the next few days. I doubt he will come alone, so you need to expect at least two strangers visiting our pack. I trust you all to be hospitable and on your best behavior. They are coming here to help protect our secret as well as their own. Until then, please remain vigilant in what you do and say

around humans. I know we are more insulated than packs who live around larger towns, but one slip, and we could find ourselves under scrutiny the same way Alpha Millard's pack was. When I know the date of their arrival, I'll pass that along. Any questions?"

Savannah raised her hand. "Yes. Is this Alpha single?"

King growled at his sister. "That doesn't matter. He's not coming here to find a mate." King looked out over the crowd. "This goes for all you unmated females. Do not disrespect me and our pack. Being kind is expected. Throwing yourselves at the male? Unacceptable. Any other questions?" When no one said anything, King dismissed them. Turning to Dakota, he said, "Come with me."

Dakota didn't want to, but she was interested in why he singled her out. No, she knew why. This was another way for him to dig his claws into her. Make her think he valued what she had to say when they both knew it was a lie. He had Sloane to turn to for advice. Still, she followed him down the hallway and up the stairs to his living quarters. The pack house was a two-story lodge. The downstairs comprised of the meeting hall that doubled as a dining room, a kitchen, laundry room, and two large restrooms. The tables and chairs had been put away to accommodate more people. Upstairs were several bedrooms including King's suite. Dakota knew this because Davis had shown her and her family around when they arrived in Panther. Davis had moved out of the suite and into one of the smaller rooms when he passed leadership to King.

The only good thing about going with King was he had gestured for Sloane to follow them, meaning she wouldn't be alone with the male. When they got to his rooms, King strode to the bar and poured three glasses of whiskey, not bothering to ask what Dakota wanted. He passed the drinks over, then sat on one end of the sofa. Dakota took one of the armchairs across from him.

Sloane chose the other chair and crossed his boot over his knee. "I know we've discussed this, but do you trust this stranger?"

King, sitting with his knees spread, took a sip of whiskey. Dakota kept her eyes averted. No way was she giving him any indication she was interested in what he was offering. “No, but I trust Knox Millard. He’s an honorable male, and if he says I can trust Sebastian Stone, then I can.” Dakota’s skin prickled at that name. Something about it was familiar. “Kody, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she lied. “So, what was it you wanted my opinion on?” She raised the glass to her lips, pretending to take a sip. No way would she get tipsy in his room.

“I want you to be on this council. Everyone in this pack trusts you. They don’t come to The Depot for the beer. Well, they do, but they also know if they need a kind word or good advice, they can get it sitting on a bar stool.”

“Not everyone. There are those who would rather see me leave town.”

“She’s not wrong,” Sloane muttered. King growled, and Sloane shrugged. “What? You know I’m right. I can name ten females that’d rather gut Dakota than ask her for advice.”

King scrubbed a hand down his face. He stared at Dakota, and she knew what he was thinking. If she would say yes, all his troubles would go away. Or something like that. Hell, maybe he was wondering what color underwear she had on.

“Yeah, well, those ten females are brainless bimbos. If they weren’t, they’d have found a mate by now.”

“*I* haven’t found a mate, so am I a brainless bimbo?” Dakota arched a brow.

“No, Kody. You’re neither. You can think for yourself. It’s one of your most admirable traits. I at least want you sitting in on the meeting with this Alpha. You’re good at reading people, and I want you to gauge his sincerity.”

Dakota stood, placing her unfinished drink on the end table. “Fine. Let me know when the meeting is.” She had to get out of there and figure out why the name Sebastian was familiar.

King rose from the sofa. “Where are you going?”

“Home. And I’m leaving the back way so I don’t run into my parents. I’m not interested in another lecture from my father.”

“I’ll walk you out.”

“Not necessary. I’m sure you and Sloane have important matters to discuss.” Dakota pointed at Sloane and said, “If you don’t get your head out of your ass, Jolee’s going to take Malone up on his offer. Good night.”

Dakota smirked when Sloane cursed under his breath. She didn’t understand what the male was waiting on. He had taken Jolee on several dates, and according to her best friend, they burned the sheets up afterward. In Dakota’s eyes, Sloane was a jerk. Malone would make a wonderful mate if Jolee could get over being with Sloane because he was King’s second. The woman was gorgeous as well as intelligent, she could cook like nobody’s business, and she was scrappy. She had planned on going off to college to study interior design, but during high school, things with her parents were rough. Her dad lost his job, turned to alcohol, and sat at home feeling sorry for himself. Jolee’s mom worked two jobs to make ends meet, and Jolee helped where she could. What she didn’t do was move back home once she had her own place. Dakota couldn’t blame her. There was no way she could live under the same roof as her own father and not throttle him. A couple years ago, Jolee’s parents had been killed when her father refused to hand over the keys after a night out drinking. He crossed a double yellow line, hitting a semi head-on. Now, Jolee had the pack, but no other family.

Dakota stepped into the hallway and listened for signs of life coming from Davis’s room. She wouldn’t put it past her father to be waiting to ambush her when she left King’s suite. When she didn’t hear anyone, she tiptoed along the wooden planks, making as little noise as possible. She’d opted for her cowboy boots, and the heels were heavy when she stepped. At the end of the hallway, she pushed open the door that led to the back stairway. When she reached the bottom, she paused and listened again. The kitchen was on this end of the house, and several people were congregated there, talking. None of them

were her parents or brother, so Dakota continued to the back door. Everyone stopped speaking when they noticed her. Instead of giving them all double middle fingers, she tipped her hat their direction and slipped out into the night.

Dakota made her way along the path through the woods that led to not only her cabin but other homes as well. It was a two-mile hike, but her boots were worn in and comfortable. The air was crisp, so she buttoned her flannel shirt over her tank top. She expected to encounter more of her pack mates along the way, but there was no sign of anyone. They were probably hanging out at the pack house, discussing the Alpha who was coming to visit. *Sebastian*. Why did that name give her goose bumps? As soon as she walked into her home, Dakota dug her laptop out of the drawer where she stored it. As it booted, she grabbed a beer out of the refrigerator, then toed her boots off and tossed them toward the closet where they landed with a thunk. She removed her hat and set it on the table beside her computer.

Once she could access the internet, Dakota typed in the name Sebastian Stone. There were several hits, but most all of them were of the same man, an architect out of Atlanta, Georgia, who specialized in building log and stone houses. His company, or his family's company, Stone, Inc., had been around for over half a century. Before Sebastian joined the company, they focused on designing commercial buildings, mostly high rises. When she switched from the home page to the about section, Dakota nearly fell out of her chair. There were two photos, one of Sebastian, and one of a man named Travis McKenzie, the commercial architect. Travis was cute in a boy-next-door way, but Sebastian Stone? Holy goddess, the man was stunning. He had dark hair and a closely cropped beard, but it was his eyes that held her attention. They were a dark blue, and Dakota could swear he was staring into her soul. It was hard to gauge his age. He could be anywhere from mid-twenties to early thirties.

Opening a new tab, Dakota searched for any scrap of personal information on Sebastian, but there was none. No other photos. No personal articles. No mention of him if it wasn't about his work with the company. The homes he built

were beyond amazing. They put the pack house to shame, and it was a nice building even if it was in a poor area of the state.

Dakota took a swig out of her bottle, staring at the screen. Why would he not have photos of himself other than the professional head shot? Because he was an alpha shifter? And since he was an alpha, he probably already had a mate. Not that it mattered to her. She already had one gorgeous alpha trying to get in her pants. But damn. Just... damn. Regardless of Kingston warning their pack, the females were going to fall all over themselves when they got a look at this man. And Dakota was supposed to sit in a meeting with him?

Damn.

Her cell phone rang, bringing Dakota out of her lustful musings. What? She was young and single. She could look. Taking her beer with her, she walked over to where her phone was charging on the kitchen counter. When she saw her father's name on the screen, Dakota hit the ignore button. He would probably show up at her house if she didn't call back soon, but she was in no mood to hear how she had disrespected their family in front of their Alpha. Calling Nix a dick hadn't been her finest moment, but she was sick of his meddling. Sick of him trying to stay in their father's good graces by needling Dakota at every turn. If he really wanted to gain brownie points, Nix would ask Savannah to be his mate, then the families would be united without Dakota being the one to give in.

The only way to avoid her father dropping in was to be gone if he showed up. Dakota finished her beer, took one last look at Sebastian's photo, then stripped out of her clothes. She stepped outside through the back door and took to her fur. As she launched off the porch into the darkness, Dakota did her best to put all thoughts of both alphas out of her mind. As paws met dirt, Dakota's Wolf lapped at the air with its tongue. Rarely did she give her beast free rein, but tonight, she gave it the freedom to run uninhibited. And run they did. Dried leaves crunched under their paws with each step. Branches scraped her fur as they rushed between trees and around brush. They crossed a creek and jumped the railroad tracks. At the

cemetery, her Wolf turned and retraced her steps back to the cabin.

By the time they returned home, a couple hours had passed, and both woman and beast were exhausted. When Dakota shifted to her skin, she had to hold onto the banister to make it up the few steps to the porch. She opened the back door and sniffed the air, searching for any indication her father had been in her home. It took a second, but she found it. That scent that was uniquely his. Dakota was surprised he hadn't waited on her, but she had been gone for hours. She didn't bother picking her clothes off the floor. Instead, she stepped over to the table to wake her laptop up. There, taped to the screen, was a note from her father. After reading his heated words telling her to get her ass to their house tomorrow, she crumpled the paper and tossed it in the garbage. She might be his daughter, but she was a grown ass woman. Maybe it *was finally* time to get the hell out of Panther.

Chapter 6

ANTHONY'S CASE ENDED up taking longer than expected, so Sebastian headed on to West Virginia. Lydia was riding with Anthony, and since he wanted them both with him when they visited the Alpha in Panther, Bas drove to the town of Carlton to look at the first property. Not knowing what the roads would be like, he opted to take his Jeep instead of his sports car. He had scanned the weather forecast for rain, but it looked to be clear skies for the next week. He had the front split panels removed and stowed in the back, just in case. Bas loved riding with the top off, but it wasn't practical when he was driving hundreds of miles, and there was always a chance Mother Nature would change her mind about giving the earth a shower.

Before having a realtor meet him, Bas wanted to get a look at the buildings and their areas to see whether he was interested. The road up the mountain wasn't too bad, but the driveway to the property would need to be repaved. When he saw the lodge, Bas was pleasantly surprised. Even though the hotel had been closed for years, the building looked to be in decent shape. After parking, Bas got out and looked around. This site was one of two which were on small mountains. The building wasn't as large as what Sebastian had in mind, but if the structure was sound, he could redesign it to fit his specifications. He wouldn't know until he got a look inside.

From the old photos, Bas could imagine what the property would look like when the overgrown vegetation was cleared out and proper landscaping added. He pictured a three-story hotel with balconies across the back overlooking the valley. The old ski runs were visible in the distance, and if he bought this location, Bas would consider eventually reopening them. He used the camera on his phone and snapped several pictures of the area to refer to later. The property had potential, and he took his time wandering around, looking for any

potential hazards. He also ventured into the surrounding woods, searching for signs of wildlife. The listing was for the lodge, the ski runs, and forty acres. If he purchased this location, Bas wanted to buy the acreage on either side as well. More room for him to let the beast loose.

When he was satisfied he had documented everything, Sebastian walked to the back of the building and stared out over the valley. The sun was going down, and it was glorious. Since he had nowhere to be, Bas moved his Jeep to where he had a clear view and got comfortable. One of his least favorite things about Atlanta was all the lights. His home was far enough away from the city that he could stargaze, which he loved to do as often as possible. That was one reason he wanted to find somewhere he could continue to enjoy the night sky. With the top panels off and the windows down, Bas could hear the various nocturnal creatures coming to life as twilight turned to dusk. This was Sebastian's favorite time of day, when the moon rose, light disappeared, and the stars shone above. The wait was worth it.

Only half of the moon was visible, but it beckoned to him. Since he didn't know the area well, didn't know whether humans came to this spot to get up to no good, Bas restrained from phasing and taking to the sky. He leaned the seat back and stared at the stars for hours. The peacefulness was just what he needed after the last few weeks of becoming King and worrying about the GIA agent in South Carolina. When he glanced at his phone and saw it was going on four a.m., Bas started his Jeep and headed down the mountain to find a hotel. After breakfast, he would explore the town at the base of the mountain. He wanted to get a feel for the area around a potential purchase. It was imperative to his potential venture that there would be other shops and attractions to entice his guests to visit. One of the most prominent lodges in the state had all sorts of outdoor activities such as skiing and fishing. Sebastian wasn't worried about offering those himself, but he did want there to be plenty of activities offered wherever he decided to open his business.

After a few hours of sleep, Sebastian checked out the local diner. It didn't look like much on the outside, but inside

was decorated reminiscent of the 1950s. It amazed Bas how some trends never went away, even more than a century later. The food was basic breakfast fare but delicious. After getting his fill of eggs, bacon, and pancakes, Bas walked around what was considered downtown. Stores and businesses lined both sides of the main drag. A few were designed to lure in tourists, but most were geared toward everyday living. When he came to Walker's Outfitters, an outdoor adventure shop, Bas went inside.

"Can I help you?" a twenty-something man asked. He looked like the outdoor type wearing cargo pants and a T-shirt boasting the company's logo.

"I'm interested in what activities are available in the area."

"Sure, man. We can hook you up with everything from trout fishing, to horseback rides, to four-wheeler trails, and ziplining. A friend of mine owns a rafting company. In the winter, there's cross-country skiing and tubing. If you want downhill skiing, you'd need to head over toward Snowshoe. We haven't had downhill here since the lodge closed. I'm Dustin, by the way."

"Sebastian." Bas reached over to shake hands. "I'm actually looking to invest in the area, and the old Wellis Lodge is one of the properties I have my eye on. I'm researching what activities are available to guests who would stay there."

"Dude, that would be amazing. Are you thinking of reopening the slopes? That would bring in more tourists."

"It's a possibility but not my priority. First, I would need to remodel the hotel. The new lodge would have approximately thirty guest rooms, so at double occupancy, that's sixty people not counting kids or other guests sharing a suite. Could you possibly accommodate that many people with the activities you offer?"

Dustin tapped his fingers on the counter, reminding Bas of Anthony. "For fishing and horseback riding, yes. We don't keep that many four-wheelers on hand since we don't need them, but if you were successful in keeping the lodge full, we

would restructure our business around your needs. As far as winter activities, that would be easy enough to add a few more tubes, skis, and what not. I gotta tell ya, I hope you take a chance on our little town. We do well enough, but reopening the lodge would be a boon for all of us, and not just those of us who own businesses. With a hotel that size, you'll need all kinds of employees from housekeeping to groundskeepers, and if you have a restaurant on site, you'll need cooks and servers. Plenty of folks around here would love to have a job closer to home."

Sebastian had already spoken to Slade and Matthew regarding what was needed in setting up a restaurant. They offered to help once he got his new venture up and running. That would leave hiring an experienced hotel manager. The idea of bringing jobs to a small town did his heart good. He had learned early in his life to help others when he could, and this was one way to do that.

"That's part of the reason I'm looking into reopening businesses in your state. I want to help smaller communities. I have two other properties to look at, and I'll make my decision in the next few days. If I choose Carlton, I'll let you know." The bell over the door jingled, and a group of six walked in. Not wanting to keep Dustin from his customers, Sebastian said, "I appreciate your time." Once outside, Bas took a deep breath of crisp air. He had a good feeling about this little town.

Sebastian called the realtor and scheduled an appointment to officially look at Wellis Lodge. With how quickly Missy Perkins agreed to meet, Bas figured she was excited at the prospect of a large commission, but once he spoke to her in person, it was clear she was invested in the town.

As she unlocked the door, Missy said, "I'm fifth generation Carltonian. Most of my family worked in the coal mines until their jobs became all but obsolete. Now we rely heavily on tourism to keep our town afloat." Missy gestured for Sebastian to enter first, but he held the door for her instead. She stepped to the left and flipped on some lights. "My great-grandmother was a cook here back when the lodge first

opened. I still have the cookbook she published with their recipes.”

“Wouldn’t that be counterproductive? Sharing her secrets?”

Missy laughed. “Oh, heavens no. The folks who visited were from out of town, and having the recipes meant they could take a little of her cooking home with them. She didn’t share them on the lodge’s website or anywhere digital. Anyway, the lodge was remodeled a couple times, making things more modern. The last owner bought it right before the apocalypse and was never able to make a go of it, even when things began turning around. He spent a lot of time and money on the upkeep just in case, but eventually he had to shut everything down. He has someone come in once a month to check on the place and make sure nothing catastrophic has happened like the plumbing bursting or the roof leaking. All in all, it’s still in pretty good shape. Come on. I’ll give you the grand tour.”

After looking at every room and taking even more pictures, Sebastian was excited. The layout of the first floor was in line with his vision. The second floor would need minimal structural changes, but the drawback was the third floor. It was currently an attic the previous owners used for storage. There was plenty of room to divide the space into suites, but there was no plumbing.

Bas shared his concerns with the realtor, but Missy wasn’t daunted. “This property has sat for many years, as you know. The owners are ready to sell. Heck, they’ve been ready, but honestly? You’re the first person to show any interest. I know you have other towns you’re visiting, but if you find you like this one best, make them an offer.” What she didn’t come right out and say was Bas could lowball the owners and they’d accept.

“I’ll keep that in mind. I plan on looking at the other two properties this week, so I’ll let you know one way or another early next week at the latest. One more thing. I’d like to find out more about the surrounding properties. Is the land suitable

for building on, and if it is, would whoever owns it be willing to sell?”

“You want to expand?”

“I’m thinking more along the lines of building a house so I don’t have to live at the lodge. I have a good feeling about this place.”

“I’ll see what I can find out.”

Missy walked Sebastian out and locked up behind them. They said their goodbyes, and Bas got in his Jeep, following the female down the mountain. He had already set his GPS for Titus. After taking several turns, he finally came to the state highway heading North.

Three hours later, he arrived in front of a stunning hotel at the foot of a mountain. Unless the inside was trashed, Sebastian couldn’t see a reason why this property wasn’t up and running. He parked his Jeep and got out. Bas walked around the structure, peering in the windows. From what he could tell, the inside was in good condition. The vegetation was overgrown, but it wouldn’t be hard to tame. Bas made his way to the back of the property. A long dock led to a narrow river. Sebastian eased down the wooden planks to the end, mindful of broken or rotting boards. From where he stood, he could make out the rental cabins scattered along the shore, nestled in the trees. The scenery was nice, but it didn’t hold a candle to the Wellis Lodge’s view. Sebastian closed his eyes, envisioning living there, but he couldn’t see himself or his Gargoyle with nowhere to let loose. Turning toward his vehicle, Bas didn’t bother calling the realtor. He drove around until he found a restaurant. He grabbed a quick lunch, then got back on the road toward the third site.

By the time Bas made it to Southville, it was late, so he checked into a hotel for the night. It was nothing to write home about, but it was the best the town had to offer. Sebastian dropped his duffel on one of the queen beds, removed his boots, then set his laptop bag on the two-person table in the corner. While it booted, he took his toiletry bag to the bathroom and brushed his teeth after taking a piss and washing

his hands. Since he was in for the night, Bas changed out of his clothes into a pair of knit shorts and a T-shirt. The weather outside warranted the heater being cranked up inside, but being a Goyle, he ran hot, so he turned the thermostat to cold before sitting down at his computer.

Grace had texted earlier that she was sending several emails through for him to look at, so he checked those first. Both were inquiries into meetings about potential drawings, and he responded with meeting requests. While doing so, a notification popped up in the corner. It was Carleigh requesting a secure chat. Sebastian clicked the icon accepting her request. Carleigh's dad, Julian, had handled all technology for the Clan for many years. He was a genius and passed his knowledge on to his daughter. Since she was requesting an encrypted chat, something was up.

“Hey, Bas. How are things in West Virginia?”

“Not too bad. The first property has a lot of potential. The second one is in a valley, so I didn't bother looking at the interior. I have one more to look at tomorrow. But I doubt that's why you're contacting me.”

“You're right, but I can still ask how things are going.” The good thing about his cousins was they still spoke their mind as they always had. “Anyway, I got an alert that someone was searching your name, and I wanted to give you a heads-up.”

“You sure it wasn't someone looking to hire me to build a house? I had two emails from potential clients earlier.”

“I'm sure, unless one of those prospects was in Panther, West Virginia.”

Sebastian leaned back in the uncomfortable chair. He should have settled on the bed instead. “Anthony, Lydia, and I have a meeting with the Alpha of a wolf pack there this week, so it's probably him checking out who's coming into his territory.”

“That would make sense if the person doing the searching was male.”

“Then it could be his mate or someone in charge of security. If I were him, I’d want as much information about a stranger requesting a sit down too.”

“She doesn’t have the same last name as the Alpha, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t mates. And you’re right, she could be on his security team. I’m still going to keep an eye on her.”

“Sounds good. Any updates on Agent Stallings?” The GIA agent was the main reason Bas wanted to form a council. He and the medical examiner in South Carolina had no definitive proof shifters existed, but they were aware Hadley hadn’t been a normal human. Connor had put the fear of the gods in Stallings, but the agent had been the protégé of another agent, who, in the past, had knowledge of shifters. It was thought that all evidence had been destroyed, but they couldn’t bank on it.

“He’s still keeping a low profile, but the medical examiner took early retirement. We’re watching him as well. Bas, are you sure you want to move to the middle of nowhere? I get you wanting out of Atlanta. I just figured with your folks being in New York you’d want to move there too.”

“I love my parents; you know that. But now that I’m King, I need space from them. I need to lead the Clan my way. West Virginia is halfway between Georgia and New York, so I’ll be able to get to both places easily.”

“Just make sure there’s good Wi-Fi because you know some of the Clan are probably going to move with you.”

“I hope so. At least those of you who have jobs you can do from anywhere.” Yes, Bas was hinting strongly. He needed some of his cousins close by when he embarked on this venture. “Anyway, keep me posted if you find something off about the female trying to research me.”

“Will do. Good night, My King.” Carleigh disconnected before Bas could chastise her. Yes, he was her King, but he was her cousin and friend first.

Sebastian's phone vibrated on the table. He tapped the screen and opened the text.

Anthony: *My case is complete. I've already talked to Lydia, and we'll head out first thing. Where do you want to meet?*

Me: *I'm in Southville, but that's several hours north of Panther.*

Bas did the math. If he got up early and skipped breakfast, he could go see the lodge. If it turned out to be a good prospect, he could come back after the meeting in Panther to see it with a realtor.

Me: *If you leave at nine, that'll put you in Panther around four. That gives me time to look at the property here and arrive around the same time. I'll give Alpha Bridgewater a call in the morning and see if he wants to meet tomorrow evening or wait until Sunday. Either way, I'll book a hotel now and send you the address.*

Anthony: *Sweet. I don't have to get up at the crack of ass.*

Sebastian laughed out loud. He could always count on Anthony to put a smile on his face.

Me: *Get your beauty sleep. I'll text you after I talk to him.*

Anthony sent several emojis, before responding with *Good night, My King.*

Sebastian scrubbed a hand down his face. That was going to take some getting used to. Shutting down his laptop, Bas stood and took the few steps to the closest bed. He flopped down on his back, threaded his fingers behind his head, and closed his eyes. He didn't feel like a King yet, but meeting with the Alpha would require Bas to exude confidence. That he could do. And who knows? The two of them might become friends before it was all said and done.

Chapter 7

DAKOTA'S WHOLE BODY shook as she pulled into her parents' driveway. She had considered blowing off her father's demand to come to the house until her mom called, begging her to show up. Now she knew why. Kingston was there. She put the car in park and sat there, letting it idle. She could either turn around and run, or she could get this over with. Whatever this was. If it had only been her parents, it would be the same argument as always, but if the Alpha was there?

The front door opened, and King stepped out. Maybe he was leaving. He crossed the porch and leaned his forearms on the railing, waiting. Okay, so not leaving. Fuck. Dakota shut the motor off, blew out a breath, and got out. As she made her way to the steps, King raked his eyes down her body. After her mother called, waking Dakota up, she had crawled out of bed, thrown her hair into a ponytail, and pulled on jeans and a T-shirt with sneakers. She added a hoodie to keep the chill running through her bones to a minimum. No need to dress up to get a dressing down from her father.

The door opened again, and her mother stuck her head out. "Don't just stand there. Come on in. Lunch is ready."

King pushed off the railing and waited for Dakota, then followed her into the house. Dakota stalked into the kitchen, ignoring her father. Seeing the table was already laden with food, she plopped down at her spot, her appetite gone.

King waited until Diana was seated before taking Nix's chair. "I just stopped by to give your parents the good news, and your mom invited me to stay for lunch."

Diana beamed as she began piling King's plate full of pork, baked beans, and mac 'n cheese. Someone was full of shit. Her mother didn't cook a spread for their daily lunches. As a matter of fact, her mother couldn't cook all that well on a

good day. There's no way she smoked the pork butt they were eating. Her father had yet to say anything, but his eyes were on Dakota, daring her to misbehave.

"What good news?" she asked as she helped herself to some pulled pork. She might have lost her appetite, but she needed something on her stomach.

"That you agreed to be my partner."

Dakota dropped the fork. She fisted her hands, but King grabbed her wrist, rubbing his thumb against her bare skin. "Easy, tiger. My partner on the council." He released her arm, but the damage was done. Her father smiled at the gesture, mistaking it for what it was. He saw affection, but it was King keeping Dakota from leaving in a fit. He used some of his Alpha compulsion on her, and she hated that it worked.

Ignoring the tingle left by his touch, Dakota reached for the coleslaw. "Strong-armed is more like it," she muttered, piling the slaw on top of her pork. She then reached for the mustard-infused barbecue sauce and doused the meat.

Her father sucked in a breath, but King spoke before Arthur could chastise her. "Maybe I did." He grinned sheepishly at Diana who was staring at the Alpha like he was a god. "But my reasons for wanting you on the council are valid. That's what I was telling your folks before you arrived. How you're the best candidate to stand at my side."

Dakota stabbed her meat, then shoved a huge bite into her mouth. After chewing for what seemed like forever, she took a huge gulp of sweet tea to help wash it down. Keeping her eyes on her food, Dakota ignored them all. It wouldn't do any good to refute his reasons. Nothing she said would convince him otherwise because it wasn't the council where he wanted her. It was in his bed. At his side as Alpha Mate.

"We are honored you chose Dakota. When are you meeting this other Alpha?" Arthur asked.

"I spoke to him this morning. He and his cousin arrive this afternoon. Diana, if I had known how well you cook, I would have paid you to cater our meal. This is delicious."

Dakota snorted. “Just call Big Jim.”

“Dakota,” her father warned.

“What? I’d know this Carolina sauce anywhere since it’s my favorite.” Any other time, Dakota would have kept her mouth shut and let King believe her mom slaved all morning on the meal. She hated making her mother look bad, but instead of having Dakota’s back, she was conspiring against her. Diana knew when she called Dakota that King would be there. “Sorry, Mom. It is delicious. Better than the usual sandwiches we have.” She glared at her mom briefly, and her mother dropped her eyes. It didn’t matter if she felt bad. The damage was done. Dakota knew her father put his mate up to it. Dakota never said no to her mom; they had a special bond, but Diana couldn’t say no to Arthur. He was the alpha of their family. Further talk was stilted, and the atmosphere uncomfortable. When everyone finished eating, King turned to Dakota.

“The meeting is set for six at the pack house. I can pick you up, if you’d like.”

“Not necessary, but thanks for the offer. I’ll see you then.” Dakota stood and began clearing the table.

“I apologize, Alpha. I don’t know what’s wrong with that girl,” Arthur said quietly, but Dakota still heard him.

“Nothing to apologize for. I like that Dakota knows her own mind. If I wanted a doormat for a mate, I’d have already chosen someone else. Diana, thank you again for a wonderful meal. I’ll see myself out.”

Dakota cringed when the door closed. Her father stomped through the house to the kitchen and let her have it. “How dare you disrespect your mother like that?”

Dakota dropped the platter into the sink and turned on her father. Her claws came out, and she pointed one at him. “I dare because she used our bond to get me here. You both know how I feel about King. How I don’t want to be the Alpha Mate. But you don’t care.” She jabbed her finger his direction with each word. His pheromones were strong, but Dakota wasn’t afraid.

She knew what King would do to her father if he so much as laid a hand on her. “You would rather see me roll over like an omega bitch even though that’s not what I am.” She took a deep breath and retracted her claws. “I am an alpha whether or not you want to recognize that fact. I need a mate who will balance the equation, not tip it strongly to one side.”

“Like the Alpha coming to visit? The one whose picture you had on your computer?”

“That is called research. I wanted to get a feel for who we’re meeting with. We know nothing about this male other than the Alpha from the East Coast trusts him. Speaking of which, I have some things to take care of before tonight.” Dakota stepped up to her mother who was silently watching them spar. “I’m sorry for disrespecting you.” She kissed Diana on the cheek. “Always remember, no matter what, I love you.”

“I love you too, Kody,” her mom whispered.

Dakota wiped away the single tear rolling down her mother’s cheek before walking out of the room, not bothering to say goodbye to Arthur. Once upon a time, she adored her father. Not any longer. Her mind made up, she drove the short distance to her cabin to pack. Dakota wanted to time her leaving so that King was getting ready for the meeting, so after she had everything loaded in the car, she sat down and read for a while.

She hated leaving Vernon in a bind, but Noah was always asking for more shifts. Now he could have them all. The Depot was busier than usual when Dakota stopped in to talk to Noah and Vernon, and several customers were grumbling. Jolee was working the tables alone, but that wasn’t unusual. Wendy wouldn’t start her shift for another hour. Dakota didn’t understand what the problem was until Vernon said, “Oh, Dakota. Thank the goddess.”

Dakota ducked behind the bar, grabbed the ticket from his hand, and pulled the order for Jolee. “Where’s Noah?”

“At the clinic. Lottie called. Their mom came home from work and found their dad fucking some broad. The claws came out, and it got ugly.”

Well, shit.

“I don’t know why you stopped by, but I’m glad you did. I need you behind the bar until Noah gets here. If he gets here. From what I gathered, everyone was torn up pretty good.”

“Yeah, I got this. But when he gets here, I need to talk to you.”

“No. Nope. Talking’s never a good thing, not from where I’m sitting.” Vernon shook his head and stalked off toward his office, grumbling.

Dakota filled the orders Jolee was waiting on before taking care of the patrons sitting at the bar. When she had a spare minute, she removed her hoodie and stowed it under the counter, and then she got busy checking stock and refilling ice between orders. The mood shifted back to normal since Vernon wasn’t behind the bar. He was a nice male. A good boss. But he was a shit bartender. Dakota didn’t know how you could own a bar and not be able to pull a beer.

“Maybe this is a sign,” Jolee said when she got a second to breathe. “Maybe you should—”

“Maybe I should fill these orders until Noah gets back.” Dakota cut her off before she could spill her guts. After making up her mind to get the fuck out of town for a while, Dakota called Jolee while she was packing to give her a heads-up. There was no way she’d duck out without telling her best friend what she planned. Jolee might be an omega, but she was scrappy, and when you pissed her off, she got mean.

The door opened, and Dakota prayed it was Noah. No such luck. It was an angry Kingston. Tinsley rushed over to say hello but stopped a few feet away. Even she was smart enough to recognize a pissed off Alpha.

King walked behind the bar and got in Dakota’s space. “What are you doing here? We have a meeting in thirty minutes.”

“Pulling beers. Noah had an emergency, and Vernon needed help.”

“The Depot is Vernon’s responsibility, not yours.” Dakota went to step around King, but he grabbed her arms. When she glanced down at his hands, he turned loose. “Sorry. But this is important, Kody.”

“I get that, but what would it say about me if I didn’t step in to help when Vernon needed me the most? I get you want me at this meeting, but I’m not needed there. I *am* needed here.”

King pushed a strand of hair that had come loose from her ponytail behind her ear, then cupped her nape, leaving his scent there. Dakota hated when he did it, but it was an Alpha thing. He did it to all their pack. “What was Noah’s emergency?”

“There was a domestic altercation between his parents and his dad’s mistress. The three of them tried to kill each other.”

“Fuckin’ hell.” King rubbed his temples. “Can no one else fill in?”

“You know there isn’t.” Dakota skirted around him and grabbed another ticket from Jolee. “Excuse me,” she said, shooing King from in front of the taps with her hands. “Look. If Noah gets back in time, I’ll come to the pack house. If not, I’ll meet this Alpha another time.”

“Fine. I’m sorry I put my hands on you.”

Dakota ignored him and retrieved two cold glasses from the cooler. King sighed heavily, shaking his head. He didn’t linger, thank the goddess. With him out of the way, that was one obstacle down, two more to go.

Dakota cleared the second hurdle when Noah showed up about fifteen minutes later. “How are your parents?”

“Alive.” Noah’s eyes were haunted. “But life as they know it will never be the same. My mom told my dad if he showed his face at home, she’d finish the job.”

“That’s rough, but at least they’re alive, right?”

“Yeah. Sorry you had to fill in. Let me know if I can repay the favor.”

Perfect opening. “As a matter of fact, you can. Come with me.” After making sure everyone had a full drink, Dakota gestured toward the stock room. When she closed the door, she whispered, “I need to get out of town for a while. Can you cover my shifts?”

“Hell, yeah. I mean... Is everything okay? Most people don’t just up and leave Panther.”

Dakota lifted her hand to tip her hat back, but it was in the car. She smoothed out her hair instead. “I’m tired of all the bullshit with King. I’m hoping if I’m gone for a bit, he’ll choose someone else as the Alpha Mate.”

“Or he’ll get pissed and come after you. Are you sure about this?”

“I am. So what do you say?”

“I’ll do it. But what if he comes looking for you? I can’t lie to him, Kody.”

“He’s got that meeting with the other Alpha this evening, so he won’t realize I’m gone until tomorrow. If he does ask, tell him the truth. I needed to get out of town for a bit.”

Noah opened his arms, and Dakota stepped into his embrace. “I’m gonna miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too, but I’ll be back.” *Maybe*. “Now I have to break the news to Vernon.”

“Good luck with that. He’s probably going to offer you ownership of the bar to stay.”

Dakota squeezed her friend before stepping back. “He’ll get over it. Maybe now he’ll learn how to pull a beer.”

Noah’s eyes got big, and they both burst out laughing. “I better get back out there.” Noah reached out and squeezed Dakota’s hand. “Take care of yourself.”

“I will.” She left the stockroom and turned right toward Vernon’s office. When she knocked on the doorframe, he

leaned his head back against his desk chair and narrowed his eyes.

Cutting right to the chase, Dakota said, “I need to take off for a while.”

“I figured this day would come, but I can’t say I blame you. If Kingston could take no for an answer...”

“I’ll be back. I just need to put some space between us for a little while. I already talked to Noah. He’s got my shifts covered.”

“And Wade can fill in if Noah needs a day off.” When Dakota raised her eyebrows, Vernon gave her a sad smile. “Like I said, this doesn’t really come as a surprise, and Wade’s been bugging me to work the bar. He’s been practicing after hours.”

“I’m gonna miss you, Vern. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”

“Now don’t go making me cry. Just know your job is here when you do come back.”

“Thanks. I’m gonna...” Dakota thrust her thumb over her shoulder.

“Be safe out there.”

“Always.” Dakota blew her boss a kiss, then left his office before *she* cried. The Depot had been her second home for years. Instead of going out the front where everyone could see her, Dakota left via the back door. She jogged across the parking lot, but when she got close to her car, she froze. Nix was leaned over, peering inside.

When he sensed her presence, Nix stood and asked, “What’s all this?” He gestured to the back where her things were stored.

“Donations. I’m running out of room in my closet.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be at the pack house for that meeting?”

“Yes, and I’m late. I had to fill in for Noah.” Dakota clicked the fob to unlock her car. “Gotta go.”

Nix moved aside and let her get in. When she went to close the door, he stopped it. “Dakota—”

“I’m late, Phoenix. Move your hand,” she growled, using her alpha voice. Her brother was also an alpha, but most days he didn’t act like it. He stepped back, and she slammed the door harder than necessary. Dakota started the engine and pulled out of the parking space, keeping one eye on her brother and the other on the lot. She drove slowly, giving Nix time to get inside. As soon as the door closed behind him, she turned right, headed out of town instead of left toward the pack house. Dakota kept to the speed limit. She didn’t need anyone, especially the sheriff, who was King’s cousin, to slow her down.

Once she was on the highway, Dakota let out a breath. Then she let out a loud whoop! She turned up the radio and sang along as she put Panther in her rearview mirror.

Chapter 8

SEBASTIAN DIDN'T REALIZE how small Panther was until he searched for a nearby hotel. He booked one over an hour away, which meant Anthony had to drive farther north. Bas was waiting in the small hotel bar when his cousins arrived. Lydia, looking gorgeous in a long sweater over jeans tucked into knee-high boots, walked straight up to Bas for a hug. Anthony was dressed down in faded jeans, a black T-shirt, and his biker boots. He followed Lydia, wearing a shit-eating grin.

“What’s wrong with your face?” Bas asked.

Anthony pulled him into a crushing embrace, slapping his back. When he stepped back, Anthony said, “I still can’t believe you want to move here. There ain’t shit for miles, man.”

Sebastian signaled to the bartender for his tab, then polished off his beer. “The places I’ve looked at aren’t that small. Carlton has almost a thousand residents.”

“Ooh, a thousand. You’ll know them all by name within a week,” Anthony joked as Bas placed a couple twenties on the receipt to cover the tab and a sizable tip.

“Does that mean you’ve made your choice?” Lydia asked.

Bas stood from his stool, tucking his wallet in his back pocket. “I want to go back and revisit the area around the Wellis Lodge, but the other two locations are definitely out. Titus was nice, but it was in a valley. Southville was on a mountain, but the lodge was one strong wind from collapsing. I’d have to demolish it, then rebuild from the ground up. Carlton’s lodge has good bones, and the view is amazing. There were ski slopes back in the day, so that’s an option for in the future. Are you driving, or am I?” Bas asked as they stepped outside.

“I’ll drive so you can relax.” Anthony pointed his fob at his SUV and unlocked the doors. Lydia climbed into the back seat, and Bas took shotgun. Once they were buckled, Anthony went back to their conversation. “You could always open the slopes for mountain bikes in the meantime. If you’re serious about this one, I want to go check it out after we meet with Bridgewater.”

“I am serious. It has a lot of potential, including all the land surrounding the lodge. I’ve already asked the realtor to check into ownership.”

“I can see it now – the Stone Mountain Kingdom.” Anthony spread his hands out in front of him.

Bas smacked his cousin’s shoulder. “Shut up and drive. And Stone Mountain is already taken.”

Anthony cackled as he pulled out of the parking lot. While he drove, Sebastian put the address into the GPS. The electronic voice informed them the drive would take one hour and four minutes. Sebastian got comfortable, chatting with his cousins, and Anthony got them there fifteen minutes sooner than the GPS originally stated. Sebastian understood why there wasn’t a hotel in Panther. It wasn’t a town but more of a community. It was comprised of moderate housing with a few small businesses scattered along the way. There were several churches, but none of them appeared to be in good shape. Seeing as this was wolf shifter territory, that made sense considering they worshipped a goddess.

Surprisingly, there was no gate guarding the drive to the pack house. There were also no wolves waiting to question them. Anthony pulled down the long gravel road, then parked in front of a nice-sized lodge. Sebastian studied it with an architect’s eye, and he liked what he saw. Several pack members stood on the long porch, and in the middle was a male Bas assumed was the Alpha. He had that air about him. The male walked down the steps, flanked by two other males.

“Alpha Stone?” he asked as he approached the vehicle.

Sebastian and Anthony had discussed how to handle the truth of their species, and they decided honesty was best if

they wanted Kingston Bridgewater's compliance regarding the council. But he wouldn't admit anything out in the open.

"I'm Sebastian. This is my second-in-command, Anthony, and Lydia, another member of our Clan. Thank you for agreeing to meet with us." Bas reached out his hand, and when Kingston shook it, Sebastian got a hint of something... familiar. Some scent he recognized.

"This is my second, Sloane," Kingston said, indicating the large, broody male at his side. "Please come inside, and we'll get settled for our discussion."

When Sebastian didn't move, Anthony stepped beside him. "You okay?"

"I'll tell you later," he whispered before following the Alpha. The inside of the lodge was as Bas expected. Lots of wood with a stone fireplace. The main area was currently set up as a dining room, but King didn't stop. Instead, he led them upstairs to a suite, with Sloane following.

"I thought we'd be more comfortable up here, away from everyone. Not that they can't hear our conversation if they try, but at least this way we have the semblance of privacy. I had dinner catered, but I thought we'd talk first. Can I get you a drink?"

"Beer if you have it. Water's fine if you don't." Anthony also asked for beer, while Lydia stated she was good. Sebastian tried not to be obvious as he took in the Alpha's living quarters. The living area was spacious, furnished with a sofa facing two armchairs. A large flatscreen television hung over the fireplace. There was a small kitchen off to the side, where food was set out on the counter. It was nothing extravagant, but the room was tidy if dated.

Sloane retrieved four beers from the refrigerator, then passed them out. King gestured to the sitting area. Sloane stood behind King as he chose one of the chairs, and Anthony took a similar position behind Bas who sat in the other chair, leaving the empty sofa for Lydia. As he sat, Sebastian caught another whiff of that same aroma, and it was all he could do to

keep from sniffing the fabric. The chair was covered in it, and Sebastian's beast rumbled in his head.

Not now.

But that's her scent!

Her? As in our mate? How do you know that? You weren't around when I was attacked.

I've always been with you.

King crossed his ankle over his knee, propping the bottle on his thigh. "Before we discuss this council you're proposing, why don't you tell me what you are? Because you sure as hell aren't wolves."

"You're correct. We're Gar—"

"Alpha!"

Both King and Sebastian jumped to their feet when the newcomer threw open the door, yelling. "She's gone."

Kingston narrowed his eyes at the male. "Phoenix, we're in the middle of a meeting. Who's gone?"

Phoenix moved closer to Sebastian. "Dakota." He too emitted the same scent as the Alpha. Sebastian inhaled, doing his best to be subtle. Not only that, but there was something else familiar about the male. Something that had his beast ready to rip the male's head off. Anthony noticed, and he frowned at Sebastian. Bas thumped his Gargoyle mentally, thanking the gods Kingston wasn't paying them any attention. His focus was on Phoenix.

"I just saw Kody half an hour ago at The Depot," Kingston growled.

"I know. Noah got there for his shift, and Dakota said she was coming here for the meeting, but she turned right out of the parking lot instead of left, and her car was packed with a bunch of her stuff. I asked her about it, and she said she was donating it. If she had come here, I might have believed her, but after what happened earlier..." Phoenix looked at his feet with his neck bared.

“I take it this Dakota is important?” Anthony asked.

“Yes, she’s the Alpha’s mate,” Phoenix explained.

“Nix,” King growled. “I’m sorry, but I need to reschedule our meeting. I have a runaway she-wolf to locate.”

“Maybe we can help?” Anthony offered.

“Why would you do that?” Sloane asked. That’s what Bas wanted to know. If this female was who he and his beast suspected, they needed to keep her far away from Kingston Bridgewater.

“Why wouldn’t we? Sebastian, Lydia, and I came here to form an alliance of sorts. What better way to show we’re honorable than to offer the resources at our disposal?”

Sloane set his hand on King’s shoulder, and after a few seconds, King said, “I appreciate the offer. We should be able to track her, but if not, we might entrust your help.”

Sebastian had to get out of there. “We’ll leave you to it then. You have my number if you change your mind.” He tipped his head toward the door, and his cousins followed him out. They didn’t speak until they were in Anthony’s vehicle. “I think Dakota is my mate.”

“What? Is that why you were sniffing the air?” Lydia asked.

“Yes. I first scented her on Kingston. Then again on the chair I was sitting in, and Phoenix smelled of her too.”

“If she is, you’ll have a fight on your hands, Brother. Phoenix said she’s Kingston’s mate,” Anthony stated.

“Then I’ll kidnap her ass and disappear. Fuck!”

Anthony started the SUV and drove away from the pack house. “We need information if we’re going to find her.”

“Maybe we should follow King. He said he could track her.”

“They’re wolves, Bas. They’ll sniff us out, and how will we explain why we’re sneaking around? I think we should start at The Depot. Panther isn’t that big, and there aren’t that

many businesses here.” He punched the Bluetooth button on his steering wheel. When it beeped, he said, “Call Carleigh.”

“Is your meeting over already?” Carleigh asked instead of saying hello.

“It was cut short, and we need your help. Bas may have found his mate. Well, not found, because the female has allegedly left town, but she works at a place called The Depot.”

Carleigh’s fingers flew over her keyboard. “That’s like finding the proverbial needle, Bas. I’m happy for you if she turns out to be your mate.”

Bas groaned. “Yeah, well, there’s a small problem. According to one of the pack members, she’s already mated to the Alpha.”

“Oh, shit. What are you going to do?”

“Fight like hell.” So much for making a friend out of Kingston.

“Okay, there’s a bar called The Depot at the edge of Panther. I’m sending you the address now.”

Sebastian’s phone pinged with the incoming text. “Thanks, Carleigh. All we know so far is the female’s name is Dakota. She left The Depot less than an hour ago, so if you could somehow work your magic?”

“I’m on it. I’ll pass my current job over to Harlow and make this priority.”

“I appreciate it.”

The Bluetooth beeped when she disconnected. Sebastian pulled up the address in his map app and gave Anthony directions. It didn’t take long to find the place. The inside was what Bas expected. A well-built bouncer guarding the door. Loud music. Booths lining the left side, and square tables filling the middle of the space. There were almost as many women as men filling the seats, so Bas didn’t worry about Lydia being the only female. The bar was to the right, and Anthony tilted his head that direction. Bas followed his

cousins to three empty stools at the far end. They seated Lydia in the middle. She could handle herself, but it was ingrained in the males to protect their females regardless.

“Wh-what’ll it be?” the bartender asked, wariness coming through loud and clear. Conversation had halted when they stepped through the doors and hadn’t started up again.

Sebastian did his best to study the tap handles. The same aroma he’d scented was faint there in the bar. “I’ll have the Cosmic Rays stout.” Anthony added his selection of an IPA, and Lydia asked for a Strawberry Sloth sour. The bartender turned to fill their order, glancing over his shoulder a couple times.

When he returned, the male set their frosted glasses in front of them, not bothering with coasters. “I haven’t seen you around here.”

“I’m Sebastian, and these are my cousins, Lydia and Anthony. We had a meeting with Kingston Bridgewater earlier.”

The male’s eyes widened. “Oh. You’re the Alpha here to talk about a council, right?” When Bas nodded, the bartender extended his hand. “I’m Noah. It’s a pleasure to meet y’all. I hope your meeting went well. King told us about what happened in South Carolina. Scary shit.”

“Scary indeed,” Anthony said. “But our meeting was cut short. Some emergency with the Alpha’s mate.”

“Mate? King doesn’t—”

“Noah!” Bas turned to see the bouncer scowling at the bartender. When Bas glanced back at him, Noah had his head tilted to the side. When a waitress stepped up beside Anthony, she held out a ticket. Noah took it and hustled to fill several glasses.

“Hello there,” Anthony said to the woman.

“Hello, Anthony,” she responded, grinning. “Sebastian.” She inclined her head in respect when she looked at Bas. She greeted Lydia warmly.

“And you are?” Anthony purred. The male was a consummate flirt.

“Jolee.”

“A unique name for a unique female. Tell me, Jolee, do you have a mate?”

Noah placed her order on her tray, and Jolee lifted it with practiced ease. Instead of answering, she winked at Anthony, then sashayed off to deliver the beers.

“You’re ridiculous,” Bas muttered.

“No. I am merely a male in his prime.” Anthony lifted his glass, saluted Bas with it, then drank half of it in one go.

Sebastian wanted to get Noah alone and ask him about Dakota, but he didn’t think it would be wise. While he was trying to figure out how to get information about the female who was possibly his mate, Anthony was tapping his fingers against the bar. It was something he did often, most times when he was hatching a plan. Anthony downed his ale and signaled for another.

When Noah placed it in front of him, Anthony closed his fingers around the glass. “Thanks, man. This place is great. Have you worked here long?”

“A few years. Vernon, the owner, is a good boss, the customers are family, and it’s good money.”

“Are you the only bartender?”

“No. Well, I wasn’t until earlier. The other bartender decided to take off for a while. Excuse me.” Noah walked down the bar to refill someone’s beer, and Sebastian glanced at his cousin who had his head turned, no doubt watching Jolee. Bas didn’t say anything. If Anthony had a plan, it was most likely a good one. His mind was sharp, and it made him an excellent investigator.

When Jolee returned with another order, Anthony leaned closer and whispered, “Is everyone here like us?”

“You mean hot?”

Anthony barked out a laugh, and Jolee grinned. “No. Other.”

“I knew what you meant, and yes. If you haven’t noticed, Panther isn’t exactly a tourist mecca. Other than the three of you, I can’t remember the last time we had outsiders. Like Noah said, everyone here is family. Since your meeting with King was cut short, are you all hanging around for a while or...?”

“If I received an offer from a pretty female, I could be persuaded to stick around. If not, our hotel is about an hour away, and we’ll be headed back there until King reschedules our meeting.”

Jolee propped her elbow on the bar. “You’d ditch your Alpha for a date?”

Sebastian leaned over so he could see the waitress. “Anthony would ditch me for a cheeseburger. He has no shame.”

Anthony shrugged. “He’s not wrong. I’m a growing Gar — uh garbage disposal. What can I say?”

The door opened, and Jolee straightened, taking a step away from Anthony. Sloane marched up to her and grabbed her arm. “We need to talk.”

“I’m working, Sloane.”

“I don’t give a shit. If you know where Dakota is, you need to tell me now.”

Bas leaned around Lydia and put a hand on Anthony’s arm when he growled. They were in someone else’s territory, and it wouldn’t help their cause for getting King to agree to sitting on the council if Anthony got in a fight with the Alpha’s second.

Sloane was a large male, but when he looked over at Anthony, he must have sensed the warning signs of a pissed off alpha male because he let go of Jolee’s arm and stepped back.

Jolee glared at Sloane. “She wouldn’t tell me where she’s going. Plausible deniability and all that.”

Sloane nodded once, then turned and motioned for Noah. When the bartender walked up, Sloane asked, “What about you? Did you know she was running?”

“Not until I got here today. She asked if I wanted her shifts, and I said yes. You know I need the money.”

“Fuck.” Sloane ran his hands through his hair. “I can’t believe the bitch ran.”

“Hey,” Jolee and Bas complained at the same time.

It was Sebastian who Sloane focused on. “You got something to say?”

“Yes. I think it’s disrespectful to call Dakota a bitch even if she is a wolf.”

“Yeah, well, if you ever met her, you’d call her one too. Thinking she’s so much better than everybody. I told King he was making a mistake.” Sloane pointed a finger at Jolee. “If you talk to her, tell her to get her ass back to Panther. Alpha’s orders.” Then he stormed back out the front door.

Anthony placed his hand on Jolee’s where she was white-knuckling the bar. “Are you okay?”

She slipped her hand out from under Anthony’s. “I’m fine. And Sloane’s wrong about Kody. She’s not a bitch, just a female who knows what she wants. Or doesn’t.”

“Jolee, order up!” a man called from the kitchen window. When she went to retrieve the food, Anthony signaled to Noah for the check. After he paid, they all stood, and Jolee walked over to them.

“It was nice to meet you. Good luck with your meeting, whenever it is.” She held her hand out toward Anthony, and after shaking it, he stuck his hand in his pocket. Sebastian inclined his head to the female, then followed his cousins outside.

Once seated in the vehicle, Anthony dug in his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. He showed it to Bas. “Let’s get

you two back to the hotel. Looks like I've got a date."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Bas asked as he buckled his seatbelt.

"I think it's a wonderful idea. We need information on Dakota, and Jolee has it. Plus, she's a shifter. Those females are wild between the sheets."

Sebastian wouldn't know since his previous partners had been human, but he hoped to soon find out.

Chapter 9

DAKOTA PUT SEVERAL hours between her and Panther before she stopped for the night. She would have gone farther, but her eyes were getting heavy. She chose a moderately priced hotel that advertised free breakfast. When the desk clerk asked for a credit card to cover incidentals, she momentarily panicked. “I want to pay cash.”

“I understand, but we still require a card on file, just in case. We won’t run it unless you make charges to the room.”

Dakota handed her card to the clerk after giving her name and address as well as her tag number. She paid for one night’s stay, returned her card to her wallet, and took the key card. The clerk wished her a good night, and Dakota returned the sentiment. When she got to her room, Dakota dropped her duffel bag and purse on the bed closest to the door, then toed off her boots. She really wanted a shower, but she wanted sleep more. She dug in her bag for a T-shirt to sleep in. Once she had changed, she took her toiletries to the bathroom and removed her makeup and brushed her teeth, staring at her reflection. Dakota felt different. Strange. Optimistic. A little bit free. A whole lotta nervous. After peeing, she washed and dried her hands. She left the bathroom light on but pulled the door almost all the way shut.

When she climbed under the covers, Dakota was still tired, but she was also wired from watching her rearview for so long after leaving Panther. By now, King would know she was gone. Even though she informed him she might not make it to the meeting, he would have gone back to The Depot afterward. That’s when he would find out she had left town because there was no way Vernon or Noah wouldn’t have told the Alpha the truth if he asked. King would notify her parents. Her mother would hopefully understand, but her dad would curse her name. Nix? He’d side with their father.

Dakota wasn't aware of anyone in their pack having mad computer skills, so the odds of someone being able to track her down were in her favor. Still, she left her phone at home after writing down the important numbers. She stopped about an hour away from home to get the cheapest smart phone available so she wouldn't be caught without one in case of emergency. Dakota had also researched whether someone besides her, the owner, had the ability to use the GPS on her car to track her. They couldn't since the vehicle was in her name only. The only way King could do so would be to report the car stolen and have the police find it. She didn't believe he would go to such lengths.

When she first considered leaving, Dakota investigated the cheapest accommodations available and found camping was the way to go. She planned on getting a tent until she saw there were inexpensive cabins without bathrooms. Dakota had no problem using the campground's facilities. She didn't mind paying a little more for a sturdy shelter in case of rain. She wasn't a diva by any means, but being out of the elements and having a bed was better than sleeping on the ground. She could always sleep in her fur, but Dakota didn't want to risk being caught shifting.

When deciding where to go, she considered heading to Utah, but that would be the first place her parents looked. Then she thought about heading to the coast. Dakota had been to the ocean when her family went on vacation. She loved the beach, but it wasn't necessarily somewhere she wanted to live. When she opened a map, something told her to head south, so she chose a location near a national forest in Georgia. The photos of the area showed a river, lakes, and waterfalls surrounded by all kinds of trees. Dakota never felt more alive than when she was one with nature. There were plenty of towns surrounding the forest where she could hopefully find a job. Once she was established, she would find an apartment to rent if living at the campground didn't pan out long term.

Dakota realized she was thinking of putting down roots instead of hiding out long enough for King to find a mate. Putting down roots was a stretch, but she didn't want to use up all her savings, so she'd need to find a job for at least a while.

Dakota hated burning bridges, but she'd do whatever was necessary to get through however long she stayed away from Panther, whether it was a couple months or a year.

Her Wolf grumbled. Dakota got it. They were pack animals. They thrived around others, not alone. Hopefully, King would choose a mate sooner rather than later, and they could go home. But she would deal with it one day at a time. Tomorrow would be there soon enough, and she wanted to be rested for the final leg of her drive. Dakota rolled to her side and closed her eyes.

Dakota knelt beside the creek and ran her fingers through the cool water. It had been too long since she swam there. Too long since she swam anywhere. The last time had been at a hotel when her family went on vacation to the beach. While she loved looking out over the ocean, Dakota didn't venture too far away from the shore, having watched too many movies about sharks. Her skin tingled, signaling she wasn't alone. Dakota stood, and when she turned, King was there, shirtless and barefoot. Dakota moved away from the water, ready to shift and run. King scowled at her, his fists clenched at his side. "I'm tired of waiting, Kody. You're mine."

"No, she isn't," a deep voice called behind her. When Dakota turned, Sebastian Stone was there, dressed in nothing but jeans, same as Kingston. Her Alpha was a couple inches taller and had more brawn than Sebastian, but she found the newcomer to be more enticing. Much more. Something about him called to her. She took a step toward the male, but King leapt between them.

"Stay out of this, Stone. I'm Kody's Alpha, and she's mine."

"You might be her Alpha, but she can decide who she wants as a mate." Sebastian's hands were clawed, and his teeth elongated. Dakota studied them closely. Those weren't wolf fangs.

King partially shifted, allowing his own claws to come out. He took a step back, reaching for Dakota, but she dodged his grip at the last second.

“As your Alpha, I demand you come to me.”

Dakota’s Wolf whimpered. Their Alpha had spoken. She fisted her hands, but her feet moved toward him against her wishes.

“No! Dakota, don’t do it,” Sebastian commanded, and Dakota froze. She was torn between the two males vying for her obedience. How was that possible? What kind of hold did Sebastian have over her that demanded she listen? No, it wasn’t a demand but more of a call to her soul.

With a deep growl, King shifted to his fur, then lunged for Sebastian, scraping his claws across the other male’s chest.

No! Not again. Dakota shifted and dove at the larger wolf, knocking him away from Sebastian. She rolled to her feet and turned to face her Alpha. King bared his fangs, saliva dripping from his maw. He stalked toward her, his eyes glowing amber. Dakota readied for a fight, but just as King launched at her, Dakota was grabbed and lifted into the air. King’s Wolf tossed his head back and howled as Dakota was flown up and away. Her Wolf snarled at the male below, safe in the arms of... What the fuck was Sebastian? Shifting back to her skin, Dakota’s arms flailed as if she, too, were trying to fly.

Dakota struck something soft as she flapped her arms, and she clamped on. Her eyes popped open, and in her hand was the extra pillow. Fuck. She wasn’t flying, and Sebastian Stone wasn’t a... She had no idea what he had been in her dream. Something with wings. Had that been him she dreamt about weeks ago? No, that wasn’t possible, because she hadn’t known he existed the last time she dreamed of someone with wings. Unless he was a dream walker. But they were a myth. Weren’t they?

So are wolf shifters, yet we’re real.

Dakota flopped back down and pushed her hair off her face. She understood why she dreamed King attacked Sebastian the same way Nix had attacked the teen all those years ago. What she didn’t get was dreaming about a creature with wings. As far as she knew, there were no beings who could fly.

Doesn't mean there aren't any. I'm still going with dragon.

You're not helping.

Dakota glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Six a.m. Thank the goddess it wasn't earlier. The hotel began serving breakfast in half an hour. That gave her time to take a shower and dress. She had wanted to be on the road at a decent time, putting more distance between her and Panther, so this was perfect. She rolled to her feet, stretched her arms over her head, and twisted at her waist. She reached down and touched her toes, noticing the chipped polish. It wasn't like anyone was going to see her feet, so she disregarded them and headed to the bathroom. Fifteen minutes later, she was dressed, packed, and ready to go. She took her bags to her car to eat up a few more minutes, then headed to the small dining area.

The coffee station was already set up, so Dakota fixed a cup and waited until a hotel worker informed her the buffet was ready. She loaded a plate with eggs, bacon, sausage links, and a biscuit. She went back to where individual containers of cereal were stacked and grabbed one of the fruity variety. She would save it for a snack on the road. Dakota took her time eating. She sipped her coffee as well as a glass of milk. When finished, she wiped her mouth on the cloth napkin and left a tip on the table for whoever cleaned up after her. Before heading outside, she found the restrooms past the check-in desk and peed so she wouldn't have to stop for a while.

Digging in her purse for the car keys, Dakota didn't realize she had company until it was too late. Sloane was leaning against her car, his long legs crossed at the ankle.

"Keys," he demanded.

"I'm not going anywhere with you." Dakota turned to head back inside and ran into a brick wall. A brick wall with hands that grabbed her arms.

"I'm disappointed, Kody." King released his grip, holding out his hand. "Keys, now."

“You can’t make me go home,” she argued. King arched a dark brow. Okay, he could. He could command it, and she would have to obey. “How did you find me? I left my phone at home so you couldn’t access the GPS. And you don’t have authorization to...” Then it dawned on her. Sloane owned a garage. King had worked there before taking over as Alpha. “You put a tracker on my car, didn’t you?”

King remained quiet as a couple walked by. They didn’t stop to ask if she was okay. As if they recognized the monster in their midst, they kept their eyes averted. Once they were out of earshot, King growled, “Keys, Kody. Don’t make me take them from you.”

“I hate you,” she seethed as she slapped the keys onto his open palm. “I don’t know what you think this will accomplish other than making me despise you more than I already do.”

King tossed the keys to Sloane who unlocked Dakota’s car and moved the seat back to make room for his long legs. He then got in, closed the door, and started the engine. When he drove off without looking back, Dakota knew she was fucked.

“Let’s go.” King gestured to his SUV that was parked in the next row. Dakota could have run. She could have yelled and caused a scene, but she didn’t. What she also didn’t do was speak. When King unlocked his car, she moved past him to the back door. He didn’t protest. He held the door for her until she was seated, then closed it before striding around to the driver’s side. Once buckled, King started the motor and turned the radio up.

Dakota leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Hope was a fickle bitch. She had teased Dakota with a small taste of freedom. She wondered what would happen when they got back to Panther. Would he lock her up or allow her to go back to her life? Vernon would welcome her to come back to The Depot, but that wouldn’t be fair to Noah. Dakota was willing to fill in part time so she had some money coming in. If she was allowed her freedom. If not? Dakota didn’t want to think about that.

Her thoughts strayed to her dream and Sebastian Stone. Was it possible he *was* a dragon? That didn't fit, though. Whatever he was, he hadn't shifted to a creature. He'd held her in human arms. A human with wings. Maybe he could do a partial shift? Why was she even trying to make sense of it anyway? It wasn't real. But he had felt real. The way he called to her was how she imagined a mate pull would feel even though wolves didn't have fated mates. If she got that same sense from Kingston, Dakota would have submitted to him without a second thought. Her life would be so much easier if that were the case, but it wasn't.

At least now you'll get to meet the man.

To what end?

To find out what he is. I sense something...

What? You sense what?

A calling. The same thing you felt in the dream, I sense his beast calling to me.

That was crazy talk. Wasn't it? But if he was something *other*, was it possible he was seeking her out in her dreams? She wished there was someone she could ask. Someone who knew about dream walkers and other shifters and souls calling out to their other half. But there wasn't. The Bridgewater pack wasn't like others she'd heard about with elders and healers and shaman. They had the typical hierarchy with the Alpha and his second. There were alphas, betas, and omegas, but for all intents and purposes, their pack was basically a community like most others where the members had jobs. They lived regular, though insulated, lives. Their income was mostly their own with a small percentage going to the Alpha so he didn't have to work an outside job. King's role as their leader was his job.

I doubt I'll get to see anyone. King's probably going to lock me up and throw away the key.

Dakota dug around in her purse, making as much noise as possible. She removed her phone, and King eyed her in the rearview. She then grabbed the bottle of ibuprofen and shook it

at him. She unscrewed the lid and poured a couple in her palm, tossed them in her mouth, swallowing them dry. King returned his eyes to the road, and Dakota waited a few minutes before moving her phone to her knee so King wouldn't see it. She made sure it was on silent and even went so far as to turn the vibration off. Then she leaned her elbow against the door and rested her head on her fist. Using her left hand, she typed out a text to Jolee, a few words at a time. Since it was early, her bestie was no doubt asleep, but Dakota wanted her to have the message as soon as she woke.

Me: It's Dakota. King put a tracker on my car. He's dragging me back to Panther.

Dakota didn't have to wait for a response.

Jolee: Holy shitballs. Are you okay? He didn't hurt you, did he?

Me: I'm fine. Just pissed.

Jolee: How far away are you?

Me: About 4 hours.

Jolee: What are you going to do?

Me: Depends on what he allows. Don't worry. I'm not running again.

Jolee: I love you, girl. I'll see you when you get here.

Me: Hopefully. Love you too.

Dakota stuck the phone between her legs. She closed her eyes and brought forth the image of Sebastian Stone. She didn't know what it was about the man that held her attention, but thinking of him and her dreams was a better way to pass the time than worrying about what King would do once they were back home. After a couple hours, Dakota opened the package of cereal and crunched on it. She wasn't hungry, but she loved the sugary treat. She felt King's eyes on her in the rearview mirror, but she continued to ignore him.

King didn't speak until they pulled onto pack land. He drove Dakota to her cabin where her car was already parked. He shut the engine off, and Dakota groaned. She didn't want

him inside her home any more now than before. He unbuckled and turned so he could look at her.

“I still want you on the council. I had to cut the meeting short when you ran off, so I’ll let you know when the rescheduled time is.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you come after me? Why couldn’t you let me be?”

“Because you’re pack, and pack doesn’t leave without a good reason.”

“My parents left our old pack,” Dakota argued.

“And they had a good reason after what Pheonix did to the human.”

“So now I’m a prisoner? You’re never letting me leave Panther?” Dakota hissed.

“If you have a good reason, then sure, you can go. You didn’t have a good reason other than you were pissed off. You left without telling your parents. Do you know how worried your mother was?”

“I’m sure she was the only one,” Dakota muttered. “May I go inside now?”

“Call your parents, and then call Vernon. I’m sure he’ll be happy to see you back. Noah’s good, but he’s not you.”

Dakota didn’t tell King that she didn’t plan to go back to the bar full time. She wouldn’t do that to Noah, not after offering him the full-time hours. She pushed open the door, got out, then closed it gently even though she wanted to slam it. Dakota ignored King as she strode to her car and looked inside. Her stuff was still in the back. When she opened the driver’s door, King rolled down the window.

“What are you doing, Kody?”

“Looking for my fucking keys, if that’s okay with you? I need them to get in my house.”

King sighed but nodded. Fuck. If she thought she hated the male before, she had been mistaken. Dakota snatched the keys from the ignition and slammed her car door before striding up the steps. She didn't look back as she let herself inside. Dakota waited until she heard King's motor start and the vehicle drive away. She called Jolee and asked her to come over, and her best friend nearly burst her ear drum with excitement. Then Dakota went back outside and began lugging her things into the cabin. The more trips she made, the madder she got.

One way or another, Dakota would find a way to escape Panther. Kingston Bridgewater could go fuck himself.

Chapter 10

SEBASTIAN STOOD ON the balcony holding a mug of coffee that had grown cold. The view was nothing spectacular even though he could see a mountain in the distance. The night before, Anthony dropped Sebastian and Lydia off at the hotel, then went back to Panther to meet up with Jolee. Lydia sat with Bas in his room for a while.

“Now that Big Mouth is gone, do you want to talk about it?”

“What’s there to say?” Sebastian didn’t want to get his hopes up that Dakota was his mate. Just because the males of Bridgewater pack gave off a familiar scent didn’t mean anything. His Goyle begged to differ. So did Lydia.

“Bas, if your beast insists the scent you locked onto is your mate’s, then you need to trust it. Maybe it’s not this Dakota, though. It could be another female. I caught a whiff of something in the bar, and there were plenty of women there.”

“I noticed it too, but if my mate had been there, it would have been stronger.”

“Then it begs to reason Dakota is your female, and the scent was left over from when she was behind the bar earlier.”

“True, but...” Bas ran a hand over his short beard. “We’re here to get the Bridgewater pack on board with the council. If Dakota is my mate, I don’t see things going well.”

“Then screw the pack. Mates come first. There are plenty of other wolves out there to join us. I don’t get why Knox Millard didn’t agree to sit on the council.”

“He said he’s too old, which is bullshit. According to Connor, Knox is eighty-four. He has plenty of years left in him.”

“He does, but maybe he has his hands full with his pack. Or maybe he’s still mourning the loss of Hadley. Whatever his reason, there are plenty of wolves out there. We’ll find the right fit for the council. Regardless of whether Dakota is your mate, I honestly didn’t get a good feeling from King or Sloane. Especially Sloane.”

“Then another meeting is moot. I trust your instincts. I was too focused on what I was smelling to pay much attention to the type of males they are.”

“We might not want them on the council, but we need to pretend we do so that we can remain in their territory.” Lydia stood and stretched, the sleeves of her sweater sliding back to reveal the bracelets Anthony’s aunt, Lilly, made for all females of their Clan. The jewelry was spelled, and with nothing but a thought, would become whatever weapon the wearer needed. Lydia’s weapons of choice were knives. “I’m going to my room and catch up on emails. Will you be okay?”

Bas rose and walked her to the door. “I’ll be fine. Thanks for the talk.” He hugged his cousin, then watched her walk the few steps down the hall to make sure she was safe.

That left Bas alone with nothing but his imagination. He grabbed the room card and walked down to the package store for a bottle of whiskey. Having shifter metabolism meant he couldn’t get drunk off one bottle, but he did his best. It was that or let the beast loose when it demanded they take to the sky and go after Dakota. It didn’t do any good to argue with his beast about the fact that they had no idea where the female had gone. During the course of the evening, Carleigh sent several texts keeping him updated on her progress, or lack thereof as the case was.

Sebastian was still on the balcony hours later when the hotel room door opened. Anthony entered, carrying a pink box and three to-go cups. He motioned for Bas to come inside.

“Not that I think anyone will hear our conversation, but I’d rather err on the side of caution,” he said when Bas closed the sliding door behind him. Anthony pulled two cups from the cardboard carrier and set one on the table in front of

Sebastian. He opened the box, grabbed a Danish, then pushed the box across the table. After taking a huge bite and washing it down with coffee, Anthony asked, “How are you holding up?”

“About as well as I can be considering I have no idea where Dakota is. I don’t know if she’s my mate, and if she is, how do I handle the fact that she’s already mated to King?”

“Yeah, about that. She’s not King’s mate but not for his lack of trying.” Anthony pulled out the chair closest to him and sat. “Dakota *is* your mate. The reason she wouldn’t say yes to her Alpha is because she has this romantic notion of finding the teen her brother attacked ten years ago when they lived in Utah. Since regular wolves don’t have fated mates, everyone gave Dakota grief over refusing the ‘privilege’ of being the Alpha Mate.”

“I’m surprised Jolee spilled her guts to a stranger,” Bas said before taking a sip of coffee.

Anthony wiggled his eyebrows. “Magic dick, Brother.”

Sebastian choked on the coffee and slapped his own chest. When he was no longer coughing, Sebastian, muttered, “Fucking hell.”

Anthony pulled out his phone, laughing. “Let me text Lydia to see if she’s awake. That way I don’t have to repeat everything.”

A few minutes later, Lydia knocked on the door, and Anthony got up to let her in. “I brought breakfast,” he said, motioning to the box and extra coffee.

“You just getting in?” she asked as she surveyed the sweet offerings.

“Yes, and I have some good news.” Anthony recapped what he’d told Bas so far.

“At least we know it’s not someone else.” Lydia pulled the last cup of coffee from the container and removed the lid. She added a couple packs of sugar, then took a sip.

“Is Nix Dakota’s brother?” Sebastian asked before taking a bite of donut.

“Yes. I wondered why you were sniffing him, but it makes sense. I bet your beast recognized his scent.”

“Not at first. When he stood next to me, he smelled the same as King and the chair I was sitting on. At some point, Dakota had been in King’s room. Then my Goyle got a whiff of Nix’s scent, and he was ready to throw down then and there. If she’s not King’s mate, why did Nix say she was?”

“Because King has chosen Dakota, and her family, mainly her father, was pushing her to accept the offer. According to Jolee, the pressure from both her father and King became too much, so she ran. And before you ask, no, Jolee doesn’t know where Dakota went. She wasn’t lying about that when she told Sloane she didn’t know. But one thing I did learn was Sloane owns a garage, and King worked there before taking over as Alpha from his father. Both males worked on Dakota’s car, and I bet money they put a tracker on it. I know I would if the female I wanted was skittish.”

Lydia hummed. “I thought when he said they could track her, he meant because they were wolves. I bet you’re right about them bugging her car.”

“Fuck! That means they could be following her. Hell, they may have already caught up to her by now.” Sebastian tossed the rest of his donut back into the box. “This fucking sucks.”

“I take it Carleigh hasn’t found anything?” Lydia asked.

“No, but she didn’t have much to go on.”

Anthony tapped the table with his fingers. “She has more now. After I found out Dakota’s last name, which is Young by the way, as well as the type of vehicle she drives, I texted that info to Carleigh. I also told her my theory about there being a tracker on her car. I’m not going to sugarcoat it for you. Dakota left her phone at home so they couldn’t use it to trace her whereabouts. With there being very few security cameras in Panther, it’ll be hard to find her that way, but if anyone can

locate your mate, it's the Trio. You know Carleigh's pulled Harlow and Nikita in on this."

Sebastian twirled the cup in his hand as he considered what Anthony said. Dakota was his mate, and King had no claim to her. Now to find her and convince her to... To what? Come back to West Virginia? Was that why Sebastian had been drawn to the state? Because somehow, he knew his mate was there? Stranger things had happened. Like the dream he had last night where he fought King and whisked Dakota away. He still hadn't seen her face in the dream, but he'd held her in his arms. Bas woke up happy until he realized it hadn't been real.

"Oh, I have something for you." Anthony tapped his phone a few times, then pushed it across the table. It was a photo of Jolee with another female. "That's her?" Sebastian's throat tightened as he studied her smiling face. Long black hair in two braids hung over her shoulders, and she wore a straw cowboy hat. Dark eyes glittered with happiness. The female was captivating.

"Yep. That's your mate. According to Jolee, Dakota is a badass, but we already knew that from when she tackled her brother. She's twenty-five, smart, sassy, and doesn't take shit from anyone. All the customers at The Depot love her. Well, all but the single females who want to be Alpha Mate. And as you can see by the way she's dressed, she's perfect for you. Y'all share a love of flannel shirts."

Lydia pulled the phone in front of her. "She's cute."

Sebastian disagreed. Dakota wasn't cute. She was exquisite. "Please forward that picture to me." When his phone pinged with the incoming message, he asked, "Seriously, Tony. How did you get Jolee to tell you all this?"

Anthony threaded his fingers and cupped the back of his head. "I appealed to her romantic gene. Most females have one. After we" — Anthony paused, probably considering Lydia was in the room, — "*after*, we snuggled, and I asked a lot of benign questions about the pack, stating I wanted to get a feel for how King was as the Alpha since we were

considering him for the council. When she mentioned Dakota being her best friend, I encouraged her to tell me all about the other woman. I tossed in a few probing questions, and the truth spilled out. Being an investigator, I've learned how to lead a conversation in the direction I want it to go."

Anthony dropped his hands to his lap and leaned the chair back on two legs. "What I learned is Dakota's family assumed you were dead after Pheonix attacked you that day in the woods. Her father contacted a friend, Davis Bridgewater, who was Alpha at the time, and asked if they could relocate to West Virginia. Jolee and Dakota went to school together and became best friends immediately. They both got jobs at The Depot right out of high school. Dakota moved behind the bar when she was old enough and has been slinging beer ever since. Vernon, the owner, offered Dakota the assistant manager job, but she turned him down because she hates paperwork.

"King's been after Dakota to be the Alpha Mate for quite a while, but she never accepted the role because of you. Even Jolee thought she was crazy for saying no all for someone she'd had a brief encounter with ten years ago who was more than likely dead. Dakota's father is furious with her, and the two of them have a strained relationship. Jolee said it finally got to be too much, and Dakota took off. I asked if she thought Dakota might have headed for Utah, but she said no. That's the first place her parents would look for her."

Sebastian ran a hand through his hair. "I hate this. What if King finds her?"

"Honestly, I think that's the best-case scenario. If she's in Panther, you'll at least know where she is."

"But how am I going to get close to her if he brings her back?"

"We are Gargoyles. Wolves are no match for us."

"Maybe not a few, but King has a whole pack at his disposal."

"Defeatist, thy name is Sebastian. Seriously, Cousin. We'll figure something out. I'll—"

Sebastian's phone rang. When Carleigh's name flashed on the screen, he took a deep breath. He answered it, putting it on speaker even though his cousins could hear her without it.

"Hey, Carleigh. Please tell me you have something."

"I have good news and bad news. The good news is I was able to trace the GPS on Kingston's phone. The bad news is I tracked him to Asheville, North Carolina. His location was static for about half an hour, and now he's headed back this direction."

"You think he found Dakota?" Bas asked.

"I know he did. When I got a lock on his location, which was a hotel, I hacked into the hotel's information and found Dakota Young had spent the night. I tapped into their security feed and watched it all play out. He and another male were waiting for Dakota when she exited the building. After a few heated words, Dakota handed over her keys, the other male got into her car and drove away, leaving Dakota with King. She got in the backseat of his vehicle, and they're headed back this way."

Lydia gripped Sebastian's arm. "This is good news, Bas. Nix mentioned Dakota was supposed to be at the meeting. If King is bringing her back, we'll reschedule, and hopefully she'll be there."

"And if she isn't?"

Anthony drummed the table. "Panther's a small community, and wolves aren't the only ones who can track by scent. We'll reschedule with King. If Dakota isn't in attendance, I'll call Jolee and have her set up something where the two of you can talk privately."

"Saying what?"

"The truth. And you can show her your scars to prove you are the one they left for dead."

Sebastian rubbed his chest. The scars had faded, but they were still visible. Anthony's aunt, Lilly, was a half-blood, but she was also a witch. She and her twin daughters, Luna and

Solara, had woven their magic after Bas was attacked and stitched his chest back together. He owed his life to them.

“I guess all we can do is wait and see if Dakota attends the next meeting. Thanks, Carleigh.”

“You’re welcome. Call me if you need anything or if you do meet your mate.”

“Will do.” Sebastian disconnected, then leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Could he really be this close to finding his little she-wolf?

Anthony slapped the table, startling Sebastian. “What was that for?”

“As good as those pastries were, I’m a growing Goyle, and I need sustenance. I’m going to shower, then we’re all going out for breakfast.” He stood from the table and headed toward the bathroom.

Lydia was watching him as she sipped her coffee. Bas twisted his neck to both sides and let out a deep breath. “Well, you heard the man. We’re going for breakfast, and I need to shower too.”

Lydia rose as well. “Knock on my door when you’re ready to leave.” She shoved a danish in her mouth and took her coffee with her.

Once she was gone, Sebastian walked outside onto the balcony. He inhaled deeply while rubbing his hand across his chest again. Growing up, Bas hated his scars. He still did, but now, he would use them to convince Dakota he was the teen from Utah. The one she saved. If she hadn’t attacked her brother, there wouldn’t have been anything left of him for Lilly and the twins to stitch together. He remained on the balcony, staring at Dakota’s picture, until Anthony informed him the bathroom was free.

Since the weather was nice, they opted to walk to the restaurant. While they devoured biscuits and gravy, eggs, hash browns, pancakes, and bacon, Sebastian told them more about the Wellis Lodge and the town of Carlton. He showed them the

pictures he'd taken, and by the time they finished eating, Lydia was brimming with excitement.

"I want to see this place," she said, setting her fork down on her empty plate. Lydia was one of his cousins who could work from anywhere.

"And I'd love to show it to you." Bas prayed once Lydia saw it in person, she would agree to move there. It was then he realized he'd already made his mind up about buying the lodge. "Like I said, it won't take much work to turn it into what I envision. Even if the surrounding property isn't for sale, I'm positive I can turn this place into a profitable endeavor."

Lydia patted his arm. "Of course you can. You're Sebastian Di Pietro, King of Gargoyles. You're also Sebastian Stone, brilliant architect and businessman. What are we going to do until we hear back from Kingston?"

Anthony leaned forward. "I say we head back to Panther this afternoon and hang out at The Depot. With Dakota coming back, Bas will be that much closer once she arrives."

"Won't it look suspect for us to hang around a bar all day?" Lydia asked.

"Nah," Anthony replied. "We're there to meet with the Alpha. If anyone asks, we can say we're waiting on another meeting."

Lydia scrunched her nose like a bunny, the same way her mother, Sophia, did. "I'd prefer to hang around the hotel instead of sitting at The Depot all day. No offense to your mate, Bas, but I'm not cut out for the roadhouse vibe."

"None taken. If King calls for a meeting, I'll make sure you'll have enough time to make the drive. I'll ride with Tony, and you can drive my Jeep."

Lydia wiggled in her seat. "You know I love your Jeep."

Bas did. That's why he offered it to her. "I do." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Let's get out of here. My Goyle is getting antsy."

“And you aren’t?” Anthony asked.

“Shut up.” Sebastian flagged down their waitress, and once he paid the tab, they exited the restaurant and walked back to their hotel. Bas breathed in the fresh air. West Virginia was different from Atlanta. There were small towns in Georgia, and he had visited several when clients contracted him to build homes there. But the air here felt different. Crisper.

Lydia noticed a side road that was lined with little shops, so they detoured that way. Sebastian was glad for the distraction. He was nervous about returning to Panther. About meeting Dakota for the first time. Jolee might have said Dakota was waiting on Bas, but what would she think of him when they came face to face? He wasn’t that teen any longer, and she might not like the man he was.

She’s our mate. She won’t be able to deny the bond.

His Gargoyle was right, but that didn’t alleviate his nerves. Other than becoming King, seeing his mate for the first time would be the most important moment of his life.

Chapter 11

DAKOTA GROANED LOUDLY, but she was smiling inwardly as Jolee squeezed the shit out of her. “I’m sorry King found you, but I’m really glad you’re back,” Jolee said when she released Dakota. “You want help with your stuff?”

“Sure. Just so you know, I called my mom after I talked to you, so be ready for my father and a tirade.”

“You using me as a buffer?” Jolee asked as she opened a box to see what was inside.

“You bet your ass I am. I asked Mom to give me some time alone, but you know my dad. He doesn’t give a shit about what I want.”

“I know. But I’ve got something to lift your mood. I met ___”

The door flew open, and Dakota’s father entered the cabin. Both her mom and Phoenix were behind him. “Dakota Diana Young, you have some explaining to do,” he bellowed, stalking toward her. It wasn’t until he was a few steps away that he noticed Jolee and stopped walking. “Jolee, this is a family matter. You need to leave.”

“Oh, no you don’t.” Dakota fisted her hands when her claws itched to release. “This is my home. She was invited. You weren’t.” Jolee, bless her heart, stepped next to Dakota and crossed her arms over her chest.

Diana placed her hand on Arthur’s bicep. “Let’s all calm down and talk about this rationally.” Phoenix remained by the door. Dakota narrowed her eyes at her brother, and he tilted his head, baring his neck like the little bitch he was.

Arthur not so gently removed his mate’s hand, and Dakota growled. Her dad’s eyes widened, but he didn’t apologize to Diana.

“I don’t have to explain anything, but since you won’t leave until I do, here it is. I hate Kingston Bridgewater with every fiber of my being. He may be the Alpha, but he isn’t and never will be my mate. You need to get that through your head. You hounding me at every turn will never change that fact, and if you don’t want me to hate you too, I suggest you let it go. If you want the families united, let Nix mate with Savannah.”

“Leave your brother out of this,” Arthur growled.

“Of course. Let the great Phoenix do as he pleases because he’s your little lap dog.” Dakota turned to glare at her brother. “While we’re at it, Nix, the next time you get in my business? I’ll show you who’s more alpha.”

“Kody!” Diana gasped.

“What, Mom? I’m tired of the bullshit. You know this. It’s why I left.”

Arthur shoved a finger at Dakota. “You watch your tone.”

“I’ve done nothing *but* watch my tone, and it hasn’t done any good. I’m finished with this discussion. You either let me live my life without demanding I bow down to King, or you lose me for good. Your decision.”

“Why are you so adamant about not being King’s mate? And don’t give me that fairytale bullshit about waiting for some kid who’s dead. Even if he did live, the chances of you ever meeting him again are beyond astronomical.”

“Even so, I’m not interested in being the Alpha Mate. The world’s a big place, and I want to see it, not be stuck here pushing out pups left and right because it’s what’s best for the pack. You like to forget I’m an alpha, not an omega, just because I’m female. And this female is done. Like I said, it’s your decision whether you push me further away than you already have.”

Arthur let out a low growl, then turned and stormed out of the cabin with Nix following. Her mom hesitated. “Give him time, Honey. I’m trying to talk him around, but...” Diana held her arms open, and Dakota walked over to give her mom

a hug. Dakota didn't say anything because she was all talked out. Her mom brushed a kiss to her cheek before releasing her. When Diana was outside with the others, Dakota closed the door, not bothering to watch them leave.

"I need a drink." She strode to the kitchen, opting for vodka instead of a beer. If there was ever a time for day drinking, this was it.

"That was tense, but I have something to take your mind off your father. Guess who I met?" Jolee asked as she joined Dakota at the counter.

Dakota took a gulp and hissed at the burn of alcohol in her throat. "No idea."

Jolee reached for the bottle. "Sebastian Stone." She took a smaller sip than Dakota had.

"No shit? What's he like?"

"Gorgeous. He and his two cousins came into The Depot when the meeting with King was aborted after you skipped town. One of his cousins is a beautiful female named Lydia. The other one, Anthony?" Jolee fanned her hand in front of her face. "So fucking hot. And" — Jolee took a longer pull from the vodka — "the things that male can do with his tongue? Girl."

"What? Jolee Rogers!" Dakota snagged the bottle. "You slept with a stranger?"

Jolee grinned. "Oh, there wasn't much sleeping." When Dakota stood there with her mouth open not sure what to say, Jolee continued. "Yes, the sex was out of this world, but he's sweet. We spent most of the night talking and cuddling."

"Sure, you did," Dakota drawled. "What exactly did you talk about?"

"At first, he asked about the pack, and he even wanted to know about me and my life in Panther. It wasn't until after he left that I realized we mostly talked about you."

"Me? He doesn't know me," Dakota argued. When she offered the vodka again, Jolee waved her off and got a beer out

of the fridge. She held it up, and Dakota declined.

Shrugging, Jolee screwed the cap off the bottle, tossed it in the trash can, and took a swig. “He knows who you are because you were supposed to be in the meeting. And Sloane made an ass out of himself storming into The Depot asking if I knew where you had run off to. He called you a bitch, and I thought Sebastian Stone was going to take a swing at him.”

“Damn. A stranger protecting my honor? That’s kind of hot. Now I have to go to the meeting if for no other reason than to thank him.”

“Hey! I protested too, thank you very much.”

“Thank you. What I can’t figure out is why Sloane questioned you when they already knew how to find me.”

Jolee propped her hip against the counter. “Because he’s a dick with anger issues?” Jolee took another swig of beer and wiped her mouth on the back of her hand. “I figure he was testing my loyalty.”

“He didn’t hurt you, did he? Is that why you ended up with this Anthony guy?”

“Nah. He grabbed my arm, but there were too many people around for him to do any real damage. The reason I ended up with Anthony is because he’s fucking gorgeous. And funny. And sexy as hell with his auburn hair and bright green eyes. He’s as built as Sloane, but he doesn’t use his size to intimidate, at least not that I could see. What he isn’t is one of us. I don’t know what he and his cousins are, but they aren’t wolfkind. He smelled different. Unlike anything I’ve ever encountered.”

“And you took a stranger who isn’t a wolf back to your place?” Dakota opened the fridge to find something to eat, but she’d tossed everything perishable the day before. Moving to the cabinets, she opened one and pulled out a box of macaroni and cheese along with a can of tuna. It wasn’t gourmet, but it was simple and filling.

Jolee talked while Dakota filled a pot with water to boil. “I can’t explain why, but Anthony felt safe. My Wolf

recognized him as something different, but it never once protested.”

“Huh. I wonder what they are then.”

“Maybe you can find out when you meet Sebastian. He’s got dark hair and these intense blue eyes.”

Dakota trusted her best friend with everything, so she admitted, “I know. When King first mentioned Sebastian, the name sounded familiar for some reason, so I came home and looked him up on the internet. His headshot is on the company’s website. The man was born to wear a suit.”

“Really? He didn’t strike me as a suit and tie kind of male. More like your grungy flannel twin.”

“It makes sense he wouldn’t wear a suit when meeting the Alpha of a small wolf pack. And there’s nothing wrong with flannel.” Dakota couldn’t help sticking up for the stranger. She opened the box and dumped the noodles into the boiling water, giving herself a few seconds to calm down.

“Girl, chill. I was just saying he’s exactly your type, or would be if you weren’t hung up on Utah boy. Did you figure out why his name sounded familiar?”

“No. There was just...” Dakota shrugged. “I can’t explain it, but even looking at his photo, something about him drew me in.”

“Maybe you’ll figure it out when you meet him. I sure wouldn’t mind seeing Anthony again.”

“What about Sloane?”

“Sloane’s an ass. I know he was upset on King’s behalf when you left, but the way he barged into The Depot and grabbed me? Any male who would put his hands on me in anger isn’t someone I want for a mate or even a bed partner. If he’s that volatile in public, I would be afraid he could be worse behind closed doors.” Jolee shivered, and Dakota didn’t blame her. Jolee might be a shifter, but she was an omega, and as such, nowhere near strong enough to fight off an alpha, even one of Dakota’s size. “I will say this much; if it came down to a fight between Sloane and Anthony? My money would be on

Anthony. I can't tell you why, but I could sense the power radiating off the male when Sloane grabbed me. He growled low in his chest, and it was different than any sound I've ever heard."

Hmm. Maybe she didn't trust Jolee with everything. Dakota wasn't going to admit about the dream or the connection her Wolf felt to Sebastian's beast, whatever it was. At least, not yet. Not until she met the male and figured out if there was something there. Dakota was torn between the memory of the teen and her newfound interest in Sebastian. Just then, a phone pinged. It was the one she'd left behind. Dakota opened the drawer where she'd left it to find a text from King.

Alphahole: Meeting tonight at six at the pack house. Do not disappoint me again.

Me: I'll be there.

And Dakota would. She was looking forward to meeting Sebastian Stone and his cousins. "The meeting has been rescheduled for six tonight."

"What are you going to wear?" Jolee asked.

Dakota turned the eye off and removed the pot from the stove. She drained most of the water from the noodles, leaving a little to mix with the powdered cheese since she'd tossed out her milk. After it was stirred, she opened the can of tuna, drained it, then dumped it into the noodles and stirred again. Dakota set the pot on the counter and pulled two forks out of the utensil drawer, handing one to Jolee. Her best friend didn't balk at eating the less than stellar meal.

"Nothing special. If Sebastian can wear flannel, so can I."

As Jolee chewed her bite of tuna mac, she twirled her fork in the air. After swallowing, she said, "He might already know what you look like. Anthony wanted a picture of me, and I sent him one of you and me together."

"Which one?" Dakota shouldn't care what a stranger thought of her looks, but she did.

Jolee pulled her phone out of her back pocket and held it up for Dakota to see. “Don’t worry. You look gorgeous as always.”

“As my best friend, you have to say that.”

Jolee grinned, and Dakota smiled back. She wasn’t glad to be back in Panther, but she was glad to have Jolee by her side again.

After finishing off the food, Jolee washed the pot and utensils with Dakota drying them. When they were finished, she hugged Dakota. “I’ve gotta get ready for work. Speaking of, are you going to ask for your job back?”

“No. I will take any part-time shifts no one wants, but I won’t take the money away from Noah.”

“You’re a good egg, Dakota Young. Now, go do something with your hair other than braids. And for the love of the goddess, if you must wear flannel, at least wear a shirt that’s not ancient.”

Dakota whipped the drying cloth at Jolee’s legs playfully. “Get out of here.”

When Jolee reached the door, she turned, and her eyes were shiny. “Love you, Kody,” she whispered.

“Love you, too.”

Dakota still had a couple hours before the meeting, but she wanted to look nice when seeing Sebastian Stone, although she couldn’t figure out why her stomach felt like a million hummingbirds were flitting around inside. Even though she’d showered at the hotel, Dakota took another so she could wash her hair and do something with it like Jolee encouraged. Braids were fine for work but not for making a good impression with someone like Sebastian.

With fifteen minutes to get to the pack house, she was finally ready. Dakota had chosen a nice pair of bootcut jeans and topped them with a soft, oversized sweater that fell off one shoulder over a matching tank top. She opted for her least-scuffed pair of cowboy boots. Makeup was minimal, but her hair was what she felt set off her looks. Dakota had left it

natural, a bit of wave falling over her shoulders. She didn't own lipstick, so she rubbed on some scented moisturizing lip balm. Then she chose her two favorite rings and claimed herself done.

With shaking hands, Dakota climbed into her car and took a deep breath. She was excited and nervous. Her Wolf was surprisingly quiet, but Dakota felt contentment coming from her beast. Exhaling, she started the engine and headed out. When she arrived, two strange vehicles were parked in front of the pack house. One was a jacked-up Jeep, and Dakota wanted to take it for a spin in the mud. Sloane was on the porch, speaking low to one of the pack enforcers. When she got out of her car, Sloane inclined his head her direction, and the other male took off. Sloane crossed his arms over his chest as she approached. Dakota scowled at him, remembering what Jolee said. When she reached where he was standing, Dakota lowered her voice.

“If you ever put your hands on Jolee again in anger, King's second or not, I will fucking end you.” She shouldered past him, ignoring his growl, and entered the house. When she didn't see King or the visitors, she used her shifter hearing to find them upstairs. Dakota took the steps at a normal pace, lest King think her excitement was for him. When she entered his suite, all eyes turned her way.

Dakota froze just inside the door when her eyes landed on Sebastian. He was even more impressive in person, and she wanted to run to him. To grab hold and never let go. Whatever her Wolf had felt before, Dakota now sensed the same intense desire to get close to the male.

King cleared his throat. “Kody, this is—”

“Sebastian Stone,” she finished. Sebastian stepped up to Dakota with his hand out. Instead of shaking, he kissed her knuckles gently. If she wasn't mistaken, he inhaled before rising.

“It's an honor, Dakota.” His voice was husky, and Dakota shivered. Her Wolf's contentment morphed into elated

determination. It threatened to break free, and Dakota growled in her head.

Don't you dare fight me right now.

Do you smell him? He's ours.

"I'd like to introduce you to my cousins, Anthony and Lydia," he said, releasing her fingers. Dakota focused on the other strangers, doing her best to ignore her Wolf, and both placed a fist over their hearts and subtly bowed their heads. That was odd but also endearing.

"It's nice to meet you both," Dakota said, but her eyes had turned back to Sebastian who was staring intently at her. What the hell was going on? Did he feel the same connection she did?

"Now that introductions are out of the way, shall we begin?" King asked.

Sebastian gestured for Dakota to precede him to the sitting area. There was no way she could sit beside him and keep her composure, so she opted for one of the armchairs. King took the other, and Sebastian sat on the sofa with Lydia. Sloane took up his position behind King, and Anthony did the same, standing behind Sebastian. Anthony mirrored Sloane's stance; arms crossed with a scowl on his face. Dakota could see why Jolee was taken with the redhead. He was adorable even when serious. Her gaze fell to Sebastian who was staring intently at her. King cleared his throat, and Sebastian startled, like he'd been lost in thought.

"When I spoke to Alpha Millard, he assured me he had already filled you in on what went down in South Carolina," Sebastian started.

"Yes, and I filled the pack in, so we are all aware," King responded.

Sebastian leaned forward and braced his elbows on his thighs, clasping his hands. Dakota stared at his fingers until he spoke again. "That isn't the first time humans have been made aware of shifters. Before I dive into that story, I need to tell you that wolves aren't the only shifters in the world. My

cousins and I are Gargoyles, and we have friends who are Gryphon shifters.”

King straightened in his seat. “The fuck you say.”

Anthony took a step back from the sofa, removed his black T-shirt, and a pair of large, leathery wings sprung from his back. His fangs elongated, and he held out a clawed hand. Just as quickly, he retracted all his Gargoyle parts and put his shirt back on, leaving it untucked. Dakota couldn't breathe. Those were the same type of wings from her dream. She turned her eyes to Sebastian who was studying her. Could he be...? No fucking way.

Anthony placed his hands on the sofa behind Sebastian. “Gargoyles have been around since the beginning of time to protect humans. According to our friends, Zeus created the Gryphons for the same reason. Approximately twenty-five years ago, my uncle's mate, Lucy, who is a Gryphon, was ‘hired’ by the GIA. As many hacker's stories go, it was work for the government or face imprisonment. Lucy's adopted father, Lucius, had been a geneticist who taught Lucy everything he knew. Before his death, Lucius was working on a formula to fuse Gargoyle DNA with humans. Where he got the DNA, nobody knows. With Lucius dead, the agent at the GIA he had been working with forced Lucy to continue her father's work and tucked her away in an underground laboratory. Long story short, Lucy was rescued by her Gryphon family and my uncle. The agent, Deputy Director Phil Ramey, was killed, and the evidence destroyed.”

Sebastian sat back. “Neil Stallings, the agent who was involved in South Carolina, was Ramey's protégé. We don't know if his mentor shared with him what Lucy was working on all those years ago. Since the GIA hasn't publicly gone on a ‘witch hunt’ in the past twenty-five years, we assumed that we – meaning all shifters – were safe. Now, though, with Agent Stallings being involved as well as having known Ramey, we can't be sure there aren't plans being put in place to hunt for us. This is the reason I decided to meet with other shifter leaders to form a council.”

“What will the council accomplish?” Dakota asked. Her focus had been on Sebastian this whole time, and when he smiled at her, she sucked in a breath. Her Wolf was begging to be turned loose, to get to the male sitting across from her.

“We want to meet with as many packs and Clans as possible, warning them to be on their guard. Since we are aware of four types of shifters, we assume there are more. We didn’t know Gryphons existed until Anthony’s uncle met Lucy. One of the Gryphons met his mate in a dire wolf, alerting us to the fact that wolf shifters were real, and another Gryphon has a lion mate. We hope in meeting with others, they will already know of different species than those we’re aware of. We need to get the word out to as many as we can. Whoever agrees to sit on the council must be willing to travel and spread the word.”

“Dire wolves are real?” Sloane asked. “I thought they were a myth.”

Lydia spoke for the first time. “They are real, although their numbers are few.”

“As Alpha, I can’t travel, but I’m willing to sit on the council otherwise,” King said.

Sebastian crossed his right ankle over his left knee, placing his hands on his leg. “Since you asked Dakota to join the meeting, we would love to speak to her about joining us. She should be able to travel, right?”

“Absolutely not.” King stood from his chair. “She has more important duties to our pack.”

“Like what?” Dakota asked. “I’m an unemployed bartender.”

King took a menacing step toward her, and Sebastian jumped to his feet, putting himself between the two wolves. King pointed at the door. “I think you and your cousins need to leave.”

“Not without Dakota,” Sebastian said.

Her Wolf howled in Dakota’s head. She stood in case she couldn’t hold her beast back.

King's eyes flashed amber and fur sprouted along his arms, his Wolf at the surface. "I'm the Alpha of this pack, and Kody belongs to me. You need to leave, now," he growled.

Dakota couldn't help herself. She took a couple steps toward Sebastian and placed her hand on his back. Some tether flowed from the male to Dakota, and she nearly went to her knees. He looked over his shoulder at her, his blue eyes now almost black. Instead of scaring her, it solidified what she already knew – this male was important to her.

Chapter 12

SEBASTIAN'S CLAWS ELONGATED as his Goyle fought to break free. Looking into his mate's eyes, Bas reined it in somewhat. Turning back to the angry male, he said, "You might be Alpha of this small pack, but I'm the King of all Gargoyles, and Dakota is my fated mate." Dakota gasped behind him, her hand gripping the back of his shirt. King snarled, and Anthony and Lydia moved in on either side of him, ready to defend him and help kick some wolf ass.

King puffed up his chest. "Wolves don't have fated mates, so you can fuck off out of here before I call in the pack to dispose of you."

Dakota pulled on Sebastian's arm, and he angled his body so he could see her, knowing his cousins wouldn't let King get to him. "Sebastian, please," Dakota begged.

Bas retracted his claws, then pressed a palm to her cheek. "Wolves might not have fated mates, but Gargoyles do." Bas pulled the front of his shirt from his jeans and lifted it. Pointing at the scars, he said, "Your brother did this to me ten years ago in Utah."

Dakota stretched out her hand, but before she could touch his skin, King said, "Dakota Young, as your Alpha, I command you to step away."

Sebastian wrapped his hands around her wrists, hating the way she trembled. Dakota closed her eyes and whined. The sound was mournful, yet angry. It kicked Sebastian in the nuts. A low growl sounded behind him just as Anthony yelled, "Bas, watch out!" Sebastian released Dakota and called forth his claws again as he faced the wolf from his dreams. Anthony phased, his T-shirt shredding and floating in tatters to the floor. The room was crowded with beasts and furniture. People shouted as a multitude of feet pounded up the staircase.

He and his cousins were outnumbered, but Sebastian would fight to the death to protect Dakota. King snarled at Dakota who was now lying on her side, whimpering. King must have thought he was stronger than Sebastian, because he tried to rush past him to get to Dakota. Just as King pounced, Sebastian unfurled his wings and sent King flying with one swipe.

The door flew open, and Phoenix froze when he caught sight of Sebastian's wings. "What the fuck?" Sebastian's beast forgot about the male being Dakota's brother. In that moment, he was the one who'd left Bas for dead.

Before he could attack, Lydia yelled, "Let me go, Asshole!" Sloane had Lydia by the throat, his claws digging into her skin.

"You motherfucker. I will gut you where you stand," Anthony growled. Sebastian's focus was torn, but he had to trust Anthony to take care of Lydia. Sebastian had his hands full between a furious Alpha and his own beast ready to rip Phoenix to shreds. Dakota pushed to her feet and raced past her brother out the door. Phoenix took off after her, but Sebastian had to deal with King first.

The large wolf was on his paws again, the hair on his back standing on end. Sebastian braced himself for another attack, but King raised his head and howled. Sebastian didn't have to be a wolf to know King was calling his pack.

"You fucking bitch!" Sloane yelled. Lydia was holding a pair of knives, blood dripping from one and the other shrouded in blue flames. That was new. Before Sloane could attack Lydia again, Anthony punched the large male who staggered back. Anthony took advantage of Sloane being off balance and placed a snap kick to the center of his chest. Sloane flew into the window, glass shattering as he broke through, falling to whatever lay beneath. As a shifter, the fall wouldn't kill him unless it broke his neck. Sebastian couldn't worry about that now. He had a larger, deadlier problem.

"Bas, go after your mate. We've got this," Anthony urged, but Sebastian wouldn't leave him and Lydia to fight a

pack by themselves. He once again faced King, who shifted back to his skin.

“I will fucking kill you,” a naked King snarled, his chest heaving. Several of King’s pack joined him; some in their fur and some on two legs. The latter gawked at Sebastian’s wings.

“You can try,” Sebastian countered. “But I am a Gargoyle. Phoenix couldn’t kill me as a teen, and you can’t kill me now. My cousins and I can rip your whole pack apart. Is that what you wish? All for a female who doesn’t want you? Stand down now, and we’ll leave you whole. Test me? And I’ll kill you where you stand, taking over as Alpha of your pack. Your choice.”

King’s eyes flashed amber. “You would challenge me in my own home?”

“I would. Dakota is my fated mate, and I’d burn the fucking world to ash for her.” Sebastian flapped his wings, the force knocking King backward. The pack members who had joined their Alpha took a step back. “I don’t want to kill you. I don’t want to be Alpha of your pack. I have my own Clan to lead, but if you do not step aside and let us leave in peace, taking Dakota with us, I *will* kill you.” Sebastian gestured to the other wolves. “It’s no disgrace if your Alpha backs down. It’s self-preservation, because not only will I kill Kingston, but my cousins and I will take out as many of you as we need to get the point across. That point being there is always someone stronger and more lethal waiting in the shadows.”

King retracted his claws. “Get the fuck out of my home, and take that bitch with you if you can find her. Dakota Young is no longer part of the Bridgewater pack.” King howled again, and those wolves in the room shifted to their skin, stepping out of the room, followed by the others who hadn’t shifted.

Sebastian nodded once, then turned to his cousins. “Let’s go find my mate.” He and Anthony retracted their wings, picked up their tattered shirts, and Bas led the way out of the room. Anthony took up the rear, keeping Lydia between them. At some point, she had returned the knives to her arms in the

form of bracelets. When they reached the front door, a howl sounded in the distance. One that called to Sebastian's Goyle.

"Fuck! That's Dakota. Anthony, you two get the vehicles and head out of town past the Depot," he whispered, so the surrounding wolves wouldn't easily hear him. "Go to the station where we got gas, and I'll call you for pick up." Sebastian tossed his shirt to his cousin, then unfurled his wings, launching into the sky. Now that he had Dakota's scent, his Gargoyle was able to track it. Bas flew faster than ever before, skimming the tops of trees while scanning the ground. His heart beat double time with fear and anticipation. If Phoenix or whoever was after Dakota put one scratch on his mate, they would pay dearly. The sound of snarls and paws pounding dirt came from his right, and Bas veered that direction. He saw a flash of fur, but it disappeared beneath the thick foliage. When he caught sight of his mate, she wasn't running in a straight line. No, his little wolf was making it hard for whoever was chasing to catch her.

Finally, she broke from the cover of trees when she headed for a creek. That was Sebastian's chance. He pulled his wings back and dove toward the ground. Just as Dakota leapt toward the water, Sebastian closed his arms around his mate's furry body, then quickly flapped his wings to change trajectory.

"I've got you," he promised as he shot above the trees once more. Dakota shifted to her skin, and Sebastian groaned when he had his arms full of a naked female. The wolf on the ground let out a long howl, but there was no answering call.

"Fuck you, Phoenix," Dakota yelled.

"Are you okay? Did he hurt you?" Sebastian asked as he moved his mate so he was carrying her bridal style.

Dakota crossed her arms over her breasts. "Nah. He might be bigger, but I'm faster." She looked down at the ground as Sebastian took her farther away from her brother. "This is so cool," she whispered.

"We need to find you some clothes."

“What? You don’t like naked women? Am I not appealing to you, Mr. Stone?” Dakota sassed with a wink.

Gods, this female was going to kill him before they ever mated. Sebastian growled low in his chest. “Appealing? No. I find you exquisite, Dakota. And I promise to show you just how much later, but for now, we need to get out of here and meet my cousins. That is if you want to go with me.” Dakota didn’t answer straightaway, and Sebastian held his breath.

“Am I really your fated mate?” she asked, searching his eyes.

“Yes, you are. I’ll tell you all about it once we’re somewhere other than Bridgewater pack land.”

Dakota pointed west. “My cabin isn’t far, and I can grab some clothes there. What happened with King?”

Sebastian angled his wings to change course. “I told him I’d kill him and take over the pack if he didn’t stand down. He listened to reason.”

“I have so many questions.” Dakota tentatively brushed her fingers through Sebastian’s beard.

“And I’ll answer them all.” Sebastian’s beast didn’t want to talk. It wanted to take Dakota somewhere private and claim her, but that would have to wait. Dakota pointed out a small cabin, and Sebastian guided them to the front yard. When he touched down, he lowered Dakota to her feet, keeping a tight grip to ensure she was stable.

Dakota took a step back, but instead of heading inside, she reached out and ghosted her fingertips across the scars on his torso. While she did so, Sebastian stared at his mate’s face. He couldn’t believe he’d found her.

“It really is you. I would ask how you survived, but I guess being a Gargoyle explains it.”

“Not exactly.” Sebastian gently removed her hands from his chest. He brought her fingertips to his mouth, kissing each one. “I promise I’ll explain everything, but we need to hurry. I don’t trust King to not retaliate.”

Dakota tugged her hands free and wrapped them around Sebastian's neck, pulling his head down to hers. She pressed their lips together, and Sebastian gasped. Dakota took advantage and slipped her tongue inside. Sebastian had kissed women before, but never in his life had it rocked his entire world. He placed his hands on her waist, the bare skin under his fingers smooth and more enticing than anything he'd ever encountered. His dick hardened, but he resisted the urge to pull Dakota's body against his. Barely. The need to take her was almost more than he could handle. Sebastian wrenched his mouth from hers and pressed their foreheads together.

"I really need you to get dressed, *Cucciolina*. As much as I want to take you inside and claim you, we need to meet my cousins so we can get out of Panther. Where are the clothes you had on?" he asked, putting a step between them.

"Somewhere between the pack house and the woods. I really liked those boots," she said, staring off in the direction they'd come from.

"I'll buy you new ones." Bas tugged on her hand, and Dakota tilted her head to the side.

"What?"

Dakota didn't respond. Instead, she led him up the steps to the porch. "My keys were in my jeans, so if you'd do the honors?" She gestured toward the door.

Sebastian raised his leg and placed his boot against the door beside the knob. With a hard shove, it came open. Dakota entered the cabin and padded to a ladder. She paused at the first step. "I'll just be a second." As she climbed, Sebastian couldn't help but admire her form. Dakota was lithe. Her breasts were on the average size, which was perfect for him. Her long hair bounced against her back as she climbed, drawing Sebastian's attention to her perfectly shaped ass.

Go up there and claim her now.

I'm not rushing this. When we claim her, it's going to be somewhere private where I can take my time.

Sebastian hadn't been a saint over the years. He was a young Goyle with needs, but his lovers had been few. Random strangers when he traveled who knew the score – one night only with no promise of anything more. And the next morning, Bas hated himself for giving in to his baser needs, feeling as though he had cheated on his mate. The only positive to come from those trysts was that Bas had experience in how to please Dakota. He adjusted his dick behind the zipper of his jeans as he looked around her small home. Was this how she wanted to live? Or would she be happy with the larger home he planned to build?

“Should I pack a bag?” Dakota called out from the loft.

Sebastian looked up at his mate who was staring down from the railing. “A few things for now.”

Dakota smiled at him, then disappeared. Within seconds she tossed a duffel at him. Bas almost dropped it because his focus was on the female as she made her way down the ladder. “I hadn't unpacked from my trip, so I'm ready to go.” Dakota was now dressed in a worn pair of jeans over a pair of black moto boots and a red tank top with a flannel shirt she had knotted at her waist. As nice as her sweater had been, Bas preferred this casual look. Would it be too cheesy for him to get them matching flannel?

A car door slammed, and before Sebastian could take a step toward the door, Dakota grabbed his hand. “That's probably my family, so let's sneak out the back,” she whispered, dragging him the few steps to the other door. She eased it open, and as soon as they were outside, she took the bag and hugged it to her chest. “Let's fly,” she encouraged.

Sebastian lifted his mate into his arms, unfurled his wings, and shot up between the trees. When an angry voice yelled from below, Dakota looked down. “Yep. That's my dad. Maybe I should've let you have a go at him.”

Hovering over the trees, Bas asked, “Do you want me to talk to him?”

“Goddess, no. I want you to take me away from here. I'll call my mom later when we're far away from Panther.”

Bas kissed Dakota's cheek, then took off. She rested her head against his shoulder, remaining quiet as they flew over the trees and out of Panther. It didn't bother him though. He didn't know his mate. Didn't know if she normally talked a lot or was always quiet. He had all the time in the world to find out. Bas flew as far as possible, then landed at the edge of town. The trees opened to a narrow two-lane, and Sebastian texted Anthony a pin of their location.

"My cousin will be here to pick us up in a few." Bas took Dakota's bag and set it beside her feet. He grabbed both her hands in his, placing them on his chest. "Since we have a few minutes, I'll tell you what happened after our first encounter." Bas explained how Luna, Solara, and Lilly healed his wounds, then he told her about being a half-blood and how meeting his mate – her – initiated his transition. "My parents took me back to Utah a few times looking for you. Honestly, I never thought I'd find you. I thank the gods I did."

Dakota had listened with rapt attention, her eyes never leaving his. "My father was furious at me for denying King, but there was always this hope in the back of my mind I would one day be reunited with you. My family thought I was crazy for holding onto the notion considering we left you for dead. I'm sorry about that, by the way. Phoenix has always been hot-headed, but that day he just lost it. I don't know if it was because his Wolf sensed other shifters in the area. He never gave a reasonable explanation for it, but it was the last straw for the Alpha of our pack."

Sebastian's phone pinged, and after checking the message, he said, "That's our ride." Bas waited in the cover of the trees until Anthony pulled to the side of the road and stopped. Bas snagged Dakota's bag and placed his free hand on her back.

When they got to Bas's Jeep, Dakota whistled. "And what a ride it is." Bas grinned as he opened the back door, tossing her duffel over the seat. He helped her climb in, then got in beside her.

Anthony put the Jeep in gear and took off. "Everyone okay?" he asked, handing Sebastian a shirt over his shoulder.

Sebastian slipped it on. As he was threading the buttons through the holes, he answered, “For now. I don’t trust Kingston.”

“How about you, Dakota?” Anthony asked. “You know him better than we do.”

“Normally King is level-headed, but I don’t think he’s going to take this lying down. He’ll need to save face with the pack.”

“But you’re Bas’s fated mate. Doesn’t that count for something?”

Dakota placed her hand on Sebastian’s thigh. “If it had been anyone other than me? Yes. But King has it in his head I belong to him. Besides that, Sebastian challenged King. Regardless that he let y’all walk away, Alphas don’t let challenges go unanswered.” Bas settled his hand on Dakota’s, but she turned hers over and threaded their fingers. “Is this okay?”

Bas lifted their joined hands to his mouth and kissed her knuckles. “More than.” When he returned their hands to his thigh, Dakota leaned her head against his shoulder. Sebastian pressed his lips to her hair. When he straightened, Anthony was eyeing them through the rearview mirror. Catching Sebastian’s gaze, Anthony nodded. Sebastian released an uneasy sigh. He had no doubt they hadn’t seen the last of Kingston Bridgewater, but he had found his mate. His Queen. With Dakota by his side and his Clan at his back, Sebastian felt lighter than ever before.

Chapter 13

DAKOTA HAD TO be dreaming. No way was this her life. She, Dakota Young, was the fated mate to the King of Gargoyles. She had to let that sink in for a moment. Would that make her Queen if she accepted the bond? Who was she kidding? It was all she could do not to crawl into Sebastian's lap and beg him to seal the deal then and there. Not only that, but he was the boy from Utah. It all felt like some fantastical dream. Speaking of dreams, hers had come true. Had it truly been a dream or a prophecy of things to come? If she didn't think he and his cousin would look at her funny, Dakota would release the squeal threatening to break free. Jolee was going to shit a brick when she learned the truth.

Anthony pulled into a gas station, parking next to an SUV. "Are we going back to the hotel or on to Carlton?"

Sebastian turned to her. "I'm looking to purchase a lodge about five hours from here, and I'd like to get your opinion before I sign the papers. I want to reopen a once thriving business to help Carlton by bringing guests to the town. The place is in decent shape, and it will take minimal renovations to get it up and running. Is that something you might be interested in? If not, we can go wherever you want."

"I'd love to see it." Being an architect must pay well if he was going to purchase a lodge. Not only that, but he was King of his Clan. Kingston's money came from the pack members who worked. Dakota wondered if the Gargoyle Clan operated the same way.

"I'll ride with Lydia so you two kids can have some privacy. We'll follow you to Carlton." Anthony climbed out and switched vehicles.

Sebastian and Dakota got into the front seat. Before putting the Jeep in drive, Sebastian asked, "Can you drive a

stick?”

Now Dakota knew she was dreaming. There was no way any male would let a female drive a vehicle this nice. Not the males in her pack, anyway. “Sure can, but I’d rather wait and drive when I’m more familiar with the roads.”

“You just let me know when.” Sebastian tapped the screen, bringing up a map, and when he selected the destination, they were off. “You mentioned you have questions. What would you like to know?” Sebastian asked.

“Everything.” Dakota sat on her hands to keep from distracting him. “How old are you? Do you have siblings? Since you’re King, did you take the throne from your father? Or did you fight for it?”

Sebastian grinned at her. “I’m twenty-seven. I have one sister. Her name is Stefania Seven Di Pietro. She was born on July 7th, thus her middle name, and yes, we call her Seven.”

“Di Pietro?”

“That’s our original family surname. Living as long as we do, Gargoyles reinvent themselves every so often, and Stone is the surname my papa chose the last time he did so, and most of his brothers and cousins followed suit. Uncle Dante is the only one still using their original name. We can live a thousand years if we aren’t killed first. Male Gargoyles can only be killed by a select few poisons or by decapitation. Our skin is impenetrable. Females aren’t as lucky. They don’t have the same skin, nor do they have wings. Until my cousins came along, most of the female Gargoyles had died off. I got off topic, but that’s information you need to know. My papa, Rafael, was King, and he recently passed the crown to me because he was ready to retire and enjoy life with my momma. Like I explained while we were waiting on Anthony, my mother is human, so Seven and I are considered half-bloods. A few of my cousins, like Lydia, Anthony, and his twin, Tabitha, are full-bloods since both their parents are either full or half-bloods. It gets confusing, but Lydia is our archivist, and she can give you a list of everyone and their heritage.”

“A thousand years? Wow. Wolves get in maybe two centuries, and I thought that was a long time. Sorry I interrupted. Please continue.”

“No need to apologize.” Sebastian gave her a butterflies-in-the-stomach-inducing smile. “Let’s see. My papa is an architect. I wanted to follow in his footsteps, but where he focused on commercial designs, I wanted to build residential homes. I grew up in a modern manor, but most of my cousins lived in large wooden and stone houses, and they were more my style. I currently live in Atlanta where our family has been for over fifty years. Gargoyles don’t age like humans, so we have to move around if we don’t want to remain hidden from the public eye or wear disguises. My parents moved to New York, and I wanted somewhere between there and Georgia. I was drawn to West Virginia, and now I know why.” Sebastian held out his right hand. Dakota removed her left from under her leg and threaded their fingers.

“I dreamed about you,” Dakota admitted. “I was running from King, and you swooped down and saved me from him. I didn’t know it was you. Hell, I didn’t know Gargoyles existed, and I thought you might be a dragon. Then today I saw Anthony’s wings when he shifted, and... It had to be you because what happened today played out almost exactly as in my dream.”

“I had the same dream. Well, almost. Only in mine, I saved you from a black panther. When Anthony told me where the meeting with King was, I knew it was a sign. I just didn’t know what kind.”

“How is that possible? Us having similar dreams?”

“I believe it’s because of our connection. I’ve had dreams where snippets were later revealed in real life, but nothing like what I dreamed about you. You and I have been tied to one another for ten years.”

“I still can’t believe you’re the boy from Utah. Why were you there?”

“We were celebrating my cousin Connor receiving his masters. Our Clan will get together for any reason, big or

small. The hotel is owned by a Gargoyle couple, and we rented the place for the weekend so we didn't have to worry about humans."

"How big is your Clan?"

"I'd have to ask Lydia to be sure, but I'd venture to say a couple thousand here in the States where I'm King."

"Wow. How do you rule that many?"

"With a lot of help. Papa put males he trusted in charge of different areas, kind of how wolf packs have different Alphas. If someone has an issue, they go to that leader first. If they can't settle the dispute, they contact me. If that leader moves out of their territory, they'll contact me beforehand, and I will select someone new to oversee the area. When I was crowned King, I elected Anthony as my second-in-command. He's not only my cousin, but one of my best friends. We have several cousins who are close in age, and we're a tight-knit group. I'm hoping some of them will agree to move to West Virginia with me. That brings me back to the lodge we're going to see. I know you and I just met, and we have a lot to discuss, but your opinion means everything to me, Dakota. If you don't want to remain in West Virginia, I'll look elsewhere."

"You'd do that?"

"Of course. I'm getting way ahead of myself since I don't know if you want to be mated to me. I'd like to spend time getting to know one another, and if at any time you feel like I'm not the male for you, you can walk away."

"And you'll go find another mate?" Dakota didn't like the sound of that. At all.

"No. You're it for me. I could find someone to date, or marry even, but I'll never be able to give them my heart. It belongs to you and you alone."

"Then why would you let me walk away? Why wouldn't you fight for me?"

Sebastian squeezed her hand. "Oh, I'd fight for you, like I was ready to do back at the pack house, but I don't want you

to feel like you have no say in the matter just because the fates deemed us to be mates. I won't treat you the way King has."

Dakota relaxed in her seat. "That right there is how I know you're an honorable male. You'd allow me to walk away to the detriment of your heart. I guess it's a good thing I've been hoping to find you all these years. Like you said, we have a connection, and I'm looking forward to getting to know you better. Hell, it might turn out that you don't like me once you've spent time with me."

"Yeah? Do you snore? Or leave wet towels on the bathroom floor? Do you leave the peanut butter knife on the counter? Or worse, do you put ketchup on your eggs?"

Dakota grinned. "Are all those deal breakers? Because I do one of those things. I'll let you guess which one."

Sebastian hummed. "Well, if you snore, I'm sure it's cute. Your cabin was spotless, so I'm guessing you eat ketchup on your eggs."

"Do you eat ketchup on hash browns?" she asked.

"Of course. Don't you?"

"I do, and I'm not one of those people whose food can't touch, so sometimes the ketchup gets mixed in with the eggs. I don't purposely put it on the eggs, but I don't mind the taste."

"Whew, there for a minute I thought I was going to have to drop you on the side of the road," Sebastian joked. She knew he was kidding by the big grin on his gorgeous face.

"Are you saying you don't have any weird food combinations you like?"

"No, ma'am. My tastes are perfectly normal including putting pineapple on pizza. Now Anthony on the other hand... Wait until you eat with him and he orders steak. It's not so much a weird combination, but he likes extra Worcestershire sauce on his."

"What's wrong with that?" Dakota marinated her steaks in both Worcestershire and spicy steak sauce.

“Nothing’s wrong with it, but when he was little, he had trouble pronouncing Worcestershire, and he called it wash your sister sauce. Still does.”

Dakota barked out a laugh. “Somehow, I can see that. Since he spent the night with Jolee, I assume he doesn’t have a mate?”

“You’re correct. Very few of our generation have found their mates yet. Connor met his when they were both kidnapped as little kids. His story is similar to ours in that he found Alyssa a few months ago after twenty years. Connor has visions, and it was one of those that led him to South Carolina and the mess with the wolf shifters there. Alyssa was the biologist tasked with studying the obscure sample taken during the autopsy.”

“Back the truck up. They were kidnapped?”

“It’s a long story, but yes. Many of our parents went through hell finding their mates, and Connor was used as a pawn against his mother. But those are stories for another day. You’ll hear them all when you meet the family.”

“Tell me more about your parents,” Dakota encouraged. If she was going to meet them, she wanted a heads-up on what kind of people they were. She already knew Rafael had been King, but that didn’t tell her if he had been a fair and kind one. As Sebastian talked about his parents, it was clear both meant the world to him. While he drove, Sebastian also tossed in details about his uncles as well as Rafael’s cousins who were more like brothers to him. Sebastian listed all his cousins and their jobs, some like Lydia and Carleigh, who had taken roles from their fathers. He talked about growing up with a group of best friends in those cousins as they learned and trained from their parents. Dakota was a little jealous. She wasn’t close with Phoenix, and other than Jolee, she didn’t have many friends. From what Sebastian told her, that would change as soon as she met his family. She would become one of them. It was another reason she couldn’t wait to accept the mate bond.

Sebastian’s phone rang, and he pressed a button on the steering wheel to answer. “What’s up?”

“Lydia has to pee, so I’m taking the next exit.”

“Roger that.” Sebastian disconnected. “I should have said this to you before now, and I apologize that I haven’t, but if you need to stop for any reason, all you have to do is say so.”

“I appreciate that. Growing up in my family meant you learned to hold it. My father wasn’t one to stop often when we traveled.”

“I’ve never understood that. If I need to take a leak, I stop. Why make yourself or someone else miserable for something that takes less than ten minutes?”

“Yeah, well, my father isn’t like yours. Mine’s an asshole.”

“I’m sorry, *Cucciolina*.”

“What does that mean?” Dakota asked, never having a nickname other than Kody.

“It’s Italian for little cub. I hope that doesn’t bother you.”

“Not at all. I think it’s sweet. I noticed your cousins call you Bas. Is that what you prefer?”

“You can call me whatever you want. I’m hoping someday you’ll call me mate.”

Dakota couldn’t imagine why Bas thought she would refuse the bond. Not only was he a handsome, successful businessman, he was the freaking Gargoyle King. Maybe he felt being Queen would be something she wouldn’t want. Granted, she didn’t know what the role entailed, if anything, but it wasn’t a job or title she would turn down. She had waited for what felt like forever for him, and there was no way she was letting him go, and she told him so.

“I’ll call you that now because that’s what you are to me. No, we haven’t exchanged bites, but for all intents and purposes, I’m yours. I denied my Alpha on the slim chance of meeting you one day. Why on Earth would I not want to be your mate or your Queen? I have no idea what that entails, but if it means standing beside you, working with you, loving you

for the rest of my life? I'm in. My Wolf has been fighting me to claim you since the moment I set eyes on you."

Sebastian visibly relaxed as he lifted her hand to his mouth. It was such a sweet gesture, and Dakota loved it. In all her years, she couldn't remember her father showing her mom such tenderness. Maybe he did behind closed doors, but Dakota couldn't see it. Neither could she imagine Kingston ever doing something so gentle. He was all Alpha all the time, and she didn't think that included showing vulnerability even when he was alone with his mate. Bas, on the other hand, had already shown he valued her as an equal. He wanted her opinion on the lodge. If she said she didn't like it or didn't feel it was a good investment, he wouldn't sign the papers. She would have to get used to that since she'd never encountered mates being true partners. In both her packs, there was the alpha of the relationship, and whatever they said was law.

"The best person to talk to about being Queen is my momma. She's human, but she's as tough as they come having been chief of police. From what I can tell from observing my parents, she was the rock my father needed when shit went sideways. The one who kept him grounded while helping him soar. She's still his best friend and confidante. There'll be times when you'll have to speak on my behalf should I be unavailable. When I named Anthony my second, I didn't believe I'd ever find you. As my mate, you're my second, but Anthony will still be my trusted next-in-command after you. I've only been King a month, so this will be a learning experience for both of us, but we'll manage it together. My papa has been preparing me for a while, and my momma will be thrilled to help you any way she can. That's the type of person she is."

"I can't wait to meet her. Both of them, actually. It'll be nice to see how a true partnership works." Dakota was excited but also nervous. She was an unemployed bartender, not something as exciting as a police chief, but she was willing to learn how to be a good Queen and partner. Dakota had done well in school, but she was still just a backwoods wolf. Maybe when they went shopping, she could get something besides

flannel to wear when meeting his parents. That was a tomorrow Dakota's problem.

Sebastian drove for a while until Anthony pulled up alongside of them, and Lydia pointed to the right. Sebastian dropped back so Anthony could lead, and he followed them to a famous store that had been around almost a century. It was a large gas station as well as a humongous store. He parked beside his cousin, and Lydia climbed out of the SUV, but she didn't go inside. She stood at the front of the Jeep with Anthony stepping up beside her.

Sebastian said, "Wait there," and got out, jogging around to open the door for her. She placed her hand in his even though she didn't need help climbing down. He closed her door, then pressed the lock button on his fob. The four of them made their way inside, and Dakota slowed her steps to take it all in. She'd seen signs for this store on the highway, but her dad had never stopped at one, saying it would take too much time for them to browse. Now she understood why he said that. The place was huge. They followed the signs to the restrooms, and Sebastian kissed Dakota quickly before she went with Lydia into the women's.

"Holy cow. This bathroom's bigger than my parents' house," Dakota whispered, taking in the rows of stalls and the long line of sinks. "Cleaner too, and that's saying something. My mom's a neat freak."

Lydia grinned before ducking into one of the stalls. Dakota took one farther down. When they finished peeing, they met back at the basins. As they washed, Dakota glanced at Lydia in the mirror. "Are all of Sebastian's cousins as gorgeous as you?"

Lydia chuckled as she placed her damp hands over one of the dryers in between the sinks. Dakota would have been searching for paper towels if Lydia hadn't finished first. "We have good genes, but don't sell yourself short. You're stunning. And exactly Bas's type."

Dakota dried her hands before asking, "Yeah? And what's that?" Dakota didn't really want to think about being

compared to the others who had come before her, but she couldn't judge him too harshly. She hadn't been a saint.

Lydia gestured at Dakota's shirt. "Bas could open his own flannel store. The only time he dresses up is if he's meeting clients, or the day he took over for his father."

"So, he likes his women to look like biker lumberjacks?" Dakota rolled her eyes, but she smiled at Lydia to let her know she was kidding.

Lydia laughed, but then she narrowed her eyes. "Come to think of it, I don't actually know his type. He's never dated anyone. Pretty sure he was waiting on you."

"I hope he's not disappointed. He's... him, and I'm me, an unemployed bartender."

"Think of it this way. If you'd met while you were still working, you would have quit anyway. At least I think you would have."

"Oh, definitely. I'd follow that man through Hell and back," Dakota admitted.

"I hope it doesn't come to that. Now, let's go get the guys to buy us something to eat. I'm starving." Lydia strode to the door and held it open for Dakota. The guys were waiting on them in the hallway, and Dakota didn't hesitate in meeting Sebastian as he held out a hand for her. She didn't know what she'd done to deserve such an important male, but she thanked the goddess Bas was hers. Now, she just had to not screw things up.

Chapter 14

SEBASTIAN WAS ENTHRALLED with his mate. He didn't think anything of stopping at the huge store slash gas station, but by the way Dakota's wide eyes took everything in, she'd never been in one. It had taken longer than expected for her and Lydia to exit the restroom, but he figured his cousin was either giving Dakota the third degree, which he doubted, or she was edging her way into a new friendship with his mate. That scenario was most likely. He didn't ask what they talked about. He could have listened in, but he didn't want to invade their privacy by doing so. Instead, he'd texted the realtor, asking if they could see the lodge the next morning.

When the females walked out, they were both smiling. Lydia winked at Bas over Dakota's shoulder. "I'm hungry," his cousin announced.

"Fuck," Bas whispered. "I suck at being a good ma— uh, boyfriend," he stammered. Too many humans were around. "I'm sorry, *Cucciolina*. I should have asked if you wanted to stop to eat."

Dakota ran her fingertip down the bridge of his nose. "Stop. I'm a big girl. If I'm hungry or I need to stop to pee, I'll tell you."

"Got it." Bas led her toward the food section of the store. "Do you like brisket? They make some fantastic sandwiches here."

"I do. For future reference, there's not a whole lot I won't eat. I'm not a fan of sushi. I used to like shrimp, but I got food poisoning after eating it a couple years ago, so now that's on my will-not-eat list."

"What about pineapple on pizza?" Anthony asked, his eyes narrowed at Sebastian.

“I’ve never tried it, but it’d probably be something I’d enjoy. I like salty and sweet together, like popcorn and chocolate.” Sebastian grinned, waiting for Anthony’s response. His cousin was so anti-pineapple on pizza, he would throw down over it.

“No. Nope. Nuh-uh. No Queen of mine is going to eat that shit,” he declared. Several heads turned at his tirade, but he kept walking, flapping his arms in front of him. Lydia ducked and dodged, laughing her ass off.

Dakota stopped abruptly, turning to face the maniac. She looked around, then lowered her voice, pointing a finger in his face. “When I’m Queen, I’ll make a decree that every member of our Clan eat it once a week. Bet.”

Lydia laughed harder, as Anthony gasped, clutching his heart. “You wound me.”

“I’m gonna wound you if you disparage someone else’s choice in food again.” Dakota turned to Sebastian and winked. “Now, I need one of those brisket sandwiches. Do you think they have any wash your sister sauce to go on it?”

Bas grinned at his mate, drawing her into his body and kissing her soundly while Lydia howled behind them. Anthony brushed by them muttering, “Traitor.”

“Oh, my gods, that was stellar,” Lydia said when she could breathe properly. Shaking her head, she patted Dakota on the shoulder. “Kaya would’ve been proud.”

“Kaya?” Dakota asked.

“My momma. Come on. I wasn’t hungry, but now that brisket’s all I can think about.” That was a lie. What was foremost on his mind was getting Dakota alone. While they were waiting for their orders, the realtor responded stating she’d meet them at the lodge at ten the next morning. They dug into their food, and once finished, Dakota asked if she had time to look around.

“We have nowhere to be, so take your time.” He followed his mate down every single aisle of the place, waiting patiently as she looked at everything the store had to offer. When they

came to a large wall of jerky, Dakota placed her hands on her hips.

“Now that’s something.” She stared at all the different flavors, and Sebastian pointed out his favorites.

“Just grab the large ones,” he suggested.

Dakota studied the different sizes. “I want to make sure they’re really the best bargain. Sometimes the smaller sizes are cheaper per unit.”

Knowing where his mate came from, it made sense she would bargain shop. When they were alone, he would inform her she was now loaded. Until then, he reached up and grabbed the large size in his favorite flavors. “What about you? Which ones do you like?” he asked as he put his selections in the basket he carried. When Dakota admitted she’d only ever had teriyaki, Bas chose one of each of the other flavors and added them to the basket. She opened her mouth to say something, but he pressed a finger to her plump lips. “You might find a new favorite. Now, let’s see what else we can find.”

When they walked around to the sweet section, Anthony was filling his basket with one of the store’s most popular items. It was a cross between cereal and corn puffs. Bas enjoyed a few bites of the stuff, but Anthony devoured bags at a time.

“What’s this?” Dakota asked, picking up a bag, reading the name and description.

“Only the best frickin’ stuff on the planet,” Anthony answered. Dakota went to put the bag back, but Bas took it from her and placed it in their basket. “Hey, did y’all see the rack of flannel on the other side of the store? You should get matching shirts,” Anthony said without looking up from his mission to get as many bags of puffs into his basket as possible.

Lydia smacked their cousin. “Don’t be rude.”

Anthony popped his head up, eyes narrowed. “I’m not.” He gestured at Bas and Dakota. “I was being serious. Look at

‘em. Nothing says solidarity like matching plaid.’”

Dakota tugged on Sebastian’s arm. “I’m good with solidarity. Lead the way.”

Bas smirked at Anthony and directed his mate to the other side of the store. “You’ll get used to Tony’s brand of smart ass. He’s an acquired taste.”

Dakota wrapped her arm through Sebastian’s as they strolled. It made it hard to dodge the other customers, but Bas was loath to care. “He doesn’t bother me. I like that he has no filter. I’m the same way most of the time. I hope that doesn’t bother you.”

“Not at all. Being in my position, I need to come off as diplomatic and polished. You’ll help balance that out.”

Dakota stopped in the middle of the aisle. “Are you saying I’m dull?”

Bas mentally smacked himself. “Not at all.” Not caring they were causing a traffic jam, he caressed her cheek with his free hand. “I meant you can be yourself. You don’t have to pretend where I do. The me you see now? That’s the real Sebastian Stone. Yes, I dress up when meeting with clients, but as soon as the work day is done? I’m tossing the tie and putting on flannel. If it’s summer, I’m in cargo shorts and a T-shirt while wearing work boots. Anthony gives me all kinds of shit for that fashion faux pas as he calls it.”

Dakota chuckled. “I can’t wait to see that. And I was joking about being dull. I forget you aren’t used to my sarcasm. I’ll work on it.”

“No. Do not censor yourself, especially with me. I want the real Dakota Young, twenty-four seven.”

Dakota gave Bas one of her breathtaking smiles. “Deal. Now, let’s go get matching shirts just because we can.” They did just that to mess with Anthony, but if Bas were being honest? He liked having his mate dress like him, not giving one fuck about the cheese factor.

Once they were finished shopping and paid for their purchases, they stowed their bags in the back seat of the Jeep

as Anthony and Lydia did the same in their car. Anthony kept out a bag of puffs and was already opening the package. Standing between the vehicles, Bas said, “We have a meeting with the realtor in the morning at ten. We can either get a hotel here, then drive the rest of the way in the morning, or drive farther tonight and sleep late. Thoughts?” he asked Dakota. He knew which one he would choose and that was to get a hotel here so they could be alone sooner.

“I’m used to working the late shift and sleeping in, but ___”

“Yes! I vote for sleeping in.” Anthony reached out his fist, and Dakota bumped it with hers while rolling her eyes.

“You were going to say but something. But?” Bas ignored Anthony’s pout.

Dakota pointed to Anthony. “Does that childish face work on others?”

Tony winked. “It worked really well on Jolee.”

“Yeah, and you saw the males of my pack. The bar wasn’t that high.”

Lydia doubled over laughing, and Bas arched a brow at his cousin. “I think you just got burned.”

“Why you picking on me, woman? Damn.”

“Because it’s so much fun.” Dakota leaned against Sebastian’s arm. “Let’s go ahead and drive the two hours so junior stops pouting.”

“Do you want me to reserve rooms for all of us?” Lydia offered.

“Nah. I’ll let Dakota put it on our card. I’ll text you the address before we hit the road so you don’t have to follow us.”

“Sounds good.” Anthony held out his keys to Lydia. “You drive. I need both hands for these.” He held up the bag of puffs. “Want some?” he asked Dakota.

“No thank you. I’m still full of brisket.”

“Your loss.” Anthony tossed back a mouthful, then climbed into the passenger side of his vehicle.

Clutching the keys in one hand, Lydia waved with the other. “See you in a couple hours.”

Sebastian walked Dakota to her side and helped her in. He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket before climbing in. Once inside, he handed Dakota a credit card as well as his phone after he unlocked it and texted the address for the inn to Anthony. “Here’s the website for where we’ll be staying. Please book three rooms.”

“Three?” Dakota asked.

“If you want your own room, then book four. I didn’t mean to assume.” Bas started the Jeep and shifted into reverse. He backed out of the spot without looking at his mate. Instead of stating her preference, Dakota began tapping at the screen. A few minutes later, she situated the credit card and phone both in one hand and typed the number into the phone. When she was finished, she placed the phone into the cubby and returned his card to his wallet. He was dying to know if they were spending the night together, but he’d find out soon enough.

Dakota slid her hand across his shoulder and tangled her fingers in his hair. “Tell me about this lodge and your vision for it.”

Sebastian’s Goyle hummed appreciatively at the contact. “I looked at three different ones. The Wellis Lodge was in the best condition, plus it’s on a mountain. The building is in good repair and won’t need too much work to make it into what I envisioned. The attic will need walls built since it’s all one big area, plus it’ll have to be plumbed in for bathrooms. That’ll be the biggest expense. A couple in our Clan have opened several restaurants, and they’ve offered to help with the kitchen. If you open my phone to the photos, I took lots of pictures if you want to see it before we get there tomorrow.” Dakota plucked the phone from the cubby, tapped the screen, and paused. “The passcode is 062565.”

“Is that significant?” Dakota asked as she typed it in.

“That’s the date you pounced into my life,” he admitted. Call him a sentimental fool, but that day changed everything for Bas.

Dakota’s fingers paused stroking his hair, then started up again as she scrolled through the photos. “This place looks awesome. Are you planning on living there?”

“That was the plan. I was going to take one of the rooms while renovations are being done.”

“Was the plan?”

“I have you to consider now. I’ve inquired about the surrounding land, and if the owners are willing to sell, I planned to build a house close to the lodge. If not, I was going to remain there long enough to get the business up and running, then find another property to do the same thing. What are your thoughts about remaining in West Virginia? Because if you’d rather move to another state, we can still proceed with renovating Wellis Lodge while looking for property to build our home elsewhere. And then there’s my home in Atlanta. We have a place to live while searching for somewhere else.”

Dakota replaced the phone after looking at all the photos. “What about your office?”

“I do a lot of business by phone and email. I’ll use the office at the lodge for the time being, and I can always find real estate in town. If I’m needed in Atlanta, I can either drive or fly back.”

“I’m not opposed to living in West Virginia. I might be on the outs with my pack and my father, but I wouldn’t mind staying close to my mom. She’s a typical omega, always baring her neck to my alpha father, but she’s been on my side for the most part. Carlton is close enough to see her if I want, but also far enough away I won’t have to worry about the pack showing up every five minutes.”

“You sure about that? You said you didn’t think King would let the challenge go without retribution.”

Dakota squeezed Sebastian’s neck before resuming her caress of his hair. “I’m sure. He might come after us, but I

have no doubt you can take him down. How did Sloane end up flying out the window?”

“Anthony punched him, then kicked him. I don’t think he meant to send him flying, but Sloane had his claws around Lydia’s neck. She cut Sloane, then Anthony did the rest.”

“I wish I’d seen that. Sloane’s a dick at the best of times, but to assault a female? That goes against everything I was raised to believe in.”

“Same for Gargoyles. Our females are trained in hand-to-hand combat as well as all types of weaponry, so they can handle themselves, but it’s engrained in the males of our Clan to be their protectors. Females are sacred. If anyone, regardless of who they are, put their hands on you, their life would be forfeit.”

“Just like that?”

Bas tightened his grip on the steering wheel, thinking of someone harming his mate. “Just like that. If you accept the mate bond, you’ll be Queen of our Clan. You’re already the most important female in my life, but you’ll be important to thousands of Gargoyles as well.”

“Just so you know, I plan to accept the mate bond. I have dreamed of you since that day in the woods. Turned down being Alpha Mate on the chance I would one day meet you. So let’s consider that a done deal. I guess we should do the whole twenty questions and learn more about one another. I like all types of music, but I tend to listen to country the most when I’m in the car. I hear nothing but classic rock at The Depot. My favorite food is steak and potatoes. Any kind of potatoes. Being a shifter means high metabolism, and I don’t have to worry about too many carbs. I prefer to read over watching television, but I do have a few shows I binge. My favorite color is blue, but I love everything about fall and that includes all the colors associated with the season. My idea of the perfect date is sitting under the stars by an open fire drinking beer after eating steak and potatoes.”

“I see a theme there with the food,” Bas joked. “I also enjoy most genres of music, but I tend to listen to hard rock

most. Have you heard of Cyanide Sweetness?”

“Who hasn’t?” Dakota huffed.

“Desi Rothchild is a Goyle. His father and mine are good friends, and I’ve seen Desi’s band several times. I also like a good steak, but my favorite food would probably be Mexican. I don’t think I have a favorite color other than plaid.” Dakota laughed, and Sebastian had found his new favorite sound. “I love your idea of the perfect date. I too enjoy the outdoors especially during fall. It’s one of the main reasons I want a business on the mountains in West Virginia. The colors are so vibrant, and then there’s snow. We don’t get much snow in Georgia. It’s mostly a layer of ice. To be honest, I don’t read much. I do like movies. Mostly the ones with lots of car chases and explosions. I did well in school, and I enjoyed it, mainly because I had so many cousins there at the same time. I didn’t go to college, though. I learned architecture from my papa. He set up a small drafting table in his office where I colored pictures. As I got older, I watched him work, and I was like a sponge.”

“Not only is he drop-dead gorgeous but smart too,” Dakota stage whispered.

Bas grinned at his mate. “What about you? Did you like school?”

“It wasn’t bad because I had Jolee. I did well in my classes and would like to have gone on to college, but my parents couldn’t afford it, and I didn’t want to be strapped with student loans the rest of my life.”

“Makes sense. What would you have studied if you’d been able to go?”

“English and literature. I love getting lost in books, and at one point I thought about trying my hand at writing. I used to write short stories and poems, but I had to hide them. Phoenix is an asshole, and he’d tease me about having my head in the clouds. I’m an alpha, but I’m also a romantic at heart. After a while, I stopped writing and turned to besting him anytime I could.” Dakota waved her hand as if she were wiping away the

memory, and Bas wanted to turn the Jeep around and go beat her brother's ass.

Oblivious to Sebastian's inner rage, Dakota continued. "I also considered being a teacher. I love kids, and I thought it would be cool to make a difference. Be that teacher who got down on the student's level with patience. There were so many times I could see a kid in my class struggling, and the teacher didn't make an effort to ensure everyone understood the class work. I tutored my share of peers in middle and high school. I wasn't a jock or a cheerleader, and I had the time."

"That's amazing, Dakota. If you want to try your hand at writing, or if you'd like to go to college, I say go for it. The future is wide open for you now."

"Writing maybe, but I still don't have the funds for college."

"Oh, but you do. Not to brag, but I'm loaded, and that means you are too. Everything I have is now yours, or it will be as soon as we seal the bond."

"Aren't you worried about me taking off with all your money?"

"No, *Mia Regina*, I'm not. The fates wouldn't have chosen you if you were a thief who wouldn't love me as much as I will cherish you."

Dakota tugged on his hair. "What's that one mean?"

Sebastian reached back and removed her hand from his hair. It was doing crazy things to his body, and Bas didn't want to wreck. He kissed her knuckles before saying, "It means my queen."

"That's just nuts. Me, a queen, and of Gargoyles no less. I mean, look at me. I look like a bartender, not a royal."

"And my momma was chief of police. Do you think she looked royal? It takes a tough female to lead a Clan, not someone who wears fancy dresses with lots of jewelry and eats bon bons all day."

"I don't even know what a bon bon is."

“It’s a fancy chocolate. What I’m saying is you already have qualities like compassion and a tough disposition. The way you spoke of wanting to help kids? That right there is the type of person our Clan needs. You’re going to make a fantastic Queen, and I cannot wait to introduce you to the rest of our family. They’re going to love you.”

“How do you know?”

Bas held back the words he wanted to say. It was too soon. Instead, he told her, “You put Anthony in his place. Anyone who can do that is a welcome addition to our Clan.”

“He is fun to wind up,” Dakota said, grinning.

“You mentioned loving kids. Does that mean you want them some day?”

“I do. At least a couple, but not anytime soon. Is that okay?”

“It’s perfect. My papa was five hundred seventy-three when I was born, so I figure we have a few years.”

“Excuse me?”

Chapter 15

SURELY DAKOTA HEARD him wrong. “Five hundred seventy-three?”

“That’s how long it took him to find my momma.”

“And he didn’t date or marry anyone before her?” Dakota couldn’t imagine being celibate that long.

“I’m sure he had dates or one-night stands. He’s not a saint. But no, he never married because he held out hope he would find his mate. My uncle Sinclair did get married over the years. He finally found his mate not long after papa found momma. And that’s another long story we’ll get to when we have more time. Something you should know is when you accept the mate bond, you’ll stop aging, and your life span will match mine. Can you imagine being alive hundreds of years?”

Turning to Sebastian, Dakota told him honestly, “Yes, I absolutely can imagine it. Just think of all the changes we’ll see together. But maybe we don’t wait five hundred years to have kids.”

Sebastian laughed. “I can agree to that.”

“If I stop aging, I’ll look twenty-five the rest of my life?” Bas nodded, and Dakota asked, “And you’ll look twenty-seven?”

“No. I’ll probably look to be in my late thirties. Will that bother you?”

“I’m sure you’ll age like fine wine, so no.”

Sebastian’s phone rang. Dakota read the name Nikita on the dash display, and jealousy flared as he answered it using a button on the steering wheel.

“Hey, Nik. What’s up?”

Nik?

“Bas, what the hell have you done?” the female asked, sounding stressed.

“You’ll have to be more specific. I’ve done a lot of things since we last spoke.”

“Goddess. Okay, so Kingston Bridgewater called Knox furious that he would put you in their pack’s orbit. Mads and I were having dinner with Knox when he called. Kingston claims you kidnapped one of his females. His Alpha Mate, more specifically, after you challenged him. What the hell?”

Dakota growled. “That overbearing fucker!”

“I’m assuming by your outburst you are the female and you went willingly?” Nikita asked.

“I’m Dakota, and yes, I went with Sebastian willingly. For the record, I was never going to be Alpha Mate.”

“Nik, Dakota is my fated mate. We were meeting with King about the shifter council, and he pulled the Alpha card when I mentioned wanting Dakota to be part of it. Things got out of hand. His second grabbed Lydia by the throat, Anthony kicked the male through the window, and King and I had words amid claws, fangs, wings, and posturing. I convinced him it would be wise to let us leave or else.”

“Fuck. Okay, so no kidnapping, but you did call him out in front of his pack?”

“I did. I told those around King it wasn’t dishonorable to stand down considering Gargoyles could wipe their pack out if we wanted.”

“He might have let you leave, but King is causing trouble all over the place. He has called other pack Alphas he knows telling them his side of the story.”

“How do you know that?” Sebastian asked.

“Because Mads tapped into his phone. My mate is scary when it comes to spying on people.”

“Aw, thank you, Nikki,” a male voice said.

“You’re welcome, Bubba.” What sounded like kissing came through the speakers.

“Uh, Nik, maybe swap spit later?” Bas suggested, and Dakota grinned, feeling much better knowing this female had a mate of her own.

“Sorry, not sorry. My mate is just too sexy. Anyway, Mads has the name and number of everyone King spoke to. Once Knox knows Dakota is your fated mate, he’ll agree to call the Alphas and set the record straight. In the meantime, you might want to lay low.”

“We’re heading several hours away from Panther to look at a lodge. King shouldn’t have any way of finding us there. Regardless, we will remain vigilant. Please keep me posted on the conversations Knox has with the other Alphas, and if you can, try to find out how many packs are in West Virginia. If I’m going to build a home here, I need to understand who I’ll be neighbors with.”

“We’re on it, and congrats to you both.”

Dakota muttered, “Thank you,” as something Bas said niggled at her.

“Thanks, Nik. Go maul your mate, and we’ll talk soon.” Sebastian disconnected.

“Is Nikita a Gargoyle?” Dakota asked.

“She’s a dire wolf. Remember in the meeting, Anthony mentioned one of the Gryphons found his mate in a dire wolf? She is Nikita’s mother. Madsen is a wolf shifter. They met in South Carolina when that whole debacle went down. Nikita, along with two of our Clan, Carleigh and Harlow, own a cyber security company called H3. We call them the Trio. All three of them are expert hackers, but don’t call them that. They prefer computer specialists. Madsen is also a hacker. Between the four of them, they could probably wipe out a small country with a few keystrokes.” Sebastian flipped on his blinker as he changed lanes to overtake a slower vehicle. “Did I mention Gargoyles have the ability to detect emotions in others?”

“No, I don’t think you did.” Dakota was confused in the subject change.

“We can. And I noticed you tensed when you saw who was calling. Your heart rate sped up, and I do believe it indicated either anger or jealousy. You are my mate, *Cucciolina*. It doesn’t matter that we haven’t exchanged bites. You are the only female for me. Let me assure you now, any female who has my number is either family, part of the Clan, or a friend of mine. There is no former lover with my number, not that there are many of those. I tried to keep my baser urges under control, but I’m a male with needs, and I gave in several times. For that, I apologize.”

“Oh, Bas. There’s nothing to apologize for. You probably don’t want to hear that I’m not a virgin, but it’s true. Let’s just agree going forward there will be no others.”

“That I can promise.”

The GPS indicated their exit was a mile ahead, and Dakota’s heart raced for a different reason. She hadn’t booked herself a separate room, and in the next half hour, she would be alone with Sebastian. Would they have sex and complete the bond so quickly? Not that she was opposed, but her life would be forever changed once they marked each other. She would become the Gargoyle Queen. She still couldn’t wrap her head around that. When thinking about being Alpha Mate, Dakota had no desire whatsoever. So why was being Queen of Gargoyles hitting differently? She turned and looked at the male sitting beside her. That was why. Then again, Bas could have said he washed dishes at a diner, and Dakota would’ve still been as enthralled. There was an inherent goodness in him that called to her. Was Dakota that good? She liked to think so. She helped others whenever she could, which lately hadn’t been often, other than listening to her pack mates and offering advice while pouring beer that is. Thinking of her previous job reminded her of her best friend.

“I need to call Jolee and tell her what really happened with King. If he’s spreading lies, the pack needs to know the truth. I’ll also tell my mom. Not that she’ll speak up, but I want her to know I’m safe.”

“Do you know their numbers?”

“I have them all written down. When I left town yesterday, I copied them so I could put them in a new phone. I left my old one behind so they couldn’t track me. Turns out that didn’t matter.” It hit Dakota then what was bugging her earlier. “Bas, we need to check the Jeep and Anthony’s car for trackers.”

“Shit, I didn’t even think about that. As soon as we get to the hotel, I’ll have Tony check.”

“Won’t he need some type of device?”

“Yes, but with him being a private investigator who also does security, he probably has a kit in the back of his car full of techy toys.”

They pulled into the parking lot of a small hotel. The outside was decorated with fall accents and jack-o’-lanterns. Bas parked beside the other vehicle and shut the motor off. “I’m surprised something this small had online reservations,” Dakota stated.

“I was too when I looked at their website. I had planned on staying here the first night I was in town, but the stars were magnificent, and I ended up sitting in my Jeep until early the next morning.”

Anthony knocked on Sebastian’s window. “You gonna sit there all night making moon eyes at each other?”

Dakota opened her door and climbed on the running board, looking over the top to where Anthony stood wearing his signature smirk. “And if we are?” she challenged, arching a brow.

Sebastian got out, pushing Anthony back with his door. Lowering his voice, he said, “Can you check to make sure King didn’t have trackers put on our vehicles?”

Dakota jumped down, closed the door, and rounded the Jeep, wanting to hear his answer. She also wanted to see his tech kit, if he had one.

“I did that while you were rescuing your damsel. Both cars were clean.”

Dakota looked up at Sebastian. “I wonder how he plans on finding us then.”

“You think he’ll try?” Lydia asked.

“Maybe not physically.” Sebastian relayed the conversation with Nikita. “Then again, if we try to go into other territories where he’s spread his lies, we might be met head-on with claws and fangs. Now we not only need to worry about humans, but other shifters as well.”

Anthony tapped his fingers against the top of the Jeep, his gaze off in the distance. Dakota knew from listening to Bas talk about his cousin that Anthony was smart even if he came across as a wise ass. “Maybe we should head back to Panther and really challenge King. Once we defeat him, that will show the other wolves who they’re dealing with.”

Sebastian sighed. “Let’s save that as a last resort. I don’t want to come across as combative. We’re trying to get the other species leaders on our side, not start a war.”

“You’re no fun,” Anthony teased. “But I see your point. This is why you’re the King.”

Dakota shifted closer to Sebastian. “I say we let Knox do the talking for us. I don’t know that many Alphas, but those I do know, other than King, are peaceable and want what’s best for their packs.”

Bas tucked her hair behind her ear. “I agree. Let’s get a good night’s sleep, go see the lodge tomorrow, and see where things are then.” He opened the back door and retrieved their bags, encouraging Anthony and Lydia to do the same. They entered the hotel together, and while Sebastian approached the front desk, Dakota looked around the lobby. The building hadn’t looked like much on the outside, but the inside was quaint. The furniture in the waiting area appeared new. There was a coffee and water station off to the side, and through an open door was the dining area.

Anthony sidled up next to Dakota and whispered, “Are you going to let her talk to Bas that way?”

Dakota had been listening as the desk clerk flirted with Sebastian. Anthony was trying to get a rise out of Dakota, but she wasn’t taking the bait. “Yep.”

Anthony frowned, looking between Dakota and the woman. “You are?”

“Sure. All she’s doing is flirting, not offering turn-down service. And even if she were? Sebastian would make sure she knows he’s taken.”

“Dakota, Sweetheart? Are you ready?” Bas called out.

Giving Anthony a smirk of her own, she muttered, “You’re a goober,” and playfully punched Anthony on the shoulder as she strolled past. When she reached Sebastian, she palmed his cheek. “More than,” she husked.

“Come on, Goober. Let’s head upstairs,” Lydia called out to Anthony who was staring at Dakota. Shaking his head, he joined them, but he was smiling.

Sebastian handed his cousins their room keys. “They start serving breakfast at six.”

Anthony took his card. “Son, if I see your ass down here that early, you and I are going to have a talk.”

Sebastian sighed, and Dakota had a feeling it was something he did often around Anthony. Bas picked up their bags and stepped toward the elevator. When he pushed the up button, he told Tony, “Let me rephrase. Breakfast is served from six ‘til eleven. The realtor is meeting us at ten, so if you want to eat before then, you can. Dakota and I will meet you in the lobby at eight-thirty.”

They all piled on the lift, and Bas pressed the button for the second floor. When they exited a few seconds later, Lydia shoved her cousin. “Tony and I will see you when we see you.” They turned right, but Sebastian didn’t follow.

“I made sure our room wasn’t close to theirs,” Bas explained when he turned left.

“Good idea.” When they stood outside room 212, Dakota took the key from Bas and unlocked the door, pushing it open and holding it so he could enter. It had a king-sized bed in the middle of the small room. The décor was minimal with tones of blues and grays throughout.

“I’m sorry it’s not bigger,” Bas said, placing their bags on the bed.

“They make bigger beds?” Dakota joked. Bas stared at her, and Dakota laughed. “Sarcasm, big guy.” She took the two steps separating them and locked her arms around his neck. “I know you said you’re loaded, and you’re probably used to staying in fancy suites, but you saw my home, Bas. That little cabin is what I’m used to. *I’m* not fancy. I don’t require opulence to be happy. What will make me happy isn’t a mansion or expensive cars. If you have those already, I’m not opposed, but I don’t need them. What I do need is someone to have my back. To put me first sometimes. To treat me as an equal.”

“I won’t put you first sometimes, *Mia Regina*. You’ll be first every time.”

Dakota pulled Sebastian’s head down so she could kiss him. Their first kiss had been explosive, and she wanted more fireworks. Bas gripped her waist, his thumbs stroking her stomach over her shirt. Without breaking the kiss, Dakota unbuttoned her flannel and dropped it to the floor. She then worked Sebastian’s shirt off, wanting to see his chest again. Wanted to kiss the scars left behind from her brother’s attack. Understanding where she was going, Sebastian leaned back long enough to remove his undershirt, and Dakota did the same, leaving them bare from the waist up. She only wore a bra when she had to, and in her rush to get out of the cabin and away from Panther, she hadn’t bothered.

Sebastian seemed hesitant as he placed his hands on her shoulders. Dakota was okay with that. It meant they could take their time exploring. She toed off her boots while running her fingertips over the pink lines on his torso. She leaned in and pressed open-mouthed kisses to each one. Bas sucked in a breath, his hands tightening on her shoulders, then easing to

slide up her neck and cradling her head. Using her hair, Bas tilted Dakota's head back and gazed at her with adoration.

"Exquisite," Bas whispered before pressing his lips to hers. The kiss wasn't hurried. It was intentional, as though he were speaking to her without words. She chalked it up to them being fated mates, but Dakota understood what he was implying. She expressed the same feelings, the same intentions with her mouth and tongue. With her gentle strokes over his chest. Bas caressed her scalp with one hand while the other dropped to her hip, tugging her closer. She slid her hands up his pecs, across his shoulders, pressing her aching breasts to his abs. His erection was thick against her stomach, and her core pulsed with need. The previous times Dakota had sex, it was usually after a mediocre date where both parties were drinking and fell into bed because they were lonely. At least she had been. There had been no tender touches. No sweet words. Just two bodies coming together to slake a need. This was different. This was two beings whose fate had been written in the stars.

Dakota ached with such need, something she'd never encountered. Never had she wanted to give pleasure more than receiving it. Oh, she wanted him to take her. To make love to her. To ravish her body. But she wanted to taste him. To bring him to release with her mouth and hands as much as with Bas deep inside her. From the feel of his erection, he would be *deep*.

"Please, Bas," she begged.

"Tell me, *Cucciolina*. Tell me what you need."

"You. I need you inside me."

Sebastian released Dakota. "If we do this, I won't be able to stop my beast from claiming you."

"I don't want you to stop it. I want to claim you just as much."

Bas pointed to her jeans. "Then those need to go." He removed his own boots and pants as she did the same. When they were both naked, Sebastian lifted her into his arms, and

Dakota wrapped her legs around his waist, his erection caught between them. “Fuck, *Amore Mio*.”

“Yes, I want you to fuck me, Bas. We can make love later.” Dakota gripped Sebastian’s hair and kissed him roughly. She was ready to impale herself on his magnificent cock, knowing without a doubt it would be the best sex of her life. Dakota squirmed, trying to get his dick where she needed it, all while mauling his mouth. Her body ached with need. “I need you in me now.”

Sebastian stalked to the bed, placing her in the middle. When he didn’t immediately follow, Dakota rose on her elbows. He bent over, pulling his wallet from the pocket. “If you’re looking for a condom, don’t bother. I had a shot earlier this year, and it’s good for a few more months.”

“Oh, thank the gods.” Bas dropped his wallet somewhere close to his jeans. His erection bounced as Sebastian turned toward her. Dakota couldn’t wait to get *that* beast inside her while his beast claimed her.

Chapter 16

SEBASTIAN STARED AT the wonder spread out before him. His Goyle was too close to the surface, and it was all Bas could do to keep it contained. He bent down and kissed the inside of Dakota's calf, inhaling her scent. His mate spread her legs wider, reaching out for him.

"I appreciate you being sweet, but if you don't fuck me soon, I can't be held responsible for my actions."

Bas grinned at his mate until he caught her eyes flashing amber and her fangs on display. It seemed his wasn't the only beast ready to break free. Bas climbed on the bed, settling between Dakota's legs. He pushed one of her knees toward her chest and placed her other ankle on his shoulder. He licked his lips as he eyed her slickness. His mate was ready for him. "This is going to be quick because I can't wait to claim you. I promise I'll make love to you soon, but my beast is fighting me."

Dakota's eyes flashed amber once more. "Don't fight it. I'm ready"

Sebastian gripped his cock and rubbed it against her slick opening a few times before pressing against her entrance. Dakota hooked her foot around his thigh and tugged. He took the hint and entered her channel in one quick thrust. Bas took a breath, praying to the gods he didn't come too quickly, but fuck, she felt good. No, it was better than good. Being inside his mate was everything he'd dreamed it would be.

Dakota grabbed onto his biceps and squeezed. Bas got the message. He pulled out to the tip, then slammed home again. Dakota's eyes switched from amber to brown several times. She dropped her leg from his shoulder and placed both feet on the bed, meeting him thrust for thrust. She released one arm and brought her hand to her breast, tweaking her nipple. Fuck,

that was hot. Sebastian's fangs dropped and his wings unfurled behind him. Dakota gasped. She turned loose of his arm and stretched her fingertips to one wing, running her fingers along the rigid edge. That was all it took. Sebastian's orgasm was like fire racing through his body. He reached under her back and pulled his mate to his chest, then sank his fangs in the juncture of her neck and shoulder. Dakota hissed, and her core clamped down on his pulsing cock. She moaned and writhed against him as she found her own release.

Before he could retract his sharp teeth from her neck, Dakota returned the gesture, sinking her fangs into his skin. His dick hardened instantly as euphoria flooded his system. Dakota licked his neck, then rode his cock. He kept hold of her waist as she lifted and lowered herself with abandon. Dakota threaded her fingers through his hair and smashed their mouths together. The kiss was rough. There was no finesse, only need. As their lower bodies were joined, so were their lips. Breathing in as she breathed out, Sebastian took her essence into his lungs, and two souls became one.

Bas lowered Dakota to the bed and slowed their movements. Braced on his forearms, he stared into Dakota's brown eyes as he made love to her. His mate. His Queen. "*Mia Regina*," he whispered.

"My King," she whispered back. His beast howled with pleasure in his head, but Bas didn't mind. This moment was the single most important in their long lives. Bas changed the angle of his dick entering her core so he could rub against her clit. Dakota scratched her blunt nails down his chest, teasing his nipples. It surprised him when the sensation had his dick pulsing. Dakota found her release first this time, but Bas soon followed when her heat clenched his erection. With both their chests heaving from exertion, Sebastian lowered his mouth to hers and took her lips in a soft kiss.

They spent the rest of the night making love, talking, kissing, trying all the different kinds of jerky, and fucking. Bas never thought he would use that term when having sex with his mate, but there was no other way to describe how Dakota rode him as he lay on his back. Sebastian had the forethought

to set an alarm on his phone so they wouldn't sleep too late and miss their appointment with the realtor.

When the alarm woke him, Dakota was lying on her stomach, her long hair shielding her face. Bas pushed the strands aside so he could once again stare at the wonder beside him. Now he knew how his papa felt. Rafael had tried to explain how claiming one's mate changed a male. He didn't grasp the intensity until he experienced it for himself. *I'm the luckiest male in the world.*

"I'm the lucky one. Time is it?" Dakota rolled to her side, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. *"Ew, sorry."*

Sebastian didn't mind a little drool, not after all the bodily fluids they swapped during the night. Wait... Dakota wasn't speaking aloud. *"It's seven-thirty. I wanted to have plenty of time to shower and grab breakfast."* When Dakota turned her head his way, her eyes were smiling. *"Good morning."*

"It sure is, but if Anthony makes fun of me for walking funny, please smack him. I don't have the energy."

Bas laughed, nuzzling their noses. *"Deal."* He pressed soft kisses to her cheek and chin, not wanting to inflict his morning breath on her.

Dakota angled her head giving him better access to her neck. *"Why are we talking in our minds?"*

"Because it's cool? I didn't know if we'd be able to. Not all mates can."

"But you're my Alpha."

"No, I'm your mate. I'm King, but I can't speak soundlessly to anyone else." Bas tapped Dakota on the nose. *"Shower with me?"*

"Not yet." Dakota pushed back the covers and turned so she was facing his feet.

"What—?" Dakota sucked his morning wood into her mouth, and Bas let out a groan. He curled one arm behind his

head and closed his eyes. He smoothed his free hand up her thigh, then palming her ass as she bobbed up and down. “Gods, you’re good at that.” He didn’t want to think about how she’d come to be experienced at blow jobs, so he didn’t. Bas toyed with her backside, lowering his hand until his fingers met her slick passage. He bypassed it for her clit, thumbing it as she brought him closer to orgasm. Wanting her on his mouth, Bas rearranged his mate so she straddled his face. He ate her out, licked her clit, and kneaded her ass cheeks. He had never sixty-nined before, but it was now his third favorite position, only surpassing missionary by a margin. Dakota riding him was top of the list. Watching his mate catch her pleasure was thrilling.

Bas wanted Dakota to come first, so he doubled his efforts while using his Gargoyle’s willpower to keep his own orgasm at bay a little longer. It worked, but barely. Dakota moaned around his dick and writhed against his mouth when she found her release. The humming vibrated, ramping up his own need to come. He tapped his mate on the thigh. “I’m close, Love. If you don’t want to swallow, pull off.” It was Dakota’s turn to double-down, and soon, he was shooting his load down her throat. His mate didn’t stop until she’d wrung every drop from him. Then she flopped over on her back, her head at his feet.

Dakota reached out and ghosted her fingertips across his hip. “Now we can shower.”

It was eight forty-five by the time they made it downstairs. While Dakota was braiding her hair, Bas sent Anthony a text warning him to keep his mouth shut. There were some things he didn’t mind his cousin joking about, but Bas claiming Dakota wasn’t one of them. What Bas and his mate had was sacred. Lydia and Anthony were seated by the window, both had empty plates in front of them. Anthony lifted his coffee cup in salute but otherwise remained quiet. Bas and Dakota helped themselves to the buffet. Lydia had coffee poured for them from a small pot on the table. Bas guessed the big urns hotels put out on the sideboard didn’t make sense considering the four of them were the only customers in the dining room.

“Nice shirts,” Anthony teased as they took their seats.

Dakota tipped her cowboy hat. When she dug it out of her duffel earlier, she fussed about it being squished, but as far as Bas could tell, it looked fine. “Thank you. It was a great idea you had.” She had suggested wearing their matching flannel to tease Anthony, and Bas readily agreed. Dakota was sexy in hers with it tied at the waist. Sebastian paid attention to how she fixed her coffee. Instead of using the creamer on the table, she poured some of her milk in it. Bas took his with sugar only, and she watched him add two teaspoons of sweetener before taking a sip.

“So, Kody... May I call you Kody?” Anthony asked.

“Sure, if I can call you Tony,” she returned.

He waved his hand in the air. “Sure, sure. Most of my cousins do. So, Kody, can you cook?”

Dakota broke her bacon into pieces before scooping up a bit of eggs onto her spoon. “I can. Granted, it isn’t gourmet, but it’s edible.” She looked around before lowering her voice. “My mom did all the cooking at home since that’s an omega’s role.”

Lydia sat up straighter. “And you aren’t an omega?”

“Nope. I’m an alpha, which is rare in our world. Most females are born betas or omegas. At least in the packs I know of.”

“Nikita’s an alpha as well, but I thought that was due to her being a dire wolf,” Anthony said.

Dakota took another bite of egg and bacon. After she chewed and swallowed, she said, “We were told dire wolves were nothing more than a myth.”

“Probably because there are so few of them. The only ones Nikita knows of are her grandmother’s old pack down in New Mexico. According to her mother’s journal, they kept to themselves and didn’t want their pack members to mate with regular wolf shifters. They wanted to keep their bloodlines pure. It’s why her mother ran away,” Anthony explained.

“That sounds like your great-uncle, the one who ostracized your grandfather.”

“Ah, yes. Dear old Alistair. May he rot in the bowels of whatever hell the gods sent him to upon his demise.” Anthony raised his mug, and Bas tapped it with his own. Then Anthony did that thing where he drummed his fingers against the table while staring off across the room. “Kody, how many other single females in your pack are alphas?” he asked without looking at her.

“None, why?”

Lydia turned in her chair so she was facing Dakota. “Is it possible that’s why King was so hell-bent on you becoming Alpha Mate?”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Anthony added. “I’m not up on my wolf shifter biology, but wouldn’t two alphas make more alphas? Like two parents with brown eyes have a higher probability of having a child with brown eyes?”

Dakota’s fork clanked against the plate when she dropped it. “I never thought of that. I always figured he wanted me because I kept turning him down. Like he considered me a challenge.”

Anthony downed his coffee and reached for the pot for a refill. “We alpha males do love a good challenge, but I believe it was more than that. Do you know the percentage of each type of wolf in your pack?”

“Not off the top of my head. I don’t know every single member of our pack since there are a bunch of kids, but thinking about those I do know, the percentage of alphas is probably lower than the other two. Irregardless—” Sebastian narrowed his eyes at his mate, while Anthony choked on his coffee, and Lydia groaned. Dakota burst out laughing and waved her hand in front of her face as her eyes watered. Sebastian loved the sound. Loved the playful side of Dakota. “Oh, my goddess,” she managed to say between laughing fits. When she was finally able to speak, she said, “I know that isn’t a word. I promise I’m not some dumb hick from the sticks. *Regardless* of the reason, it’s now a mute point.”

This time, Anthony groaned, Lydia laughed, and Bas tickled her side. “Finish your breakfast, Sassy Pants. We need to leave in ten minutes so we aren’t late.” Gods, his mate was cute. And funny. And sexy. And gorgeous. And... Bas could go on thinking of her positive attributes. He was truly blessed to have this female as his Queen. He couldn’t wait to introduce her to his parents.

“I want to call my parents and tell them the good news,” he said, tossing his napkin on the table.

“Yeah, about that.” Anthony rose from the table and stretched his arms overhead, twisting his body left and right. When he dropped his arms, he said, “Tabby called last night to talk about a case, and I mentioned you found your mate. I have no doubt she got off the phone with me and called Mom who told Dad who called Rafael. Just a hunch.”

Bas didn’t doubt it either. “And we know your hunches are always right. All the more reason to call them.”

“I need to get another phone so I can call my mother. I’m sure she’s having a breakdown,” Dakota said.

Anthony shoved his hands in his front pockets. “I have one in my kit you can have. Unless King has someone like the Trio, your call will be untraceable.”

Bas stood and held out his hand for Dakota. “Come on. We’ll make those calls after we look at the lodge.”

Once outside, Bas helped Dakota into the Jeep while Anthony stopped by his vehicle and retrieved a burner for Dakota. Lydia climbed in the back, then Tony joined her. He passed the phone to Dakota. “It’s a basic phone, but let me know if you need help adding the numbers.”

Dakota took it with a smile. “Thank you.” She dug into her small purse and removed a piece of paper. “I’m adding Jolee’s number too so I can tell her the truth of what went down yesterday.”

Anthony leaned forward between the seats. “When you talk to her, tell her I said hello.”

Dakota turned and pushed against Anthony's forehead. "Sit back, you heathen. And no, I won't tell her that. Since it's obvious she isn't your fated mate, you can leave my best friend be."

"But—"

"No. You had your night of fun with her, but Jolee doesn't need you messing with her head."

"Fine," Anthony agreed, sitting back and crossing his arms over his chest.

Bas grinned at his cousin's pouty face. Tony didn't like being told no. The drive was scenic if short. Sebastian enjoyed the changing colors in the fall. He loved the air with its crisp cleanness. There was no pollution coming from thousands of cars speeding down Interstate 75. No horns blaring as drivers jockeyed for position as though they were in a race. Bas yearned for a slower pace, and after talking it over with Dakota between bouts of sex, she was agreeable. His mate liked living off the grid, so to speak. Said it suited her fine. For that, Sebastian was thankful. Bas was excited to show his mate the lodge. If she liked it, this would become their first endeavor as a couple.

Missy Perkins was waiting for them when Bas parked next to her sedan. When the four of them piled out of the Jeep, Missy smiled, raising a hand. Until she caught sight of Anthony, then her smile faltered briefly. She pressed a hand to her already neat hair. Tony had that effect on women. Even though he was an imposing male at six-three, Tony wowed females everywhere he went with his boy-next-door good looks and goofy grin.

"Missy, I'd like to introduce my fiancée, Dakota, and my cousins, Lydia and Anthony."

Missy shook everyone's hand. "It's a pleasure. And Sebastian, I'm thrilled you want to see the property again. Does this mean you've made your decision?" Missy walked to the front door and unlocked it for them. She stepped back, allowing them to enter first.

“In a manner. The other properties I visited are not suitable for what I have envisioned. Were you able to inquire into the adjacent land?”

“I was. I didn’t call you because I’m waiting on a call myself, but the owner, George Macon, is the same one who sold this property to the Wellises. Mr. Macon is in a nursing home, and his daughter, Connie, is his power of attorney. Before his mind began slipping, Mr. Macon added his three children’s names to the deed, and Connie is contacting her brothers to see if they’re agreeable to selling. As for the land being suitable for building, it is.”

Sebastian had done his homework on property values in the area. “After our tour, if Dakota and I agree this is something we want to move forward with, I’ll make an offer you can take to the Macons.”

“Sounds good. Since you know your way around, I’ll wait outside and give you some privacy.” Missy glanced at Anthony before heading outside.

Sebastian took his time explaining his vision as they walked through the building. He kept his eye on Dakota as she studied each area. He reached out with his shifter senses, trying to gauge her mood, and he found happiness.

“Are you going to hire a manager for each area?” she asked.

“Yes. I know nothing about running a hotel.”

They had toured all three floors and were back downstairs. “What made you want to do this, since you aren’t knowledgeable?” Dakota walked behind the bar and surveyed the equipment.

“I’ve stayed at a few places like this with my family over the years. I much prefer it over a fancy hotel, and as I was looking into areas where I could build a home, I noticed a lot of properties had fallen on hard times. I want where I live to be prosperous, and by reopening the lodge, I’ll be giving back to the community in the form of jobs as well as revenue from

tourists who will visit the town. Carlton has plenty of outdoor activities for the guests who stay here.”

“I like that.” Dakota pointed to the beer taps. “If you do buy this place, I would add several more taps and source locally brewed options. You can stock bottles of the popular domestics, but partnering with local breweries would be a win for both parties. The brewers could also tell your kitchen manager what beer pairs well with which types of food. I bet there are also vineyards and distilleries who’d be willing to partner with you as well.”

“Damn, Son. Not only is she pretty, but she’s smart too,” Anthony gushed sincerely, and Bas agreed wholeheartedly.

“Those are excellent points, but the question remains; is this an endeavor you’d enjoy undertaking? We’d live here during the remodel, unless you wouldn’t want to stay onsite, and then we could rent a place in town. We won’t need to be here twenty-four seven, but we would need to drop in and check on everything periodically.”

“I have no issues with staying here. And you know who I think would be amazing at helping with the interior and furniture decisions? Jolee. She has an eye for these things.”

Sebastian leaned his arms on the bar. “You think she’d leave the pack?”

“For an opportunity like this? Absolutely. She has a good head for business too, so maybe once the lodge is up and running, we could offer her a position as the hotel manager.”

“Why didn’t the owner of The Depot offer her a management position if she’d be good at it?”

“He did, but Jolee turned him down. That’s when he offered it to me. Vernon is getting on in years, and he was ready to turn the headache over to someone else.”

“If she didn’t want to manage The Depot, what makes you think she’d want to manage our lodge?”

Facing him, Dakota mimicked Sebastian’s pose. “Because this is an opportunity to get out of Panther. Not only

that, but Jolee is wicked good at organization. She's smart, has a great personality, and she'd get to see me all the time."

Bas reached across the bar and grabbed his mate's hands. "And who wouldn't want to be around you? Does this mean you think we should make an offer and open ourselves a lodge?"

"Why, yes, Mr. Stone. It does. Now we just have to figure out how to get Jolee away from Panther without King following."

Sebastian was thrilled his mate wanted to move forward with this project, but he had a feeling getting her best friend to join them wasn't going to be easy. *Irregardless*, Bas thought, chuckling to himself, he was willing to do whatever it took to make it happen. He was ready for Kingston Bridgewater.

Chapter 17

DAKOTA HAD GONE behind the bar for a reason other than checking the equipment. Her mate was too enticing, so she put a little space between them before she embarrassed him in front of Anthony and Lydia. “Before you make an offer, I want to take one more look at the attic.”

“Sure.” Bas walked to the end of the bar and held out his hand. When Dakota met him, he said to his cousins, “We’ll be right back.” They made their way to the third floor via the stairway. There was an elevator, but Bas mentioned getting it checked before trusting it to run properly. When they reached the attic, Bas stopped. “What did you want to see?”

“This.” Dakota jumped into Sebastian’s arms, knowing he would catch her. She was right, and with his hands under her butt, she wrapped her arms and legs around him and kissed him. She didn’t know if it was the mate bond or all the sex they had the night before, but Dakota’s body ached for his. They couldn’t get naked with the others downstairs, but she could at least get a taste. The kiss was frantic, and Bas crossed a few steps to the wall, pressing Dakota’s back against it. Her hat fell to the floor, but she didn’t care. All she cared about in that moment was getting more of her mate. Goddess, she had a mate!

“Fuck, *Amore Mio*, I wish we were alone,” he husked into her ear. Dakota bared her neck willingly. Sebastian was her Alpha. Her King. Bas nipped at her skin with sharp teeth, and she wanted nothing more than for him to bite her again. “When this place is ours, we’ll christen every room.”

“Promise?” Dakota writhed against him.

“Promise.” Bas placed her on her feet and took a step back. “The sooner we tell the realtor we want to make an offer, the sooner we can get back to the hotel.”

“Fuck, fine,” Dakota grouched as she bent over to pick up her hat. “Is it always going to be like this? I want you all the time.”

“Probably. My parents have been together almost thirty years, and they still act like they can’t get enough of one another. Speaking of the folks, once I call and tell them I found you, they’re going to want to meet you.”

“I’m good with that. I’d like to see New York. So, priorities. First, you make an offer. Second, we call your parents and Jolee. Third, we figure out how to get Jolee here without King finding out.”

Sebastian laced their fingers together and tugged her toward the stairs. Lowering his voice, he said, “I thought for certain sex would be number two on your list.”

Dakota settled the cowboy hat on her head. “Nope, because when we get naked, I plan on keeping you that way for hours.”

Sebastian chuckled. “I do love the way your mind works.”

Meeting the others outside, Sebastian checked number one off their list. He offered an ungodly amount of money for the lodge contingent on the inspection. Bas had told Dakota he was loaded. She was too now that they were mated. She didn’t know how to feel about that. Having lived in a pack her whole life, part of everyone’s wages went to the Alpha. In the Gargoyle world, they lived as humans did, each earning their own way while keeping what they made. Maybe if King considered hiring a financial advisor, the pack wouldn’t be as broke as they were.

Missy shook their hands after promising to call as soon as she talked to the seller. When they were loaded in the Jeep, Anthony and Lydia offered their congratulations. Anthony and Sebastian talked about first steps in getting the renovations started.

“Once the inspection is completed, I’ll look over their punch list of items that require immediate attention. Then I’ll

get started on the drawings of areas I want redone. While I'm doing that, I'll send in a plumber to get water to the attic. Since Dakota thinks we should offer additional types of beer, we'll have to find someone who is experienced in bar remodels. I want to get the attic buildout complete first since it's going to be the most work. The first and second floors will be easier."

"Hey, pull over up there and let me out," Lydia said. "I want to walk around the town a bit."

"I'll go with you. I don't want you alone until things with Kingston have been settled," Anthony offered.

"Thanks, Tony."

Sebastian pulled to the curb in front of some cute looking shops, and his cousins piled out of the Jeep.

"We'll walk back to the hotel later," Lydia said.

"Alone at last," Dakota sighed as soon as the back doors were shut. It had only been a couple hours since they left the hotel room, but still. She wanted to get her mate naked. Finish what she tried to start in the attic.

Sebastian grinned at her. "I'm going to call my parents now because if I don't, I have a feeling it'll be a while before I get a chance." He hit the button on his steering wheel and informed the mechanical voice to "Call Mom."

"Why not your dad?" Dakota asked as it rang through the speakers.

"They're joined at the hip, so it doesn't matter."

A sweet-sounding female answered, "Hello, My King. Your papa's here with me, and we heard the great news."

"Hi, Momma. I have Dakota with me."

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Stone."

"Hello, Dakota," Kaya said. "Please call us Rafael and Kaya. I can't tell you how happy we are that Bas found you."

Dakota smiled at Sebastian. "I'm pretty stoked about it myself."

Sebastian reached over and grabbed her hand. “Papa, did Gregor explain what’s going on?”

“He did, Son. If you need me to come kick some wolf ass, you just say the word. It’s been a minute since I’ve seen any action.” Kaya snickered in the background, and Dakota slapped her hand over her mouth to cover her laugh. “Not *that* type of action, *Bellezza*.”

“That’s where you get it from,” Dakota whispered.

“Where he gets what from?” Rafael asked. Dakota forgot about his Gargoyle hearing.

“The Italian, Papa. And if you wanted more action, you should have kept the crown. I appreciate the offer, but I’m hopeful once Knox Millard begins calling the other Alphas and explains what really happened, we won’t have any trouble with those we seek out for the council. As for Kingston, I can handle him. Dakota and I want to come for a visit. I put in an offer on a lodge in Carlton, and soon, Dakota and I will be the new owners. We want to come to New York before renovations begin.”

“We’d love that. Will it just be the two of you, or will the twins be tagging along? I know Tessa would love to see them.”

Sebastian parked in the lot at the hotel and let the Jeep idle. “I’ll ask, but you know they’re busy with their caseloads. Anyway, we wanted to call even though you already knew about us. We’ve got work to do, so I’m going to let you get back to whatever it was you were doing.”

“We appreciate the call, Bas. We love you both,” Rafael said.

“Love you too. Talk soon.” Sebastian disconnected.

“Wow, they sound amazing.” Dakota’s father wasn’t big on demonstrating affection, yet here was Sebastian’s dad, the former King, giving it freely to her even though they’d never met.

“They’re awesome.” Bas shut the engine off and pulled the parking brake. Dakota waited for him to come around and

open her door.

As he was closing the door behind him, Dakota gestured to the Jeep. “Is this your everyday vehicle and you have a Ferrari at home in the garage?”

“No, but I do have an Audi. It’s sporty and fast but also a four-door. It’s the only thing I’ve ever splurged on. Why? Do you want a Ferrari?”

“Well, you did say you’re loaded,” Dakota teased.

“No, I said *we’re* loaded. If I gave you free rein with our money, what would you buy?”

Dakota toyed with the end of one of her braids. “It wouldn’t be a two-hundred-thousand-dollar car. There are so many struggling just to make ends meet. Kids are going hungry, and people are living on the streets. I know I can’t save them all, but I’d like to try and help as many as I can. Living in a pack in a small community wasn’t easy, but it wasn’t hard either. It’s what we were used to. You saw Panther. The Depot is a shithole, but it was ours. The kids didn’t go hungry, and they always had clothes and a place to sleep. That’s because pack takes care of its own. But I’ve seen the statistics. You’d think that a nation like ours would do better. I guess what they say about the rich getting richer is true. Why have billions of dollars and not spend it to help the less fortunate? I’m sure there are some who do help, but it’s not enough.”

Sebastian pulled Dakota into his arms. “And this is why you’ll make a wonderful Queen. Because you care. Maybe while we’re renovating the lodge, you can contact the schools and see if there are kids in need. I know we can’t save them all, but it’s a start.”

“I love that idea.”

Sebastian kissed her softly, then turned them so they could head inside the hotel. The door to their room hadn’t fully shut before they were stripping out of their clothes. They spent the next couple of hours getting each other off with their hands, mouths, and bodies. Dakota was sprawled on her back

after her last orgasm. Bas climbed from between her legs and lay on his side next to her. He propped his head on one hand and the other was circling her navel.

“As much as I don’t want to move, I really need to call my mom and Jolee.”

“Stay here. I’ll get your phone.” Bas rolled off the bed. Dakota admired his long legs and toned butt as he walked away. When he came back, she gazed at his defined abs. Dakota was one lucky-ass female. Bas climbed back on the bed, returning to the same position he had been in.

She took the burner phone and pulled up the two contacts she’d added. Dakota texted Jolee, knowing her best friend wouldn’t answer an unknown number. She didn’t have to wait long for the phone to ring.

“Hey, Jo.”

“Dakota Diana Young! Are you okay? Did Sebastian Stone really kidnap you? Who sent Sloane flying through the window? Goddess, I wish I’d seen that. What in the hell is going on?”

“Breathe, Jo. That’s why I’m calling. No, I wasn’t kidnapped. Sebastian saved me from Phoenix. And before I tell you what happened, you need to know Bas is the boy from Utah, and I’m his fated mate.”

“No frickin’ way. Kody, that’s...”

“It’s astonishing is what it is. He’s amazing. We were at the meeting in King’s suite and things got out of hand. Sebastian was talking about the council. King said he couldn’t participate because he couldn’t travel, and when Sebastian said he wanted to talk to me about being on it, King lost his shit. Words were said, claws came out, and King used his Alpha voice on me. When the wings came out, I ran.”

“I heard about the wings. So they really are Gargoyles? I knew Anthony was something other, I just didn’t know what.”

“Yes. As for Sloane, that was Anthony’s doing. Sloane had their cousin, Lydia, by the throat, and she stabbed him with a knife. When he turned loose, Anthony punched him,

then kicked him, sending him flying. I missed all the action too, having already run from the room. As soon as I was outside, I shifted and took off. Of course my dickhead brother chased after me, but Sebastian grabbed me and flew me to safety.”

“He flew you? With his wings? Wow. That must have been scary.”

“Actually, it was fun. He took me to my cabin where I packed a bag, and we met up with his cousins, and then we got the hell out of Panther. Jo, King is calling other Alphas, telling them lies. I’m not asking you to go against King, but I wanted you to know the truth. Also, I have a proposition for you. Bas and I are buying a lodge, and we think you’d make a wonderful addition, helping with the interior design, then possibly taking over as manager.”

“Kody, slow your roll, girl. You’ve been gone less than twenty-four hours, and you’re already playing house?”

“Playing lodge is more like it,” Dakota joked. “Did you miss the part where I said I’m Sebastian’s fated mate? That’s why I never could let the thought of him go. It was as though my Wolf knew somehow I was destined to be with him. We’re mated, Jo. Seal-the-deal bites and everything.”

“I’m happy for you. Truly, and if you could find some way to get me out of here without starting a war, I’d do it in a heartbeat, but I won’t ask you to do anything that’ll bring you back here. I take it you haven’t talked to your mom?”

“No, I was going to call her next. Not that it’ll do any good, but I want her to know I’m okay.”

“Kody, your dad’s not going to let her answer the phone. When I say Arthur’s angry, I mean he’s next level pissed and heading up a posse to come after you. He’s just waiting on you to call Diana so he can figure out where you are. Things here are nuts. King is telling the whole pack lies about what went down. I’m sure he demanded those who witnessed everything to keep their mouths shut since no one is disputing him. He’s saying Sebastian challenged him, then backed out. Sloane has

vowed to get revenge on Anthony, and now I know why. Speaking of, has he asked about me?”

Dakota rolled her eyes. “He said to tell you hello, but Jo, you need to let that go. Gargoyles have fated mates, and since you aren’t Tony’s, whatever you’re thinking isn’t going to happen.”

“You don’t know what I’m thinking. Why can’t I have a little fun with him until he finds his mate?”

Dakota placed her free arm over her eyes. “Would you want that? To knock boots with a male when you know it’s not going to lead anywhere?”

“It’ll lead to amazing sex. I already told you his tongue —”

“I don’t need another visual, Jo. But you do you, Boo. If you want no-strings-attached sex, then go for it.”

“Back to your— Shit, I gotta go.” The line went dead, and Dakota stared at the phone.

“Damn it. I hope she’s okay.”

Sebastian took the phone from her and placed it on the nightstand. He then rolled Dakota so she was on top of him. Dakota took advantage of the position and straddled his waist.

Bas reached up and tugged both braids. “I think we need to form a plan and go on the offensive. I didn’t want it to come to that, but I can go back, challenge King in front of the pack, and take him down. Not kill him, but make him submit.”

Dakota ran her fingers through Bas’s chest hair. “I’m not sure that’ll work. Wolves fight to the death when challenged.”

“Fuck. I don’t want to kill him.”

“Let me call my dad. After he gets finished yelling, I’ll try to get him to see reason.”

“You think it’ll work?”

“Nope, but I have to try. At least it might calm his ass down.” Dakota leaned over and snagged the burner from the nightstand. Since she didn’t have her father’s number

programmed, she called her mom's phone. It only rang once before her father answered.

"Dakota? Is that you?"

"Yes, and before you start—"

"Where the fuck are you? Are you okay? Goddess, your mother's worried herself sick."

"I'm fine. I wasn't kidnapped. As a matter of fact, Sebastian saved me from Phoenix. It's him you should be yelling at."

"Your brother was doing his job. Now, where are you? I'll come get you and—"

"No, what you'll do is listen to me for once in your life. Sebastian is my mate. He and—"

"Kingston is your mate. You need to accept that and—"

"Shut the fuck up!" Dakota took a deep breath. Her father started cussing, and Dakota hung up on him. She waited a full minute before calling back. "Don't say a word, or I'll hang up and you'll never hear from me again. Got it? Now listen without interrupting. I know the lies King has been telling. What he didn't tell you is that Sebastian and his cousins are Gargoyles. Gargoyles have fated mates, and I am Sebastian's. We've already shared bites, so that's that. You'll have to get over it, as will King. Sebastian knew I was his mate as soon as he and I were in the same room. He is also the boy from Utah. He survived Phoenix's attack, and the goddess led him to Panther. To me. We were discussing the shifter council, and it got out of hand. Sebastian didn't challenge King to overthrow him as Alpha of the pack. It was to get King to let me go. Sebastian told the other wolves that it wasn't a disgrace for King to back down knowing the Gargoyles could take them all out, not just King. King tossed Sebastian and his cousins out of the pack house. Sebastian saved me from Phoenix, we left town, and now Bas and I are mated. End of story."

"May I speak now?"

"Only if you aren't demanding my return because that's never going to happen."

“No matter the reason Stone did it, a challenge was made, Kody. You know what that means to an Alpha wolf.”

“I do, but do you want Kingston dead? Because if he demands Sebastian fulfill the challenge, King will die.”

“You’ve disappointed me, Dakota. You were going to be the one to save our pack, and now you’re nothing but a traitor, siding with this asshole.”

“Bas isn’t the asshole. He’s King of *all* the Gargoyles. Think about that for a second. Consider putting all wolfpack Alphas in a ring and seeing who came out the ultimate victor between them all. That’s what you have with my Sebastian.”

“Your head has been filled with lies.”

“Ask Sloane who kicked his ass through a window. Ask him who put his claws around a female’s neck and threatened her. If that’s the type of wolves you want to bare your neck to, be my guest. I’d rather be considered a traitor than to align myself with bastards who would threaten a female.”

“Since you won’t tell me where you are, well, consider yourself warned.”

“I knew talking to you would be pointless, but I had to try. I know you won’t tell Mom I’m okay because you never wanted us to be happy. But if you care about your mate at all, at least give her that.” Dakota disconnected, threw the phone across the room, and collapsed against Sebastian’s chest.

Bas held her tightly. “I’m sorry, *Cucciolina*, but now I know what I have to do.”

Dakota turned her head so her face was against Sebastian’s neck. “Yeah? What’s that?”

Sebastian took a deep breath. “I have to confront King.”

Chapter 18

SEBASTIAN WAITED FOR Dakota to argue, but she didn't. Instead, she snuggled deeper into his embrace. He reached out to check her mood and found contentment mixed with anger. Maybe that was his own ire coming through the bond because Bas wanted to head to Panther and rip Arthur Young a new one. How dare he call Dakota a traitor? Accuse her of turning her back on the pack? And what was the deal with Dakota being the one to save their pack? Save them from what?

“*Cucciolina*, what did Arthur mean about you saving the pack?”

“Fuck if I know, unless Tony was onto something with two alphas creating more alphas.” Dakota scooted down and crossed her arms over Bas's chest, resting her chin there. Her dark eyes held a fire he'd only seen once, and that was right after he saved her from her brother. “And even if that's the case, if the pack is in some kind of trouble, adding alpha pups isn't going to make the pack stronger until those kids are grown. None of this makes sense.”

“I agree. What do you think about what I said? About confronting King?”

“I think before you do that, maybe talk to Alpha Millard and see if he's making headway with other packs. Right now, it's his word against King's, but Knox is older and probably better respected. Getting other Alphas onboard with the council is your ultimate goal, right?” Bas nodded, palming Dakota's head. “If you confront King now and word gets out you defeated him, I believe that'll make others hesitant about talking to you. If we weren't worried about humans, we could televise the meeting. Have you speak to him beforehand, explaining where the first meeting went awry and that you weren't challenging him but asking him to take a step back.”

Bas pulled Dakota up his chest and kissed her soundly. “You’re brilliant.”

“I am? I mean, yeah. I’m a genius,” Dakota joked, her mouth tilting at one side. Bas poked her ribs to turn the almost grin into a full-blown smile. It worked. Too well. Dakota giggled while wiggling off the bed, landing with a thud. “I gotta pee. Hang on.”

Sebastian relaxed against the pillow. Behind the closed bathroom door, Dakota muttered, “I’m gross.” Sebastian chuckled, knowing they were both in need of a shower. The sheets needed changing as they reeked of sex, as did the room. He got up and padded to the window to see if it would open. It wouldn’t, so he cranked the AC down a few degrees. He didn’t know if that would help, but it couldn’t hurt. When the toilet flushed, he met Dakota as she opened the door.

“Let’s shower.”

“Good idea.” Dakota reached into the tub and turned the knob. While the water was heating, she went to her toiletry bag and pulled out a huge clip. She secured her braids to the top of her head so her hair wouldn’t get wet.

Once they were both in the enclosure, Bas soaped up a washcloth and ran it over her body. “Speaking of good ideas, we can record the next meeting. I will go on record stating what happened in the first meeting and why I’m returning to Panther. To talk. If it then comes down to a fight, everyone who watches the recording will know I tried my best to talk King down.” While he was washing her, Dakota began stroking his cock.

“Oh. Yeah, that might work. But we’re going to need to call in reinforcements. I have no doubt you can take King, but you, me, and your cousins against a hundred wolves is not good odds.”

Sebastian brushed the cloth across her breasts. “You’d fight against your pack?”

Dakota’s eyes flashed amber. “You are my pack now.”

Bas dropped the cloth, and bathing was forgotten as he lifted Dakota against the shower tiles and lowered her onto his aching cock. Before, sex had been nothing more than slaking a need. Now it was a different type of need. An ache to be one with his mate. She rode him until they both found their release, and after placing her on her feet, Bas kissed her tenderly. They finished bathing, and as they were drying off, he said, "I have thousands of Goyles I can call on, but it won't take that many to defend against the pack. I don't want it to come to an all-out war. I only want to show who's stronger. If I have to fight King, I will, but I want my Clan there to ensure no one interferes. Let's get dressed and see where Tony and Lydia are so we can come up with a plan."

Ten minutes later, they headed out on foot. Sebastian liked the fact that Dakota didn't wear a lot of makeup. She didn't need it. His mate was stunning with her natural beauty. He also appreciated how she dressed. With her flannel shirt tied around her waist, her ass-hugging jeans over worn cowboy boots, and the straw cowboy hat topping her braids, Dakota was the girl next door of his dreams. He had no doubt that whenever they attended a formal event, his mate would be equally exquisite in a ball gown and heels.

When Bas texted to see where his cousins were, Lydia responded that they were still milling around, waiting for Bas and Dakota to come up for air. It didn't take long to reach the diner where Tony wanted to meet for a late lunch. Instead of sitting inside, Lydia suggested getting their food to go and eating at the small park she'd found earlier, giving them privacy to talk. The males carried their drinks, while the females carried their bagged meals. The park was empty, but that wasn't surprising considering the time of year. Being shifters, they weren't susceptible to the cooler temperatures. Gathering around a concrete picnic table, they unpacked their lunch.

"Dakota called Jolee and got a feel for the temperature back in Panther. It wasn't good. We already knew King was spreading lies, but those in his pack who witnessed what went down at the meeting haven't set the record straight. Jolee said Dakota's father was rounding up a posse to come after Dakota,

thinking she would call her mother and he would somehow figure out where she was.”

Dakota dumped several packets of ketchup on the sandwich wrapper. “I called Mom, but good old Arthur answered. It wasn’t pleasant. He called me a traitor and a disappointment. He mentioned how I was supposed to save the pack somehow by mating with King. At first, I thought you might be onto something with the two alphas mating, Tony, but that doesn’t make sense. If it were up to more alphas being born into the pack to save it, those pups would only add numbers, not strength. At least not until they hit puberty and could fight.”

Sebastian picked his sandwich up, but placed it down without taking a bite. “I think I need to confront Kingston.”

“Hell, yeah!” Tony pumped a fist in the air, spewing his chewed sandwich onto the table.

“Say it, don’t spray it, Goober,” Lydia chided, slapping Tony on the arm.

“Sorry, but that gets my blood pumping.” He used a napkin to wipe the table, then wadded it up and set it aside.

Dakota pointed a fry at him. “Why? You aren’t going to be the one fighting.” She then dragged it through the ketchup and stuck the whole thing in her mouth.

Sebastian’s dick twinged as he remembered what her luscious mouth had done to him earlier. He didn’t need to get an erection sitting at the table with his cousins. *Focus, damnit.* “She’s right. I’ll need you and several others of our Clan backing me up, making sure the wolves don’t jump in to help King.”

“Well, damn, Son, that’s no fun.” Tony winked at Bas before taking another bite of his Reuben.

“Then again, Sloane will want his pound of flesh, so you might get your wish after Bas takes care of King,” Dakota added.

Tony set his sandwich down and rubbed his hands together, cackling. If Bas didn’t know his cousin, he would

think the male unhinged. Tony scooped up fallen sauerkraut with a chip, and as he chewed, he looked over Sebastian's shoulder. Bas gave him time to formulate whatever thought was floating in his mischievous brain.

Lydia pulled out her phone and placed it on the table. "How many Goyles are you thinking?"

Bas turned to Dakota. "How many fighters does the pack have?"

"As far as those who are adult alphas and betas? Roughly one hundred? But anyone King calls on would have to participate."

"Do you think he'd do that? Ask omegas and children to fight?"

Dakota sighed. "No. He's an ass to me, but he's not a bad Alpha."

Tony took a sip of soda before chiming in. "Kody, how many of those in the one hundred are female?"

"Off the top of my head, I'd say ten."

"If they're shifted, is there a way to tell them from the males?" Bas asked.

"Yes. They're a lot smaller."

"Okay, so four of our females and twenty males to be on the safe side. Lydia, make sure all the females know to wear those fancy bracelets." Anthony pointed to their cousin's arm.

Dakota leaned forward, staring at Lydia's arm. "What's special about those?"

Lydia looked around as did Bas, knowing what Lydia was going to do. He didn't see anyone in the area. Lydia whispered as she angled her arm to the side, and the bracelet became a small dagger.

"What in the hocus pocus is that?"

Lydia grinned. "Exactly that – magic. Tony's aunt, Lily, along with her twin daughters are witches. They spelled the bracelets to become whatever weapon is needed." Lydia shook

her wrist, whispering once again, and the dagger went back to being jewelry. “If I need a sword, all I have to do is say the words. If I want a pair of sai, I can have those as well, although I’m not as proficient with them.”

“What are sai?” Dakota asked. Lydia described the weapons while pulling up a photo on her phone. Dakota oohed upon seeing the blades and asked Sebastian, “Can I get some of those?”

“Do you know how to use them?”

“Sure, you just slip them over your hands, and voilà!”

Bas knocked his shoulder against his mate’s, grinning. “You’re ridiculous.”

“I am, but you lo... uh, like me anyway. And no, I don’t know how to use them, but I can learn, right?”

Sebastian wanted to tell Dakota he did love her but not in front of his cousins. “You can. Zuri would probably be the best teacher for you.”

“I concur,” Lydia added. “But Z is off in New York right now.”

“Again?” Anthony asked.

“She’s working on a showing for Connor,” Lydia explained. Zuri, or Z as the younger generation called the female, was Connor’s assistant for his art. The world knew the artist as Rico Di, but to the Clan, Connor was a brilliant doctor and scientist, having learned at the feet of his grandfather, Jonas Montague.

“When we get this mess with Kingston straightened out, Dakota and I are going to visit my parents. Maybe we can catch Z while we’re there. But speaking of magic, since when did you learn how to set your blades on fire?”

Lydia bit her lip at Sebastian’s question. “About a year ago. I was visiting the twins, and we were talking about elemental magic. Luna said she could see both fire and water in my aura, which is odd since people who are attuned to the elements are usually only gifted with one.”

“That’s amazing,” Tony said. “I wonder if all of us will be blessed with special abilities, or if you, Bas, and Connor are the only ones?”

Dakota angled her head, smiling at Bas. “What’s your gift?”

Bas sighed. “I wouldn’t call mine a gift, exactly, but there have been a few times I’ve seen snippets in my dreams that later came true. Unlike Connor’s visions, mine aren’t a big deal.”

“He’s being modest,” Lydia countered. “Before he was born, Bas spoke to both his parents and warned them something bad was going to happen.”

Sebastian frowned at his cousin. “How the hell do you know about that?”

Lydia shrugged. “Our parents talk.” She tapped out a message on her phone. “I’m asking Lilly to create some bracelets for Kody.” She glanced up. “Do you want silver or gold?”

“Silver please.” Dakota wiggled on the bench, and Sebastian could feel the excitement radiating from his mate. Knowing she preferred silver over gold was good information to have for future purchases.

“Got it. Now, Bas, who do you want to call on to help?” Lydia asked, bypassing the conversation of his gift.

They spent the next hour discussing which Clan members they wanted when they went back to Panther. Lydia was a given for the females. Anthony said if he didn’t choose his twin, there would be hell to pay, so he stepped away to call and see where Tabby was with her current case.

“Harlow would be amazing,” Lydia suggested. “I’ll see how busy she is with H3, and if she can swing it, I’ll ask her to help.” Harlow, having Gargoyle and Gryphon parents, was a hybrid of the two, and one of the toughest of all their females.

Dakota placed her hand on Bas’s arm, getting his attention. “What do you think about asking your papa? He did offer.”

Before Bas could answer, Anthony retook his seat at the table. “Tabby’s in, and she suggested calling Mom. I agree with Kody. Let’s ask Rafe and my parents.”

Lydia agreed. “And if Harlow agrees, you know Lucy and Tamian will want in on the action.”

“What about the twins?” Harlow’s siblings were fourteen, so Bas wasn’t sure Lucy would want to leave them behind.

“I’m sure one of Lucy’s uncles or her grandmother would watch them for a few days.” Lydia typed out another message on her phone. A few seconds later, it rang.

“Harlow, I’m putting you on speaker,” Lydia said.

“Carleigh and Nikita have things covered with H3, so I’m in. My parents and the twins are in Italy right now. Dad’s doing King things, but you should totally ask Major and Uncle Mav.” Harlow’s cousin and uncle, Major and Maveryck, were Gryphons and members of The Hounds of Zeus MC. Sebastian hadn’t considered asking anyone other than Goyles, but it wouldn’t hurt to have the other species show their support.

“You know we have to ask Frey. His size alone will intimidate the fuck outta some wolves,” Anthony added. He wasn’t wrong. Their uncle was the one who trained them in both hand-to-hand combat and with a myriad of weapons.

They continued adding names, more than they needed in case some weren’t available. When the list was compiled, Harlow agreed to set up a video conference so Bas could ask them face-to-face after explaining what was going on. She scheduled the call for the next day.

“Thanks, Harlow. If we don’t hear back from you, we’ll talk to you tomorrow at noon,” Bas said.

“You’re welcome, My King. Dakota, welcome to the Clan. I can’t wait to officially meet you.”

“Same here,” Dakota responded.

“Bye, everyone.” With that, Harlow disconnected.

“Man, this is gonna be great,” Anthony gushed. “I know we are going as backup, but if it does come down to a fight

between us and them, we're gonna wipe the dirt with these scumbags. No offense, Kody."

"None taken. As I told Bas, you all are my pack now. If need be, I'll fight them too."

Anthony fisted his heart and inclined his head. "I know you're capable, Kody, but on my honor, I'll stand between you and every godsdamned wolf from here to China. You are our Queen."

Sebastian had never been more proud of his cousin than in that moment. Dakota reached across the table and patted Tony's hand. "I appreciate that, but as Queen, I won't hide behind wings if my Clan needs me." At his mate's declaration, Sebastian blinked hard to keep the tears at bay. Gods, she was fierce.

Lydia smiled at Bas, and seeing he probably needed a minute, she tapped the table. "Now that we have our list, we need to talk logistics."

Bas cleared his throat. "I want this over with as soon as possible. Everyone on our list is on this side of the country, so they should be able to get here quickly. We'll send the jets to Atlanta and New York. For those not in those areas, I'll charter planes for them so they can bring their swords. I'm praying we won't need weapons, but having our Clan stride onto pack land with Claymores strapped to their back will send a message."

"What happens if the video gets out and humans see it?" Dakota asked.

"That's the great thing about having brilliant Clan members. Carleigh can swap out the audio with something she creates to make it sound like an action movie."

"Do you know what would be stellar? Prosthetics," Anthony said. "What if everyone wore the same mask? Wouldn't that freak them the fuck out?"

"Prosthetics?" Dakota asked.

"We have the capability of creating masks to change our appearance, making us appear older or younger or to look like

someone else. We can also create voice manipulators to mimic whoever we're pretending to be."

Lydia slapped the table. "Oh, my gods. My mom did that when she was off trying to rescue her parents in Egypt. It was before she and my dad had mated. Mom took several disguises with her, and she had this one mask that was an old woman. Dad followed her to Egypt, but he couldn't find her because she was in disguise. He ran across her while she was dressed as 'Beatrice,' and she jumped in his arms and kissed him. I'll have to get them to reenact it for you, Kody. It's hilarious."

"I can't wait to meet all your parents. They sound wonderful," Dakota responded wistfully.

Bas placed his hand on her nape and gave it a gentle squeeze. "They really are. I would say it's a shifter trait, but I now know it isn't. I'm not sure why wolf parents aren't like ours, but mine have already claimed you, so you'll get all the love you've missed out on."

Dakota nodded as she closed her eyes. Sebastian vowed to also show his mate all the love in the world. "How about we walk around town for a bit? I'd like to see more of where we're likely calling home for the next few years."

Dakota let out a sigh as she wiped a stray tear. "Sounds good."

"We found the cutest little shop that sells vintage items. Let's start there," Lydia suggested, and that's what they did. For the next couple of hours, the four of them visited most of the businesses to see what the town had to offer. Bas was pleasantly surprised. He spoke to the owners or managers, informing them of his intentions with the lodge, and he made some good contacts. While the lodge would have its own restaurant, there were a few specialty places like the bakery who he could co-op with.

When they passed by Walker's Outfitters, Anthony talked them into going ziplining. He and Bas could fly with their Goyle wings, but this was flying of a different kind.

Bas greeted the owner when they entered the store. “Hey, Dustin. I thought you might like to know that Dakota and I put an offer on the lodge.”

Dustin was grinning when he said, “I know. Word around here travels fast. My cousin Angela over at Maddio’s heard the good news from her best friend who owns the bakery, and she called me earlier. You’ve made quite the stir today.”

“I figured as much when several store owners picked up their phones before we were out the door. I hope everyone is as excited as we are.”

“We most definitely are. Don’t be surprised when folks stop you on the street and introduce themselves.”

Sebastian had already encountered a few of the town members saying hello, and that boded well for him and Dakota. It was important to him that they were a welcome addition to Carlton. “Is it too late to go ziplining?”

“Nah. There are lights set up, and we take customers until eight.”

“Excellent. Sign us up then.”

As they filled out the paperwork, Dustin said, “Here’s the address for the course. It’s about five miles out. If you don’t have your vehicle, I can call my brother to drive you over.”

“We can drive, but thanks.” Bas took the receipt as well as the paper with the address. They walked the few blocks back to the hotel and hopped in the Jeep. After making the short drive, they were met by a younger version of Dustin.

“I’m Cole, and I’ll be your flight attendant,” he joked. They introduced themselves as they got strapped into their harnesses. Cole led them up the stairs to the platforms. Anthony offered to go first, but the females pushed him out of the way.

“Queens first,” Lydia gestured softly, and Dakota took her up on the offer. His mate let out a loud woohoo as she left the platform. Dakota leaned back, holding on with one hand and using the other to keep her hat from flying off.

“She’s badass,” Anthony muttered, and Sebastian agreed wholeheartedly. The gods had blessed him with a mate who was strong as well as kindhearted.

Lydia went next, whooping loudly, then it was Bas’s turn. He had never ziplined before, but he saw the appeal as he was riding through the air. It was so much fun that they took several turns before calling it a day. They thanked Cole, then piled into the Jeep.

“That was so much fun. Tomorrow after the call, do you think we can go out on four-wheelers?” Dakota asked.

“Anything you want, *Amore Mio*.” Sebastian meant it. He would give his mate anything her heart desired.

They were pulling into the parking lot of the hotel when Sebastian’s phone rang. Seeing it was Grace, he didn’t want Dakota to be jealous, so he said, “This is my assistant.” Pushing the Bluetooth button on the steering wheel, he answered, “Grace, is everything okay?”

“Sebastian, I’m sorry. I think I screwed up.”

“Tell me what happened.” Bas parked the Jeep and pulled the emergency brake.

“A detective with the Atlanta Police Department showed up asking for you. I told him you were in West Virginia looking at property.”

“Did he mention why he was looking for me?”

Grace sniffled. “Yes. He said he has a warrant for your arrest, and if I was lying about your whereabouts, I would be detained for obstruction. What’s going on?”

Dakota cursed under her breath, and Bas reached for her hand. He was also livid, but he had to remain calm, at least until he got off the call. “First off, you did nothing wrong. Second, and this is a long story, but the short of it is I met my mate. Her pack refused to let her go, so I helped her escape. They probably notified the police that I kidnapped her. Was Travis in the office when the detective stopped by?”

“No. He and Brynna flew out for Norway this morning. I came in to finish a proposal. What if the detective comes back?”

“Go home, and stay there until this is resolved. Better yet, call Dane and give him a heads-up. Your dad might not be chief any longer, but he can protect you. As a matter of fact, have him come get you.”

“I will. Are you safe?”

“I am. I have Anthony and Lydia with me, as well as Dakota. Between the four of us, we can handle whatever’s thrown our way.” Sebastian said goodbye, then blew out a breath.

“I guess we know what your father meant when he said you’d been warned.”

“I will gut him,” Dakota seethed.

“Don’t worry, *Cucciolina*, he’ll get what’s coming to him,” Bas promised.

Chapter 19

AFTER THE CALL with Grace, they retreated to their room where Sebastian got on the phone with the Trio, and he also called his attorney. Anthony and Lydia sat quietly, and Dakota? She paced the living area of the suite while plotting both her father's and King's deaths. How fucking dare they call the cops on Sebastian?

Sebastian hung up, but his phone pinged with another notification. Dakota stopped pacing, hoping it was good news.

"The video conference is a go with everyone on the list. I'll introduce you as my mate and Queen before I get to the reason for the call."

"I need to go shopping. I can't greet the Clan wearing a flannel shirt, and that's all I packed." Dakota tugged at the collar of her shirt.

"You can borrow something of mine," Lydia offered. "Come on. Let's go to my room and see what we can find." Dakota followed the female down the hall to her room. Nothing she tried on fit. Everything was too big. Not that Lydia was overweight; she was just built larger. When Dakota's eyes filled with tears, Lydia grabbed her hand and squeezed. "Hey, it's okay. We can go shopping in the morning. Or you can wear whatever you want. You're the Queen."

"I just don't understand why my father is being such a dick." Dakota angrily brushed the tears from her face. She hated crying, especially in front of someone else.

"I wish I knew, but we will get answers at the meeting."

"How can you be sure?" Dakota hated sounding like a whiny brat, but she was pissed.

"Because we'll have at least one Gryphon with us, and they have the ability to 'voice' others. It's scary as shit, when

you think about it, but they can make someone tell the truth, or they can convince someone to think whatever they instruct them to. Say a human discovers their secret, the Gryphon can convince them otherwise.”

“You’re right; that is scary.” Dakota stepped back and blew out a breath.

“Come on. Bas is probably freaking out.”

“Why would he be?”

“Because you’re upset, and he can sense it. If I know my cousin...” Lydia angled her head to the side and grinned, pointing to the door. “He’s waiting in the hallway.”

Dakota smiled for the first time in an hour. Knowing Sebastian worried about her was a good feeling. She strode to the door, and when she opened it, her mate was leaning against the opposite wall. Dakota walked straight up to him and set her forehead on his chest, needing his arms around her. He didn’t disappoint.

“I’ve got work to do, so if you would, ask Tony to grab me something for dinner,” Lydia said.

“Will do,” Bas responded. He kissed Dakota on top of her head before escorting her back to their room. Bas relayed Lydia’s request for food.

“I can go grab something for all of us if you don’t feel like going out,” Anthony offered.

Sebastian raised his eyebrows, and Dakota nodded. “Yeah, that’d be great. A sandwich is fine with me.”

Bas turned her loose long enough to give Anthony his credit card. Once Tony was gone, Dakota said, “Lydia’s clothes didn’t fit, so she offered to take me shopping in the morning.”

“Sweetheart, that isn’t necessary.”

“Please? I’m not a vain person, but this one time, my first time being seen by the Clan, I want to look decent.”

“I can see how much this means to you. If that’s what you wish, then by all means, go shopping.”

Bas pulled her down on the sofa and held her while they waited on Anthony to return. After they’d eaten their sandwiches, Sebastian stripped her down and made her forget about everything except them.

The next morning, the four of them were once again the only ones in the hotel’s dining room. Dakota picked at her breakfast, and when Lydia finished eating, it was time to find some clothes suitable for being seen for the first time as Queen. Carlton didn’t have any boutiques, and after searching on the internet, Lydia found one in White’s Bluff, the next town over. If they didn’t have what she was looking for, Lydia assured her they could drive to the mall in Barboursville.

Anthony excused himself to his room to call his boss, and Sebastian stood, removing the keys to the Jeep from his pocket. “You sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

Dakota reached up and brushed Bas’s hair back. “You’re more than welcome to join us, but do you really want to go shopping?”

“No, but I want you to promise to be safe. And I don’t mean driving. I mean keeping your senses open to any potential threats.”

“I promise. I doubt King would try anything in public, but if he somehow finds us, Lydia or I will call you.”

Sebastian pressed their lips together. “Then I’ll see you soon.”

Dakota took the keys and tossed them in the air, catching them easily. She and Lydia made their way to the parking lot, and Dakota unlocked the doors using the fob. Once in the driver’s seat, she placed her phone in the cupholder, set her purse on the back seat so it wouldn’t get in the way of her feet as she worked the pedals, then adjusted the seat and mirrors since she was so much shorter than Bas. When she started the engine, Lydia input the address for the boutique into the GPS

system, and they were off. White's Bluff was only twenty minutes away.

"I thought for sure Bas was going to insist on coming with us," Lydia said. "Gargoyle males are protective to the extreme, and you aren't just any female."

"Neither are you. You stabbed an alpha wolf. I'd loved to have seen that."

"It was pretty badass," Lydia joked. "I meant to tell you, Luna has an extra set of bangles her mother made, and she's sending them with my brother."

"That's Locke, right?" There were so many names to remember, but she was pretty sure she had that one correct.

"Right. He and my dad will insist on going with us to confront King. Locke's only seventeen, but he got our Uncle Frey's built-like-a-tank genes. He's already six-four, and I doubt he's stopped growing."

"And your mom's okay with him fighting if he has to?"

Lydia laughed. "If my mom wasn't pregnant, she'd be right there with them."

The digital voice told Dakota to turn at the next intersection. She flipped on the blinker just as red and blue lights flashed behind her. "What the hell?" Since there were cars lined next to the sidewalk, Dakota continued making the right turn and pulled into the first lot she came to. She put the Jeep in neutral and pulled the parking brake.

Lydia unbuckled and turned in the seat as a police officer got out of his patrol car. Dakota watched him in the sideview mirror. The man had his hand on his weapon.

"I wasn't speeding, was I?" she asked as she rolled the window down.

"I don't think so," Lydia muttered as she began typing on her phone.

The man approached the window, and Dakota placed both hands on the steering wheel. He didn't speak. Instead, he looked first at Dakota, then around her at Lydia.

“Good morning, officer,” Dakota said.

“I’m Deputy Brown with the White’s Bluff sheriff’s department. Where are you two headed?”

“To the Maple Boutique on Main Street.”

“Is this your Jeep?”

“No, sir. It’s my husband’s.” Dakota couldn’t very well say mate, and for all intents and purposes, they were married.

“License and registration please.” When Dakota turned toward the back seat, he pulled his weapon. “Easy, young lady.”

“My license is in my purse, which is in the back seat.”

“Reach for it slowly,” he warned.

Dakota mouthed, “What the fuck?” to Lydia as she got her purse.

“The registration is in the glove box,” Lydia informed him. “Is it okay if I open it?”

“Slowly,” he repeated. When he had the requested documents, he looked them over. “Says here your name is Young but the owner’s name is Stone.”

“Yes, sir. Honestly, we’re engaged, but I already consider him my husband.”

“She’s telling the truth, officer. The owner of the Jeep is my cousin. I can show you my license. We have the same last name.”

“And where is Mr. Stone hiding?”

Dakota rolled her eyes, earning a glare from the deputy. “He’s not hiding. I didn’t want to subject him to a morning of shopping. What is this really about?” Dakota already knew considering there was a warrant out for Sebastian’s arrest. With Grace telling the Atlanta detective Bas was in West Virginia, they must have sent out some type of bulletin to all the local police.

“Miss Young, please turn the vehicle off and step out for me,” he instructed, ignoring Lydia. Dakota did as he instructed. The deputy returned the gun to its holster and closed the door. He had her follow him to the back of the vehicle. “Miss Young, our office received a BOLO on this vehicle. That means be on the lookout. I need to ask if the other young woman is in on it.”

“In on what? This really is my fiancé’s Jeep, and she really is his cousin.”

“We were advised you were taken against your will, and the owner of the vehicle was responsible.”

“That meddling asshole.” Dakota kicked a rock, and Deputy Brown took a step back, his hand once again going to his pistol. Dakota held her hands out in front of her. “Sir, I left home willingly. My father is an overbearing git. He wanted me to marry someone different, and when I refused, he became belligerent and borderline abusive. I tried to leave town once before, but someone had put a tracker on my car. They found me and took me back. They’re the ones who need a BOLO, not Sebastian.”

“How do I know this Sebastian Stone and his cousin didn’t coerce you into telling me this story?”

“If I was in trouble, now would be the perfect time to say so. I’d get in your patrol car and leave with you. Look, I’m not lying. My father or whoever filed this false report is the one in the wrong. Not Sebastian, not Lydia, and not me. I tried to call my mother yesterday and let her know I’m okay, but my father answered the phone, and after a heated argument where he told me to get my ass back home, his exact words were ‘consider yourself warned.’ I’m an adult who can make her own decisions regardless of what my dad thinks.”

“Would you be willing to come down to the station and give your statement?”

“Absolutely, and while I’m there, I’ll file my own complaint.”

“Very well.” The deputy handed Dakota her license and Sebastian’s registration. “Follow me. It’s only a couple of blocks.”

Dakota got back in the Jeep and slammed the door. “My fucking father!” She slapped the steering wheel, then started the engine. Deputy Brown drove past, and Dakota put the Jeep in first to follow. “He put out a missing persons report on me saying Bas had kidnapped me. Hell, it might have been King’s doing. Motherfuckers. Now I have to go to the station and give my statement.”

“I’m putting you on speaker, Bas.” Dakota jerked her head toward Lydia. She hadn’t realized Lydia was on a call.

“Dakota? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Pissed, but fine. While you’re kicking King’s ass, do you think Tony could put a hurtin’ on Arthur?”

“That can be arranged. Do you want me to meet you at the police station?”

Dakota blew out a breath. “No. I got this. Depending how long it takes, I might not get to go shopping.”

“And if you don’t, you’ll still look great in a T-shirt. Don’t worry about that, okay?”

“Yeah. We’re here, so I’m going to get in there and get this done. I’ll let you know when I’m on the way back.”

“Okay, *Cucciolina*. Call if you need me for anything.”

“I’ll take care of her, don’t worry,” Lydia told Bas before disconnecting. “Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

It didn’t take long for Dakota to give her statement, and Deputy Brown said he would handle the false report. Lydia assured her they had enough time to stop at the boutique. When the sales associate welcomed them, Dakota told the woman what she was looking for and her size.

“I have something I think you’ll like.” She walked to the far side of the room and stopped at a table of sweaters. “Here you are.” She held out a soft sweater that was nearly identical in color to Sebastian’s eyes. Dakota shrugged off her flannel,

then slipped the sweater on. It was a perfect fit. "I'll take it." She removed it, then handed it over while putting her button-up back on. Dakota thanked the goddess for allowing her to find something quickly. Once she and Lydia were outside, Dakota called Bas to let him know they were headed back to the hotel.

"I'll be waiting," he responded, and Dakota couldn't wait to get back. She had been away from him for less than two hours, but it felt like an eternity. True to his word, Bas was waiting out front. He met her by the Jeep, and as soon as her feet touched the ground, he wrapped Dakota in a tight hug before kissing her silly.

"I missed you too," she joked.

Bas took her hand and led her to their room with Lydia following. Once the door was closed, he grabbed her for another kiss, but Dakota twisted out of his arms.

"We're going to be late," Dakota admonished, grinning.

"I'm the King. They'll wait." Bas reached for her again, but she wouldn't be deterred.

"Not the first impression I want them to have of me, Gorgeous." Since Anthony was in the room, Dakota rushed into the bedroom to swap her flannel for the sweater, and Bas followed. When he closed the door, she pointed a finger at him. "No funny stuff, Mister. We're already running late."

"No funny stuff, I promise. I just wanted to let you know the owner of the lodge accepted our offer."

"Oh, Bas, that's wonderful." Dakota tossed her shirt onto the bed and pulled the sweater over her head. Sebastian's eyes traced her bare skin until it was covered. Knowing she'd be on a video call later, Dakota had applied a bit of makeup that morning, so all that was needed was to brush her hair. "Now what happens?" she asked from the bathroom.

"I hire an inspector. Unless he tells me there is mold in every corner or something equally detrimental, I'll move forward with the project. I want this so badly."

Dakota took one last look in the mirror, then went to her mate and gave him a quick kiss. “I have no doubt you’ll get it. Now let’s go talk to our Clan.”

The video conference was wild. There were a bunch of tiny squares on Anthony’s laptop showing those on the other end. Even having shifter sight, it was hard to distinguish all the faces. When Harlow announced everyone was present, Bas began.

“Thank you all for agreeing to the call on such short notice. Harlow gave you the basics of why I’m asking for help in the email. First off, I’d like to introduce you to my mate, Dakota.” Dakota gave a small wave, and several voices responded in unison, “On my honor.” Bas had told her the significance of the gesture, hearing the vow given to her, it hit her right in the feels.

“For those of you who aren’t aware, I’m in the process of meeting with different species leaders to set up a shifter council. The purpose of the council is to have leaders who will spread the word about what happened in South Carolina a few months ago.” Sebastian recounted the incident with the dead wolf shifter and the GIA agent involved. “Alpha Millard put me in touch with Kingston Bridgewater, Alpha of the pack in Panther, West Virginia. It was there I met Dakota. Kingston wanted Dakota as his Alpha Mate, but she had refused. When I mentioned choosing Dakota for the council, he got pissed, things got out of hand, and I unknowingly challenged King. His second, Sloane, put a clawed hand around Lydia’s throat, she stabbed him, then Anthony kicked him through a second-floor window.”

There was an uproar at that point, and Dakota understood their rage. Males who put their hands on a female deserved to get kicked, or worse. Sebastian held his hands up, and when the voices died down, he continued. “I convinced King to stand down, but he demanded Anthony, Lydia, and I get off their pack land. I rescued Dakota from her brother before leaving.” Sebastian then explained the phone calls with Jolee and her father. “As it stands, I’m headed back to Panther to confront Kingston. The number of wolf shifters who are either

alpha or beta and can fight is around one hundred. That leads to why I'm asking for your assistance. I have no doubt I can best King if it's a fair fight, but the four of us against that many wouldn't be fair."

Sebastian paused and took a sip of water. "There are females among their ranks, thus my request for some of our females to be in attendance. If you can clear your schedule for this weekend, I'd like to get this over with sooner rather than later. If you aren't available, I'll call on someone else in your stead. Are there any questions?"

"Yes," Rafael said. "Not so much a question as a statement. Arthur Young is mine. Nobody threatens my Queen and gets away with it." Dakota gripped Sebastian's hand tight. His papa hadn't officially met Dakota, yet he was willing to take on her father on her behalf. She couldn't wait to meet the male and give him a big hug.

"And Sloane is mine," Nikolas added. "Fucker put his claws on my daughter. He'll never touch another female again."

"You might have to stand in line, Dad. Sloane's out for Anthony's blood," Lydia said.

"Excuse me," Knox Millard interrupted several who were wanting in on the action. "Why have you asked that I be present? I have done as Nikita asked and called the Alphas King has already contacted."

"By having another Alpha present, it will show solidarity. We plan to record the 'meeting,' and I will ask for a peaceful resolution. I appreciate those calls you've made, but I want proof that he's spinning things to make himself the victim. For the shifter council to work, we can't have infighting among the species."

"I understand, and you can count on me. I have a feeling once Nikita and Madsen find out I'm joining you, they'll be there as well." Dakota couldn't wait to meet this Alpha. He exuded power, yet there was a softness to his gaze. He reminded Dakota of the Alpha from her pack in Utah.

“They will be most welcome. Any other questions?” Sebastian asked.

“Are we coming in armed?” Tessa asked. Lydia had shown Dakota photos of everyone who would be on the call and explained who they were. Anthony’s mother was a gorgeous redhead and didn’t look much older than her son.

“Absolutely. Those of you who have swords, feel free to bring them. All females are welcome to wear your bracelets and use them if necessary. For those of you in the New York and Atlanta areas, you’ll be flying in on the Clan jets. For everyone else, I will charter jets to bring you here. Harlow will have that information as well as the dates and times of your flights. Please coordinate with her.”

When there were no more questions, Sebastian said, “Thank you all, especially those who aren’t Gargoyles. Dakota and I appreciate your willingness to stand with us. If you have questions once we hang up, feel free to reach out to Anthony or myself.”

Once the feed ended, Dakota stood and shook out her hands. “That was...” Dakota trailed off. She wasn’t looking forward to returning to Panther, but she couldn’t wait to meet all the different shifters who had agreed to join them. Not only were there Gargoyles and Gryphons, but dire wolves, and various hybrids. When Bas explained what a Gryphon looked like when they shifted, Dakota was almost jealous. How fucking cool it was to be able to shift into not only their Gryphon form but either their Lion or Eagle too. Not that she would get to see them unless there was trouble, and Dakota didn’t want that. She prayed to the goddess that King would see the pack was outnumbered and do the right thing. Then again, it was King.

“Are you okay?” Anthony asked.

“Yes, but I’m realizing things in the Bridgewater pack are different and not in a good way. That right there,” she pointed at the computer, “is how it should be. Everyone coming together. Knox reminds me of my former Alpha, and he would be just as willing to band together with us. Maybe we could

reach out to him regarding the council, unless Utah holds too many bad memories?”

Sebastian stood and pulled Dakota close. “If I had never gone to Utah, I wouldn’t have transitioned until I was older. And although I almost died that day, I would go through the pain again if it meant I didn’t have to wait to come into my Gargoyle. Utah is also where I was crowned King, so it will always be somewhere special, and if you want to speak with your former Alpha, I’m all for it.”

Dakota turned to Lydia. “I never did thank you for helping to save Bas that day.”

Lydia smiled gently. “I didn’t do anything but yell for help. It was the witches who saved him, but you’re welcome.”

“Hey, you didn’t thank me,” Anthony huffed.

“And what exactly did you do to help?” Dakota asked.

“I didn’t go after you and your brother. If I had, neither one of you would be alive today.”

Lydia pushed against Anthony’s thigh with her foot. “And who stopped you from doing that?”

“Tabby,” he mumbled, and Lydia then slapped him with a pillow.

“That’s right. Seems Phoenix isn’t the only hot-headed brother around.”

Anthony grabbed the pillow and pretended to shove it against Lydia’s face. The two grappled and ended up falling off the sofa. Sebastian grabbed the coffee table, moving it out of the way so their wrestling didn’t break it.

“Ow, that’s my nipple, you maniac,” Anthony yelled. Lydia jumped up and ran behind Dakota, laughing.

Anthony rubbed his chest, scowling at his cousin. “That shit ain’t fair or funny.” He climbed off the floor and smoothed out his shirt. He marched to the door and grabbed the handle. When he looked at them over his shoulder, he was grinning. “I’m going to ride four-wheelers. Who’s coming with me?”

“Let me change into something more suitable,” Dakota responded.

Anthony huffed. “Flannel it is.” He got another pillow to the face, this time from Dakota.

Chapter 20

BEFORE HEADING TO Walker's Outfitters, they stopped at a small pizza joint for a late lunch. A bell rang when they entered the restaurant, and a female voice called from somewhere in the back that she'd be right there. There was a chalkboard menu hanging above the counter, a soda machine stood off to the side, and a small refrigerator held a few types of beer. As they perused the menu, a young woman stepped from the kitchen area to greet them.

"Welcome to Maddio's. I'm Angela, and I'm so happy to meet you all. What can I get you?"

Before Bas could ask Dakota what she wanted, she said, "We'll have a regular crust pepperoni and pineapple," ignoring Anthony's smartass remark under his breath. "I want soda to drink. Bas?"

"I'll take a Guinness. This will all be on one check." He stepped aside so Anthony and Lydia could order. They chose a meat lovers to share, with Anthony opting for a bottled IPA and Lydia also choosing soda. Angela rang them up, and while Bas was sliding his card through the machine, the female placed a tray on the counter and loaded it with plates, silverware, two cups for the sodas, then finally the bottled beers.

After handing Bas a receipt, Angela said, "I'll get right on your orders."

Lydia plucked the cups off the tray and handed one to Dakota. Anthony lifted the tray and followed Bas as he chose the farthest booth from the counter. After getting their drinks, Dakota and Lydia joined them.

As soon as her butt was on the seat, Lydia broached a topic Sebastian had already been contemplating. "You need to get one of the Trio to change Dakota's documents."

Dakota looked between Lydia and Bas. “What do you mean?”

Bas slid his arm across the back of the booth, tracing circles on her arm with his fingertips. “We’re mates, but we don’t have the same last name as if we’d gotten married. That might have saved a lot of trouble this morning with the deputy. The Trio can produce a new driver’s license and a fake marriage certificate so you can get a new Social Security card.”

Dakota narrowed her eyes. “Why don’t we just get married and do it the legal way? I’m not saying we need to go all out with an elaborate wedding, but we could pop over to city hall and get hitched.”

“Can I be the flower Goyle?” Anthony asked, batting his eyelashes.

“Who said you get to be there?” Dakota deadpanned.

“Ouch. Keep it up, and I’m going to think you don’t like me.”

Dakota arched an eyebrow, and Lydia fell against Anthony laughing. “She has your number.”

Angela brought their pizzas, and when she walked off, Lydia said, “I think it’s a good idea. It’s probably easy to get a license, then go before a justice of the peace.”

Bas looked down at Dakota. “What do you say, *Cucciolina*, want to be my wife as well as my mate?”

“Hmm, I’ll have to think about it.” Dakota rolled her eyes. “I’m the one who suggested it, so yes, I do.”

“Save the ‘I dos’ for later. Dig in so we can go play in the mud,” Anthony said, already grabbing a couple of slices of pizza and adding them to his plate.

Dakota placed three pieces on Bas’s plate before serving herself. “It hasn’t rained in like two weeks, so I doubt there’ll be any mud.”

Even though it was well after noon, several women stopped by Maddio’s. They spoke to Angela in hushed tones,

not realizing Bas and the others could hear every word. Bas recognized some of them from having stopped at their establishments. When he caught them looking, he smiled and waved, causing more than one blush.

“You have a fan club,” Dakota whispered.

“Nah, they’re staring at Tony.”

Anthony, who had been focused on his food, perked up. “What?” He leaned around Lydia, wiping his mouth on a napkin. He then gave his cheesiest smile, also waving at the women who giggled like schoolgirls. “I love this town.”

“I thought you wanted to hurry and eat so we can go riding,” Dakota teased, pointing her pizza slice at him.

Anthony turned his grin on Dakota. “I did, but I wouldn’t want to eat too fast and get a stomachache.”

Dakota tossed her wadded up napkin at his face. “Such a goober.”

The women left soon after, waving at them as they walked out. Dakota waved back enthusiastically.

“Kody, are you okay?” Anthony asked, smirking.

“If this is going to be my home, I want to start off on the right foot. I had enough alienation in the pack, and I don’t want that here.”

“That makes sense. Sorry for being a goober.”

“You’re forgiven.” When they finished eating, his mate smiled and thanked Angela for the wonderful meal as they were walking out the door. Sebastian was conflicted. He was glad his mate was trying to make friends, but it hurt his heart thinking of how she’d been treated by the females of her pack.

As they walked down the street to Walker’s, Sebastian suggested a detour. “Let’s stop by the courthouse and make an appointment. I’m not sure how busy the judge or whoever will do the ceremony is, but I’d like to get married as soon as possible.”

Everyone agreed, and they were able to get an appointment for eleven the next morning. Instead of filling out the paperwork for the license then, they agreed to do it when they returned the next day. Thanking the clerk, they left and headed down to Walker's.

Dustin smiled as they walked in the door. "Back for more ziplining?"

"We wanted to try out the four-wheelers if it's not too late in the day."

"Nah, there's plenty of daylight left. Are you each riding your own, or are you doubling up?"

Bas should have known Dakota and Lydia would want to drive, but he still asked. Dakota gave him the same scowl she often bestowed upon Anthony. "Your own it is."

Bas paid for the excursion, and they each signed a waiver. As they were studying a map of the trails, the front door opened, and Cole walked in.

"Hey, y'all. Good to see you again."

"Hi, Cole. We're trying out the four-wheelers today," Bas said, shaking the younger man's hand.

"I know. Dustin texted to let me know. Since I have to drive over there, do you want to ride with me?" Sebastian wondered if the two brothers were the only employees, but he didn't want to pry.

"That'd be great. Thanks."

They said goodbye to Dustin and piled into an older SUV. Cole turned the radio down. "I talked to Dustin about you all last night. Not that we were gossiping, but okay, we were gossiping, but it was the good kind. About you reopening the lodge. That's gonna be great for Carlton and our family. If you bring in enough tourists, maybe Dustin can hire someone else to help him so I can focus on my business."

"What is your business?" Bas asked.

"I own a small landscaping company, so if you need any help clearing the property or adding greenery around the

building, just let me know.”

“Do you have a business card?” Sebastian would love to hire the man to help clear off the property.

“Yes, but not on me. There are some on the counter at the Outfitters. I’ll grab you one when I drop you off. Here we are.” Cole parked next to a small barn. He unlocked a padlock and pulled open the double doors. “Let’s get you fitted for helmets.” Once they found the correct sizes, he asked, “Do you want a guide, or would you rather go by yourselves? Normally, we don’t let first-time customers go off without one of us, but Dustin said it was okay if you wanted to ride around without me.”

“If you trust us, we’ll be okay on our own.”

“I have some things I need to take care of, so I’m good with it.” Cole waited around as they all got seated, then waved as they drove off. Since they weren’t familiar with the area, they took it slow. Well, Bas and the females did. Tony raced ahead of them before circling back and riding with them for a few minutes. Then he’d do it all over again. It didn’t take long for their beasts to urge them to have fun, and soon they all were racing over the trails, dust swirling in their wake. His mate had been correct; there was no mud, but they still enjoyed themselves. When the sun started going down, they returned the ATVs to the barn where Cole was waiting to check them in. He directed them where to park and took the helmets, replacing them on the shelves.

“Do you ever get mud?” Anthony asked.

Cole laughed. “Sure do, but most folks try to avoid the trails after a good rain. Sounds like you’re a man after my own heart.”

They all climbed back into Cole’s vehicle for the drive back to town. Cole asked several questions about the lodge, like how soon they’d be getting started, what changes Bas planned to make, and how many people they were going to hire. Sebastian answered each question with as much enthusiasm as Cole had asked. In that moment, Bas knew helping Carlton was going to be a positive thing for everyone.

“How was it?” Dustin asked when they entered the store.

“So much fun,” Dakota gushed. His mate had laughed and whooped, a grin on her face the whole time they were riding. Bas enjoyed watching her having fun as much as he enjoyed riding.

“It was. I’m used to two wheels, but that was exhilarating,” Tony added.

Lydia leaned against the counter. “I think I swallowed about five bugs.” She may have, but she’d laughed right along with Dakota.

Cole walked behind the counter and chose a few business cards, handing them to Sebastian. “I’ve got to run, but it was great seeing you all again. I hope to hear from you.”

Sebastian shook the younger man’s hand. “The pleasure was ours. I’m sure we can work something out.”

With a wave, Cole was out the door. Dustin smiled after his brother. “He’s exceptional at what he does, and I’m not saying that because he’s my brother. The kid has a knack for turning blank spaces into showcases. If you noticed the landscaping around town, he’s responsible for all of it.”

Bas tapped the card on the counter. “That’s good to know. Like I told you when we first met, I want to provide opportunities to the residents of Carlton, and that includes you and Cole.”

“I’ve had more calls while you were gone, and everyone in town is thrilled you’ve chosen Carlton. Hell, don’t be surprised if they have a parade in your honor once the lodge reopens.”

Sebastian felt his face heating. He didn’t want a parade. He wasn’t settling there for the praise, but to help the community thrive. “That’s not necessary, so maybe pass the word along I don’t need anything like that, just help spreading the word once we start the remodel. That will be thanks enough.”

“That’s a given.”

“Okay, well, we’ll see you again soon, I’m sure.” Bas shook Dustin’s hand, then gestured toward the door.

As soon as they reached the sidewalk, Dakota wrapped her arms around his waist. “You don’t do well with praise, do you?”

“Not really. I’m not doing this for accolades. I’m doing it so the people and their children will have a secure future.”

“And that is why you’re a wonderful King.”

“Uh, guys?” Lydia whispered. Sebastian and Dakota turned to see why Lydia was trying to get their attention. Two policemen were walking toward them. Sebastian angled his body in front of Dakota’s, and the larger of the cops scowled.

“Mr. Stone? I’m Sheriff Tom Daltry, and this is my deputy, Chase Biggs. I wanted to personally welcome you to Carlton.” The sheriff held out his hand, and Sebastian relaxed as he shook with the man.

“Thank you, Sheriff. This is my fiancée, Dakota, and my cousins, Lydia and Anthony.” Anthony also shook hands with both males, while Dakota and Lydia gave them a wave.

“We heard about what happened to Miss Young over in White’s Bluff. Since you’re going to be part of our town, I want to assure you we’ll do everything we can to keep the riff raff away from you should they come looking for trouble.”

Sebastian kept his expression in check. These humans had no idea what they would be dealing with if the “riff raff” came to town. “I appreciate that. We don’t expect Dakota’s father to show up, but if he does, any help you could give would be welcome.”

Daltry gestured like a gameshow hostess. “It’s a wonderful thing what you’re doing for Carlton by reopening the lodge. Our town isn’t struggling like some, but additional tourism would surely be helpful.”

“That’s exactly what I’m hoping for.”

“We won’t keep you. Again, welcome to Carlton.” Sheriff Daltry tipped his hat, and he and his deputy turned and walked

away.

“Two more for the fan club,” Dakota sassed.

“As nice as Carlton is, I’m in the mood for something a little more extravagant for dinner,” Tony said. “Think Slade and Matt would open a Cade’s Key here?”

“They are helping with the restaurant at the lodge, so it’ll be like getting one just on a smaller scale.”

Lydia was distracted by something on her phone. Bas waited for her to look up before he asked, “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s something I’m working on. I’m going to head back to the hotel and get busy. I’ll grab something to eat there.”

“We’ll drive you back. I don’t want you walking alone,” Bas said.

“I’d appreciate that.”

Bas drove to the hotel, and Tony walked Lydia to her room. He hated leaving his cousin behind, but she had a job to do. At least he assumed she was doing work. Lydia hadn’t been specific. The three of them opted for a seafood restaurant in a larger town. Anthony kept them entertained with stories from his own job. Sebastian wanted to broach the subject of Mason expanding his business so Tony could move to West Virginia, but he was afraid his cousin wasn’t interested in living somewhere so remote. Bas would get the lodge remodeled, and then he would invite his cousins and friends to visit before opening for guests. Maybe they would fall in love with the area and decide to join Bas and Dakota.

After eating, Dakota asked to stop by a bookstore. “My mom bought me an e-reader, but I prefer holding books and flipping actual pages.” Sebastian grabbed a basket so she could choose as many books as she wanted. While they shopped for romances, Anthony browsed the history section. Dakota pulled books from the shelves, read the description on the back, and either placed it in the basket or returned it. She did this for close to an hour.

“I think that’s enough for now,” she said as she chose one final book. Bas didn’t know how fast his mate read, but she had chosen close to ten paperbacks.

Anthony was waiting for them at the checkout counter. He pointed to the basket. “Damn. Is the honeymoon over already?”

Dakota narrowed her eyes. “Since we’re not married, the honeymoon hasn’t even started. These are weapons.”

“Weapons?” Anthony cocked his head to the side, and Dakota grabbed the top book, then slapped him on the arm with it. “Ow. Yeah, okay.” He rubbed his arm as though she actually hurt him.

Sebastian handed the basket to the cashier. While she was ringing them up, Bas turned to Anthony. “One of these days, you’ll learn not to mess with her.”

Dakota leaned against the counter, studying Anthony. “How have you survived this long with all the females in your family?”

Tony sniffed, putting his nose in the air. “*They* love me.”

Dakota patted Tony’s arm. “Keep telling yourself that.”

Sebastian laughed as he ran his credit card through the reader. Anthony took the bag of books and walked off toward the door. When they met him outside, Dakota held out her hand, but Anthony shook his head. “Nope. You’ll get them back when I’m safely enclosed in my hotel room.”

Instead of talking on the drive back to Carlton, they listened to music with Dakota and Anthony singing along. Bas’s voice was okay, but rarely did he sing aloud. Anthony couldn’t carry a tune to save his life, but he didn’t care. It was one of those things that Bas admired about his cousin. Tony was larger than life and he owned his carefree personality. True to his word, Anthony carried Dakota’s books until they reached the second floor. He handed them to Sebastian, then trotted away before Dakota could hit him again.

Dakota toed off her boots and began undressing. Sebastian stood frozen, watching his mate. He didn’t want to

assume that she was getting naked for him. When she put on her sleeping clothes, he stripped down to his boxer briefs and tee. For the next hour, Dakota read one of her new books, and Bas watched a sports highlights show. Football season was in full swing, but being Wednesday night, there wasn't a game on.

When Dakota set her book on the nightstand, Bas switched the TV off. "You didn't have to do that," she said as she slid down the bed and placed her head on his chest. Bas rubbed his hand down her back, not going lower in case she wasn't in the mood for sex. He wanted her. He always wanted his mate, whether it was sex or kissing or touching. Bas knew from being around other Goyles it would always be that way. Dakota wasn't a Gargoyle, though, so he let her dictate what happened next.

"This is nice," she mumbled, nuzzling his chest. Bas hummed his agreement, and within a few minutes, his mate's breathing evened out, and she was asleep. He reached over and turned the lamp off. Holding his female wasn't a hardship. His dick was half-hard, but that wasn't anything new. Bas had to constantly tamp down his urges around her. Bas eased down so he was lying beside her and closed his eyes. His mind flipped through everything going on, from the lodge, to the upcoming meeting with King, to the next day when he would marry his mate. None of it worried him. He would have his family and friends at his back when he confronted the Alpha. Once that was taken care of, he and Dakota could get on with their lives, and Bas couldn't wait.

Chapter 21

DAKOTA HADN'T MEANT to fall asleep on Bas the night before, but he didn't seem put off by it when he greeted her with a smile and a kiss. "Good morning. Are you excited?"

Dakota propped up on her elbow. "I am. I know we're mated, but getting married will solidify things in the eyes of humans. Since we'll be living here for the foreseeable future, I want all the ladies to know you're taken."

Bas rolled on top of her. "All they have to do is pay attention. I only have eyes for you."

Sebastian kissed her neck, nipping at the skin with his fangs. Dakota was already in the mood for her mate, and that amped up the need coursing through her body. Bas made slow, sweet love to her, but when she suggested they shower together, he declined. It would have hurt her feelings, but Bas kissed her soundly and told her he needed to call the office and check in.

Sebastian's phone pinged while they were getting dressed. He texted a response but didn't comment.

"Everything okay?" Dakota asked.

"Yes, ma'am. That was Lydia saying she and Tony would see us at the courthouse." Bas slid his shirt on, covering all of his glorious muscles, and Dakota busied her hands by putting on her boots to keep from pushing the shirt off. Being mated to Sebastian was a constant lesson in self-control. She checked her hair in the mirror one last time. Today was her wedding day, and even though they'd agreed to wear matching flannel shirts, she still wanted to look nice for her mate.

When they went downstairs for breakfast, they didn't have the room to themselves. An older couple was seated on the far side of the room. They looked up from their food when

Dakota and Sebastian entered, but then they went back to eating without acknowledging them.

Dakota handed Bas a plate for the buffet. “Did Lydia say what she and Tony were doing this morning?”

Bas took the spoon for the eggs and shrugged. “You’ll have to wait and see.”

Dakota’s hand hovered over the bacon tongs. “So you do know. Is that what your earlier text was about?”

“Maybe,” Bas teased, bumping her hip with his thigh.

Dakota let it go. If her mate wanted to surprise her, she wouldn’t ruin it by pressing the issue. Whatever it was couldn’t be anything extravagant considering Lydia and Tony only had a couple hours before meeting them. Instead, she asked about the property surrounding the lodge.

“If the Macons agree to your offer, what type of house are you going to build?”

“That’s something you and I will decide on together.” As soon as they were seated, Bas tapped on his phone before sliding it across the table. “I have designed several that I think would be perfect for a wooded setting. They are all scalable. If you want something smaller or you’d prefer them to have more room, I can structure them to your tastes. Or, if you don’t like any of them, I can design whatever you would like.”

Dakota took a bite of bacon as she scrolled through the photos. She already knew Sebastian was successful from looking at Stone, Inc.’s website, but these designs were amazing. There were renderings of the exteriors along with floor plans for the interiors. It was as though someone asked Dakota to describe her dream home, and Bas had made it happen, at least digitally. All the designs were on the large side, but if they were to have children, they would need the room. Then there were extra bedrooms if his family or friends visited. Dakota loved that idea. She had already found a new friend in Lydia, and Tony was like a goofy older brother.

“How old is Tony?”

Bas narrowed his eyes at her. “Where did that come from?”

“Oh,” Dakota laughed and explained her thought process. “I was thinking of him as a goofy older brother.”

“He and Tabby are your age. With his attitude, he comes off as immature, so you thinking he’s older is a shock.”

“It’s more that he appears older than twenty-five than acts it. Is Tabby as laid back?”

Sebastian glanced over at the older couple, then lowered his voice. “Not really. Anthony got Tessa’s attitude, and while Tabby is her mother’s spitting image, she is the serious one. By the time she was a teen, Tabby had already developed a unique sense of style. Most days she dresses like a fashion model, but there are times she’s dressed down like a biker. She and Tony are seasoned riders. When we were younger, the twins had those little motorized bikes, then they rode mini-bikes, and progressed to motorcycles as they got older. Growing up as we did, we were all taught defensive driving and how to ride motorcycles along with our combat training. Tony also got his pilot’s license. Papa’s cousin, Frey, has a couple of helicopters, and Tony learned to fly those when he was a teen.”

“That’s so cool.”

“It is. Did you change the subject to avoid talking about the designs?” Bas tapped his phone. “Please be honest.”

“I didn’t change the subject on purpose. My mind wandered when thinking about the spare bedrooms and having friends and family come for a visit. Each one of the designs is spectacular.” Dakota scrolled through the photos and pointed. “That’s my favorite. It’s like you dipped inside my head and came up with my dream home. I like that the master bedroom is on the first level, and I love the open floor plan. If I’m in the kitchen cooking, I’ll be able to look out into the living room and see you while you’re watching TV.”

“What makes you think I won’t be in the kitchen with you?”

Dakota took a sip of coffee before responding. “You can’t be glued to my side twenty-four seven.”

“Wanna bet?” Bas set his fork down and reached for her hand, threading their fingers. “If I start to smother you, just tell me to back off. I can’t promise I’ll listen every time, at least not for a while. It’s a Gargoyle thing.”

Dakota squeezed his fingers. “And I’m a wolf. We’re pack animals. That’s why I’m so excited about having your family come visit. It’s also the main reason I loved being a bartender. Other than a few females who hated me, I enjoyed being around so many of my pack every night. I lived alone in my cabin away from my father for self-preservation. Lone wolves aren’t the norm.”

Bas leaned over and kissed Dakota. “You’ll never be alone again.”

When they finished eating, they sipped coffee and talked for a bit until it was time to meet the cousins. Bas and Dakota had a few minutes, so they went ahead and got their marriage license. Thankfully, they only needed to present their driver’s licenses. If they’d needed birth certificates as well, they would have had to wait. By the time they had the license in hand, Lydia and Anthony arrived, and they weren’t alone.

“Momma? Papa? What are you doing here?” Sebastian asked, rushing to his parents. Rafael was an older version of Bas, and Kaya was a beautiful blonde. When Kaya held out her hand, Dakota found her feet and moved into the female’s embrace. That was what a parent’s love should feel like, and Dakota vowed then and there to be the type of mother to have her child’s back, no matter what.

“You didn’t think we’d miss your wedding, did you?” Rafael asked, cupping the side of Sebastian’s neck. When he turned his son loose, he focused on Dakota. Rafael placed a fist over his heart, bowed his head, and said, “On my honor. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Dakota.”

Dakota rushed to the male and hugged him tightly, her eyes burning with unshed tears. “The pleasure is mine. I’m so happy you’re here with us.” When she realized she was still

holding onto Bas's father, Dakota cleared her throat and released him and turned to Kaya who had her arms open. Dakota leaned into the female's embrace. "Sorry for mauling your mate," she whispered.

"No need to apologize, Sweetheart." Kaya kissed Dakota's temple, and Dakota wanted to cry for real.

When Dakota stepped back, she said, "We aren't having a wedding."

"The size of the crowd and venue isn't important. You are exchanging vows, and we wanted to be here as witnesses." Rafael's smile turned to a frown when he gripped Sebastian's shoulder. "And we wouldn't have been aware if Lydia hadn't called last night. We would have flown in then, but we had to wait on Bryce to bring the jet."

"I'm sorry, Papa." Bas looked around and lowered his voice. "We've run into a bit of trouble. Someone, and we're assuming it was Dakota's father, called the Atlanta PD to have me arrested for kidnapping Dakota. A detective showed up looking for me, and Grace told him I was in West Virginia looking at property, so the detective must have contacted the local agencies because Dakota was pulled over when she and Lydia were seen in my Jeep. Dakota had to give a sworn statement, and the deputy said he would handle filing the false report. Instead of having the Trio manipulate Dakota's information, we decided to do it the legal way."

"I'm going to kick that male's ass," Rafael promised. Kaya moved to her mate, settling his ire with a hand to his cheek.

"Focus on that later. Today is for happy memories." Kaya then smiled at Dakota. "I love that you're wearing matching shirts. You two are perfect together."

Kaya sounded sincere, and considering she and Rafael were wearing jeans and sweaters, she probably meant it. Dakota thanked her. If it had been Diana, she'd have pitched a fit for Dakota looking like a slob, as her mother called her style. She would have insisted Dakota wear a formal wedding dress regardless of the location.

Lydia stepped forward and handed Dakota a gorgeous bouquet of wildflowers, while Anthony tried to sneak something to Bas.

“Oh, Lydia, these are stunning. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I didn’t know what you liked, but I thought these suited you.”

“Mr. Stone?” the clerk called from behind her desk. “Are y’all ready?”

“We are.” Sebastian held out his hand for Dakota. Together, they walked into an office with his family following. The room was small and stuffy, but like his papa said, the size of the venue didn’t matter.

Carlton’s judge, Roy Holder, was performing the ceremony. He stepped around from behind his desk, and Sebastian handed over the license. Judge Holder looked it over and asked Sebastian, “Are you the couple who are looking to purchase the lodge?”

“Yes, sir. We’ve also made an offer on the surrounding property as well so we can build a home there. We feel Carlton will be a wonderful location to start our family.”

“Then I’m doubly pleased to marry the two of you. Would you like the usual vows, or have you written your own?”

Bas had asked Dakota if she wanted to say something special, but she knew her nerves would get the best of her, so they opted to go the traditional route.

“The usual, please,” Bas responded.

“Do you have rings?” the man asked.

Sebastian surprised Dakota when he said yes. They hadn’t gone shopping, so when she frowned, Bas smiled, and Anthony chuckled. That’s what Anthony had sneaked to Bas earlier.

Anthony and Lydia both had their phones out, and Dakota was glad. It might not be an elaborate wedding, but she wanted photographic evidence to look at later. The ceremony was

short and sweet, but when Sebastian presented her with a platinum ring inlaid with diamonds, Dakota couldn't stop the tears. She held out her left hand, smiling at her mate as he slipped it on. It fit perfectly. When it came time for her to slide his ring on, he handed her a matching band. After a few more words, they were pronounced husband and wife, and they kept the kiss PG-13. Sebastian's family, now her family, cheered loudly.

Bas took her hands in his and kissed her knuckles. "I love you, Mrs. Stone."

Dakota choked back a sob, nodding. "I love you too, Mr. Stone," she whispered and pulled his head down for another kiss.

They took turns signing the marriage license with Rafael and Kaya signing as witnesses. Judge Holder promised he would get the license filed for them. Sebastian had given his address in Atlanta for the certified copy to be mailed, but before the judge walked off, Bas took a picture of the license to have on hand.

"Let's get a few pictures," Lydia suggested. She took a few of Dakota and Sebastian, then she told Kaya and Rafael to stand next to them. Kaya then took the phone so Lydia and Anthony could be in a few photos too.

The six of them filed out of the office, stopping in the lobby. Sebastian hugged her from behind as Dakota held out her hand, admiring her ring. "It's perfect. How did you know my size?"

It was Lydia who answered. "Oh, here. This is yours." She handed Dakota one of her silver rings. "I took it with me so they could measure it."

"I snuck that to Lydia while you were in the shower," Bas explained.

"Sneaky. I approve." When Kaya moved closer, Dakota held out her hand so her mother-in-law could see it.

"It is gorgeous. Just like you." Kaya brushed Dakota's hair off her shoulder. "Seven's going to be sad she missed

this.”

“I got it on video,” Anthony said. “I’ve already sent it to her.”

“Thanks, Tony.” Kaya held her arms open, and Anthony walked into his aunt’s embrace. Dakota was pleased to find her new family didn’t shy away from touching.

Sebastian asked his parents, “Would you like to take a ride up to the lodge? I don’t have the key, but you’ll be able to see my vision well enough, and the view is spectacular.”

“Anything you want, Son,” Rafael said. “We’re here for the duration. Your momma and I will need to find a room, but we can do that later.”

Lydia and Anthony went back to the hotel so Dakota and Sebastian could have alone time with his parents. Lydia offered to take her bouquet and put it in water. When they reached the lodge, Bas showed them around the outside, explaining what changes he wanted to make. They had scrolled through his photos on the ride up the mountain, so they also got to see what the inside currently looked like. At one point, Kaya pulled Dakota to the side.

“I just wanted to take a moment and tell you how thrilled Rafe and I are that Bas found you after all this time. The Clan couldn’t ask for a better Queen.”

“Any words of wisdom on that front?”

Kaya grinned. “It’s often like herding cats and wrangling toddlers. Seriously though, it’s the easiest job in the world because you have a strong King. Sebastian learned by watching his papa, and all you have to do is stand by his side and love him.”

“Yeah, that’s easy enough. I know the mate bond makes things more intense, but I fall more in love with him every day.”

“That’ll never go away. I’m not saying it’ll always be easy. Look at what lies ahead this weekend. But you’ll get through it together. You already have Tony and Lydia willing to burn the world down for you. That, as much as anything,

lets me know you're perfect as our Queen. Plus, you're a shifter. When I first met Rafe, I knew nothing about the paranormal world. Heck, I thought he was a mass murderer, and I wanted to lock him up." Dakota listened as Kaya explained how she and Rafael met and the trouble that ensued. "It was a trying few years for a lot of us. Both Anthony's and Lydia's parents went through something similar, as did all of Rafe's brothers and cousins. Every one of us came out the other side together. I won't say unscathed, because some of us were injured, kidnapped, drugged, and nearly died. I'm not telling you this to scare you. I want you to see that our Clan sticks together and fights for one another. It's why so many are willing to accompany you and Sebastian to Panther and face your old pack. There are hundreds of Gargoyles who would show up if called upon. Rafael mentioned some of the Gryphons are coming too."

"And wolves. Since this all started because of the shifter council, Bas wants to show a united front between the species."

"Hey, you two," Sebastian called out as he walked toward them. "I don't mean to intrude on your girl time, but Papa wants to get a room at the hotel, then go somewhere for lunch."

Kaya hugged Dakota and whispered, "We'll talk more later." Dakota was looking forward to it. She wanted to be around the former Queen as much as possible. Dakota felt more at ease about leading their Clan knowing Kaya had done so as a human. If Kaya could learn how to handle hundreds of shifters without having prior knowledge of their existence, Dakota felt she already had one advantage her mother-in-law hadn't. She also wanted to be around the other female because Kaya exuded love. Diana loved Dakota, but it was nowhere near how Kaya treated Bas. Dakota chalked that up to having Rafael as a mate. Kaya wasn't required to bare her neck to her mate simply because he was the alpha of the family. Hell, he'd been King of all their Clan, and Kaya was treated as his equal. The wolves could learn a thing or two from the Goyles.

While Rafael and Kaya checked in and got settled, Bas took Dakota to their room for a few quiet minutes. They didn't have time for sex, but they sat on the sofa and made out like teenagers, until someone knocked on their door. Lydia and Anthony joined them for lunch at an authentic Mexican restaurant they had yet to try. Afterward, Kaya requested they walk around and visit the shops in the quaint town. The more time Dakota spent with his parents, the more in love with them she fell.

After a couple hours, Rafael led them back to an empty store. "What do you think of using somewhere like this as a temporary office space? It would probably be easier to conduct business here than amid a construction site."

Bas cupped his hands and peered through the window. "From what I can see, it looks perfect. Dakota, what do you think?"

Dakota wasn't used to offering her opinion on important matters. "Why don't you call Missy and ask her to look at it?"

"Good idea." Bas winked as he dug his phone out of his back pocket. While he stepped away to ring up the realtor, Rafael and Kaya talked quietly, and Tony had stopped a few feet away to take a call, so Dakota took the opportunity to chat with Lydia.

"Thank you for the wedding surprises."

Lydia knocked her shoulder into Dakota's. "You're welcome. It was fun. Here, look at the photos I took." Dakota was amazed at how Lydia had captured the moment so perfectly. Her favorite was where she and Bas were grinning at one another.

"I'd like to print this one. Can you maybe email them to Sebastian since I didn't bring my laptop?"

"Already done." Her phone chimed, and Lydia checked the message. "Crap. That's a client requesting a change to the website I'm working on. I'm going back to the hotel and work for a bit. I'll catch up with you all for dinner."

“Hang on. I’ll walk with you. I need to talk to Harlow, and the conversation would be better suited in private.” Anthony hugged Kaya before hooking his arm through Lydia’s.

An hour later, Sebastian had signed papers to rent the vacant space. When they arrived at the hotel, the four of them met Anthony in his room. It was time to finalize their plans for meeting King. Where Dakota had first been nervous at the thought of returning to Panther and facing her old pack, now she was filled with surety as well as pride. This was her Clan, and she would be leading her new pack into battle.

Chapter 22

SATURDAY WAS A whirlwind of action as all those who were flying in to help arrived in West Virginia. Sebastian didn't want that many strangers to converge on Carlton, so he tasked Anthony with finding a nice hotel in one of the larger cities halfway between Carlton and Panther. Harlow had expertly handled getting everyone flown in on either a Clan jet or a chartered plane, and Rafael had taken it upon himself to hire a private car service to drive everyone to the hotel. He also rented enough SUVs to accommodate them all on the drive to Panther the following day. Once Anthony secured enough rooms, Sebastian called the hotel and reserved a conference room large enough for everyone. He inquired into having dinner catered for the group, fully expecting to be turned down with how last minute the request was, but the coordinator assured him the hotel kitchen could handle a group of their size.

Sebastian and his crew arrived early so Bas could pay for the rooms and retrieve the key cards to hand out when everyone arrived. Harlow had staggered the times of arrival, that way there weren't twenty shifters hovering around the lobby. It had been a good plan, but once they arrived, everyone either hung out in the lobby or the bar like they were having a reunion. Seeing all the smiles and hearing the laughter, Sebastian rolled with it.

All Sebastian's male relatives had shown up. Rafael's brothers, Dante, Gregor, and even Sin, who had flown in from the West Coast, were there along with his cousins, Frey, Julian, and Nikolas. Dante and his son Deklan, Frey and his son Jon, and Nikolas, Sophia, and their son Locke, arrived first. Torfinn and Bodi, two of the Norse crew, flew in with them from Atlanta. Next, coming from New York, were Gregor and

Tessa, Julian, Maveryck Lazlo and one of his twin sons, Major, along with Kayden, Nikita's brother.

Harlow flew in with Nikita and her mate, Madsen Payne, and Alpha Knox Millard. Over the years, Bas had personally met everyone in attendance except for Alpha Millard, Madsen, and Kayden Lazlo. Knox was as genuine in person as he was over the phone. Madsen, who entered the hotel with several silver cases in tow, couldn't keep his eyes off Nikita. If cartoon eye hearts were real, they would be floating around Madsen's head. They were a hacker match made in the stars. Kayden was a broody Gryphon/dire wolf hybrid, and Sebastian would be lying if he said he wasn't curious as to what forms the male could take when he shifted. Harlow and her siblings were the only other hybrids Bas knew of, and they were badass.

Bas had planned to make introductions when they gathered later in the conference room, but everyone handled that themselves as they grabbed a drink and mingled. Dakota stood with Sebastian until Lydia pulled her away to meet someone. She would return only to have Lydia take her away again. Her smile never waned, and whenever he checked her mood, Dakota was truly happy, not faking it. Hearing his mate laugh at something one of his family said filled his heart. As though she knew he was watching, she'd wink at him before returning her attention to whomever she was chatting with.

Tessa, not giving one shit they were in a nice hotel, whistled loudly, garnering everyone's attention. "Let's move the party to the bar and clear out the lobby. There's a private room where we can hang out."

Anthony, who was standing with Bas, grinned. "Gods, I love that woman." Anthony didn't hesitate to follow his mother. Tabby was stuck on a case, so she hadn't been able to meet them, much to Tessa's dismay. The twin's younger brother Andy had stayed behind with Tessa's parents.

Bas and Dakota joined the others in the private room where an impromptu wedding reception went on for several hours. The booze flowed, music was piped in so they could dance, and someone managed to find enough cupcakes for

everyone. Sebastian's face hurt from smiling so much. When it was time for supper, it was Dakota's turn to whistle loudly, getting a thumbs up from Tessa.

"Please join Sebastian and I for supper in the Magnolia Room. It's down the hall past the elevators, and there's a sign outside the door with our name on it."

The tables were set in a U so everyone could see each other. Sebastian had ordered a buffet instead of plated meals so they could serve themselves. Once everyone filed in, Bas shut the doors for privacy. Everyone went through the line, filling their plates and finding a seat.

Madsen opened one of his silver cases and pulled out several black devices, placing them around the room. Nikita went to the same case and came up with a pair of headphones, which she offered to Kaya, the only human in the room.

"These will allow you to hear the conversation better."

"Thank you." His mom put them over her ears, and when Bas whispered to her, Kaya's eyes shot up, and she smiled. She pulled them off to eat, but when everyone was finished and Bas got their attention, Kaya slid them back on.

"Again, thank you all for being here," Bas said softly. "The trip to Panther will take roughly two hours. When we arrive, this is what will happen..."

Sebastian laid out his plan for the next morning. They spent an hour tossing safety concerns and logistics back and forth, and after all questions had been asked and answered, they were ready. Some returned to the bar to relax and chat. Dakota remained in the private room with Lydia to learn how to use her new bracelets. Bas stayed with the females because he didn't want to be far from his mate. After she had the hang of it, the three of them joined the others to find Major and Anthony in a standoff. Harlow had her phone pointed at the two males, no doubt filming them and sending it to Carleigh.

"What's going on?" Bas asked.

Anthony pointed a finger at Major. "This jerkoff is asking for it."

“I just asked where Tabitha was.” Major had his beefy arms crossed over his chest. The smirk he wore said he wasn’t afraid of Anthony. It didn’t hurt that Maveryck and Kayden were standing beside him.

Anthony fisted his hands. “You asked if she was as hot as my mom. Not cool, fucker.”

“It’s a legitimate question,” Maveryck said, adding fuel to the fire. “Tessa is something else.”

“How would Natalia feel about you hitting on my mom?” Anthony tossed back.

“I wasn’t hitting on her. Damn, Kid. Slow your roll. Natalia has met Tessa. Even she thinks Tessa is a fireball. And I would never disrespect Gregor. I admire your parents. Major does as well.”

Gregor walked over and placed both hands on Anthony’s shoulders. “Chill, Son. You know your sister can handle herself. Besides, she could do a lot worse than Major.”

“Thank you, Gregor.” Major uncrossed his arms. “Honestly, I meant no disrespect.” He held out a hand, and after a few beats, Anthony relaxed and shook it.

When Major stepped back, Tessa was there with two beers. She offered one to the Gryphon. “Major, I appreciate the compliment, and if you want to meet Tabitha, I can arrange that, but I’ll have to warn you first.”

“Red—”

“What?” Tessa narrowed her eyes at Gregor.

He held up his hands. “Nothing. Carry on.”

“That’s what I thought.” Tessa winked at her mate, and Anthony groaned, scrubbing a hand down his face.

“My sister doesn’t need a matchmaker,” he muttered.

“Come on, Son. You and I both know your sister can handle whatever or whoever comes her way.” Gregor directed Anthony to the bar, leaving Tessa to tell Major how much of a badass Tabby was.

“Does this happen a lot?” Dakota asked.

“What? Tony being overprotective of his twin, or Tessa interfering in her kids’ love lives?”

“Yes,” Dakota deadpanned, and Bas laughed, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

Harlow chuckled while tapping away on her phone.

“Do I want to know?” Bas asked.

Harlow glanced up. “Probably not.” She put her phone in her pocket. “Dakota, may I buy you a drink?”

“Sure.” Dakota kissed Bas before leaving him to talk with the hacker.

The rest of the evening was less eventful, and after a couple of hours, Sebastian stole Dakota away to their room where he forgot about interfering family or upcoming fights by stripping his mate and making love.

Sunday morning, Kaya called Bas and requested that he and Dakota stop by before leaving. When they got to his parents’ room, Kaya hugged them both tightly and begged them both to be careful. Dakota promised they would, and then she asked Kaya to hold onto her wedding ring.

“I’d hate to shift quickly and lose it.”

“I’ll keep it safe,” Kaya promised.

Rafael kissed his mate, then escorted Bas and Dakota downstairs. Everyone loaded up in a caravan of black SUVs. Rafael asked to drive, so Bas and Dakota sat in the next row with Knox. Lydia rode with her father and brother, while Anthony drove his parents. Uncle Sinclair was in the passenger seat, and Nikita, Madsen, and Kayden filled the back row of their vehicle. Rafael and Sin chatted quietly, while Madsen talked animatedly about filming the meeting.

“This is going to be epic. Harlow and Nikki have already made plans on how to dub the audio.”

“If we need to. Kingston might see our group and do the right thing by backing down,” Nikita said.

Kayden growled, and Dakota gripped Sebastian's hand before turning in her seat. "You disagree?"

"I do. He's an Alpha who was both challenged and scorned."

Knox looked over his shoulder. "That is true, but when he sees a contingency of shifters far stronger than his pack, he may do the right thing." Kayden huffed but didn't argue. He, Nikita, and their mother didn't belong to a pack, therefore, didn't have an Alpha, but Bas had noticed the respect the Lazlo siblings showed Knox even though he didn't demand it.

The rest of the drive was spent talking about random topics like the lodge and Sebastian's plan to relocate. The closer to Panther they got, the quieter Dakota was. She checked her phone several times, hoping to hear from Jolee. Dakota's best friend had been radio silent ever since she quickly disconnected. That had been Wednesday, and Dakota was worried about her. Bas didn't say it, but he was too.

As agreed, the convoy drove straight through Panther to the pack house. What they hadn't agreed on was Kayden rolling down his window, shifting to his Eagle, and taking off out the window.

"Godsdamnit, what is he doing?" Bas seethed.

"Making a statement," Nikita said.

"What kind though?" Dakota asked.

"You'll see." Nikita obviously knew what her brother had planned. Bas hoped it didn't come back to bite them in the ass.

As they rolled down the drive, wolves ran beside the vehicles, several of them howling to alert their pack they had company. When the vehicles came to a stop, everyone piled out. Sebastian and Dakota took the lead with the others fanning out beside them. Kingston ran out of the pack house with Sloane and a female at his side.

"What the fuck is this?" King demanded. Dozens of wolves and people alike strode toward their Alpha, ready to defend their leader.

Sebastian made sure Madsen was recording before he spoke. “When I met with you last week, I wasn’t knowledgeable of the ways of wolves. Alpha Knox Millard was kind enough to instruct me that my words could be misconstrued as a challenge. That was not my intention. When I came to you regarding the shifter council, things got out of hand. I have returned to make amends.”

“You kidnapped my Alpha Mate. There is no making amends for that.” The female standing beside King looked as though his words punched her in the gut.

“Regular wolves don’t have fated mates, and Dakota never agreed to be yours. Gargoyles do, however, and Dakota is mine.”

“What’s a Gargoyle?” the female asked. King had lied to his pack about Sebastian, but by the look on his face, King knew he couldn’t lie again. Before King could respond, several of the pack who hadn’t shifted became frantic, pointing at the sky.

“Alpha, look,” an older male yelled.

Bas didn’t have to wonder any longer what Kayden looked like in his hybrid form. A large half eagle, half wolf circled overhead, squawking. It was impressive as fuck, and Bas was glad the shifter was on his side. Kayden landed in front of Sebastian, his powerful wings blowing a gust of wind toward the wolves. He then shifted to his Lion and let out a mighty roar. The wolves closest took a step back.

“Is that a Gargoyle?” the same male asked.

“No, I am.” Anthony removed his shirt, then spread his wings behind him.

The crowd of wolves murmured, and King growled, shutting them up.

“You scared, Stone? Did you bring... whatever he is to fight your battles?” King pointed at Kayden.

Kayden shifted to his skin. Unlike regular wolves, dire wolf magic allowed clothes to shift with the male. Kayden

turned his back on King and silently strode to stand beside Nikita.

“Show off,” Anthony grumbled.

Bas ignored his cousin and focused on King. “I didn’t come to fight; I came to talk.”

“And you need all of them with you to talk?” King gestured at the opposing group.

“I brought my friends and family to show your pack there are other types of shifters in the world. We all need to band together to keep our secret safe. As I told you and the wolves who were in the meeting, there is no shame in conceding. Your pack needs their Alpha alive.”

“Are you threatening me?” Fur sprouted along King’s arms as his wolf pushed forward.

“No. I want a peaceful resolution.”

“Fuck that,” Sloane hissed.

“Of course *you* wouldn’t want peace. Where’s Jolee?” Dakota asked Sloane.

King placed his hands on the porch rail and snarled at Dakota. “My wolves are none of your concern.”

“Jolee’s still my best friend, and if you or your mutt hurt her, you’ll be sorry,” Dakota threatened, pointing at Sloane.

“Kody?” a female voice called out. An older woman started her way, but a male grabbed her arm, stopping her.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Oh, goddess. You’re alive,” Diana cried, clamping a hand over her mouth.

“I tried to call you, but Arthur intercepted the call. I told him to tell you I’m alive and well. I guess he didn’t pass the message along. He was too busy causing trouble for my mate.” Dakota turned toward her mother, and Sebastian kept his eyes on her and King both. “Hey, Arthur. I figured you’d be in jail by now for filing a false police report.”

“Sebastian Stone is the one who should be in jail,” Pheonix said, moving to stand beside his father.

“For what? Rescuing me from you?” Dakota asked.

Phoenix stepped toward Dakota. “You turned on our family. Our pack. I should gut you myself.” Tessa and Lydia moved in front of Dakota. As if they had choreographed the movement, the two females swept their hands down, and swords appeared in their hands.

“That’s my Queen you’re threatening,” Tessa said, pointing the tip of one blade at Phoenix.

“Queen?” Phoenix narrowed his eyes at Tessa.

“Sebastian is the King of Gargoyles. All two thousand of us,” Lydia said. “Dakota, being his mate, is our Queen.”

“You can’t prove that,” Sloane called out. “Anyone can say they’re mated.”

“No, but we can prove they were married Friday,” Rafael said. “Sebastian’s mother and I were there as witnesses.” He moved to stand behind Dakota and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Dakota is my Queen, but she is also my daughter now. My mate and I welcomed her into our family, and we can’t wait to show her how parents should behave.” Goading Arthur wasn’t a good idea, but Bas trusted his papa.

“Who the fuck do you think you are, telling me how to deal with my daughter?” Arthur pushed Diana behind him so hard, she stumbled. She would have landed on her ass if Pheonix hadn’t caught her.

“I don’t think. I know I’m the one who’s going to teach you a lesson. A male should never put his hands on his female in anger. Or any female for that matter.”

“You got that right. Which one of you bastards is Sloane?” Nikolas asked, his wings popping out behind him, shredding his shirt.

“I am, motherfucker.” Sloane jumped off the porch, shifting in midair. Before his paws hit the ground, a massive grey wolf launched past Sebastian and took Sloane to the dirt.

Within seconds, Kayden had his jaws on Sloane's neck, pinning him down. Sebastian had to give props to Sloane; he didn't give up. He used his claws to scratch at the larger wolf.

"Godsdamnit, Sloane was mine," Anthony groused.

A wolf howled, and where Arthur had stood moments before, his beast now pawed at the ground. Rafael didn't bother removing his shirt. He phased, releasing his wings. "Protect our Queen," he said to Tessa and Lydia as he strode past them to get to Dakota's dad.

As more wolves flooded the area, the fighters on Sebastian's side either phased or shifted. Sebastian removed his shirt, getting ready for the fight he knew was coming. When he phased, he turned to King. "What's it going to be? Stand down and live, or leave your pack without an Alpha?"

The female next to King grabbed his arm. "Please don't, King."

King shoved her to the side. "Shut up, Tinsley. Go make yourself fucking useful."

"Yes, Alpha." The female shifted and leapt off the porch.

King also shifted, and Bas sighed. "Die it is."

Chapter 23

WHEN SEBASTIAN RELEASED his wings, Dakota shivered. Shit was getting real. Her mate was ready to face off with King, who wouldn't listen to reason. That didn't surprise her in the least. Tessa and Lydia flanked Dakota, swords at the ready. It wasn't in her nature to stand down while others protected her. Her Wolf was ready to be released, but until it was necessary, she would remain in her skin.

Dante and Deklan, looking like twins instead of father and son, stood side-by-side, wings out. Jon resembled his father in looks, but Frey towered over the younger Gargoyle and had about fifty pounds of muscle on him. Maveryck was in his full Gryphon, while Major was threatening in his Lion form. Harlow chose her Eagle, and she flew circles above the crowd. Nikolas and Locke had yet to release their wings as they hovered near Lydia. Tor and Bodi looked like Norwegian gods as they stared down the wolves close to them. Knox remained close to Nikita and Madsen, the latter who still had his camera out. Gregor and Rafael stood opposite the Norse brothers, keeping that side of the crowd back. No, that wasn't Rafael. It was Sinclair. Dakota could only tell the difference from behind because Sin's hair was longer.

A snarl brought Dakota's attention back to her mate and former Alpha. King jumped from the porch and ran full tilt toward Sebastian. Before he could reach him, Bas launched into the air. King skidded, growling when he met nothing. He snarled and snapped his jaws, turning to look for his opponent. Sebastian hovered above the wolf, and King bent his front legs, then jumped toward Sebastian. Bas flew toward King, clashing in mid-air. King slashed his claws across Bas's chest, and Dakota cringed. Bas still had faint scars from the last time he'd been attacked, but this time, there was no gouged skin. No blood dripping. Being a Gargoyle, his skin was impenetrable now.

With no grip on Sebastian, King fell to the ground, and Sebastian dove after him, grabbing the wolf around his torso before he could get his feet under him. Sebastian dug his claws into King's sides as he lifted him off the ground. More wolves howled in anguish as they watched their Alpha twist and squirm, doing his best to get loose. It was no use, though. Sebastian had a death grip on the beast.

"I don't want to kill you," Bas told King.

Kingston, slashed the air with all four paws, kicking and punching. He shook his head back and forth, trying to get away, but Sebastian's claws had found purchase and weren't letting go. When King continued thrashing about, Sebastian wrapped his wings around the animal. Kingston was no longer able to move anything but his head, and it too was still.

Rafael didn't initiate a fight with Arthur. Arthur shifted and pawed the dirt, but when Kingston attacked Sebastian, all eyes had been on the two Alpha males. Now that King was subdued, Arthur returned his focus to Rafael. If Arthur were a different type of father, Dakota would feel bad for him, but it was Rafael she was rooting for. He had claimed Dakota in front of her old pack, and she loved him more for it.

"Dakota, watch out!" Anthony yelled.

Lydia turned at the same time Dakota did, her swords raised in front of her. One of the weapons impaled a small wolf who had launched itself at Dakota's back. Lydia released her grip on the hilt when the animal fell to its side, unmoving. "Oh, my gods," Lydia cried. "Is she...?"

The small wolf shifted back to human. "Tinsley," Dakota whispered. She wasn't surprised that the female attacked. Tinsley had been the worst when it came to gossiping and trying to cause trouble for Dakota over the years. The younger woman felt she should be the Alpha Mate. Now she'd never get the chance to be anyone's mate.

"What did I do?" Lydia whispered.

"What is your family motto?" Tessa asked, wrapping an arm around Lydia's shoulder while keeping her sword ready.

Lydia swallowed hard. “Family is everything, and we defend our family.”

“Exactly, and you defended our Queen,” Tessa said calmly, moving her hand to the side of Lydia’s neck. “Fisting your heart and vowing your loyalty isn’t merely lip service. It’s what you’ve trained your whole life for. There is no higher honor, Lydia.”

It was at that moment when Dakota truly realized how important she was. Those who had joined Sebastian that day were willing to kill or die for her.

Locke seemed to realize his sister was in distress. The large male ran over and pulled Lydia’s sword from Tinsley’s downed body, then led Lydia to where Nikolas hovered near Kayden and Sloane.

Tessa put her back to Dakota’s. “Call on your weapons,” she instructed. Dakota whispered the words that changed her bracelets into two short swords. Nikita, in her dire wolf fur, bounded to Dakota’s side, snarling at anyone who came close.

Rafael punched Arthur’s beast in the jaw, sending him sprawling. When he got back to his paws, Rafael bounced on his feet, holding his hands up and wiggling his fingers in a “bring it on” gesture. “I can do this all day,” he told Arthur. Her father was stubborn. Or maybe it was his pride that had him surging forward again. Rafael used one of his powerful wings to sweep Arthur off his feet.

“Arthur, stop, please,” Diana begged, while she and Phoenix watched. Nix must have felt her eyes, because he looked up from where their father was getting his ass kicked and snarled at her. His concern for Arthur morphed into the meanest scowl he’d ever given Dakota, and that was saying something. She was quicker than her brother, but with so many wolves in the way, she’d never outrun him. No, she would have to fight. Thankful she’d practiced some the night before, Dakota faced Nix fully and held the swords the way Lydia had shown her.

Phoenix ripped his shirt over his head as he stalked toward her. Nikita growled at him, and Nix stumbled. Then

another wolf appeared beside Nikita, both blocking Nix's path. Anthony stepped behind Dakota with his wings outstretched.

"You won't get through them," Anthony said to Nix, gesturing at the two wolves. "But if you do? I'm gonna tear you a new asshole. You've tormented my Queen for the last time."

Tessa tossed a thumb her son's direction. "What he said."

Dakota appreciated her Clan protecting her, but this was her fight. She pushed past the wolves and faced her brother. "You really wanna do this?"

"Yes, I fucking do. All my life I've played second fiddle to you all because you're an alpha bitch. *Protect your sister, Nix. Kody's important, Nix. Kody's going to elevate our family to the highest ranks.*"

"You could have done that yourself if you weren't such a dick. Why not go after Savannah?"

"Because she turned me down! Once again, I was the disappointment, relegated to being your protector."

"I didn't need your protection. I needed a big brother who loved me and had my back."

"Too fucking bad for you because I hate you." Phoenix shifted, but Dakota wasn't ready. He hated her? Her heart thumped wildly in her chest as she raised her swords. Could she kill Nix? Saliva dripped from his fangs as he crouched low, readying to attack. Nix launched himself at Dakota, but before he reached her, she was pulled out of the way by Tessa. Where Dakota had been seconds before, Anthony now stood in her place, catching Nix and tossing him to the ground. Anthony didn't give Nix time to recover. He straddled the wolf and grabbed his head, twisting. The snap of bones was loud, and someone – Diana – yelled. She ran to where Nix, now in his human form, lay unmoving, howling with her human voice. Anthony rose and stepped away, surveying the area. Unlike Lydia, Tony was ready to take down another foe.

Dakota's family was shattered. *She* was shattered. Her old pack was falling apart, and for what? Because King was

too proud to step aside? Because her brother hated her? Goddess, it was too much.

“Stop!” Dakota yelled. The fighting continued, so she partially shifted, then tossed back her head and howled. It was like time froze. The air around her stilled. Dakota was an alpha, but now, she was Queen, and she had Sebastian’s bite. His strength. The power of Gargoyles running through her veins. The wolves of her old pack, including her father, dropped to their bellies. Those still in their skin knelt and bared their necks to her.

Beside her, Tessa murmured, “Holy shit.”

When Kingston shifted from his wolf and stopped struggling, Sebastian released him. King fell to his knees, his wary eyes on her. Bas smiled at Dakota and inclined his head, letting her take the lead.

Stepping out of the circle of her Clan, Dakota faced her old pack. She propped one sword on her shoulder and pointed the other at King. “Two lives have already been lost, and for what? Because you were too prideful to listen to reason. Too stubborn to admit there are creatures stronger than you. We came here to talk peacefully, yet you still demanded the challenge be fulfilled. Would you like for my mate to finish the job? Or would you prefer to swallow your wounded pride, mourn the loss...” Dakota choked back a sob as her mother wailed beside Nix’s body. “Mourn the loss of two of your wolves, then lead the Bridgewater pack with honor? Choose wisely because if you don’t, the pack will lose not only its Alpha but also its second. I will turn my mate loose on you, and that Lion over there will finish the job he so easily started.”

Kingston lowered his eyes and bared his neck. None of the pack argued or called him out for being a coward.

Dakota hitched a breath at King’s submission. “Before we get to what happens next, where is Jolee?”

“Sloane,” King called out to his second who was still in his fur. The wolf raised his head but kept his eyes on the Lion.

“Kayden, don’t kill Sloane when he shifts, yeah?” Dakota commanded.

The Lion huffed, then returned to his human form. “You’re no fun.”

“Shift,” Dakota demanded of Sloane. He fought the compulsion, but in the end, he had to comply. When he was once again in his skin, she asked, “Where is Jolee?”

Sloane snarled his lip. “That bitch is—”

Kayden grabbed Sloane by the neck, lifting him off the ground easily. “The next words out of your mouth will be said respectfully, or I’ll go against Dakota’s wishes and rip your dick off and make you eat it.”

Sloane’s eyes widened, and for the first time Dakota could recall, the male showed fear. He might be a major asshole, but Sloane was smart enough to know he would not win a fight against Kayden. Sloane nodded as best he could. When Kayden dropped him, Sloane coughed and cleared his throat. “She’s in my bedroom.”

Dakota didn’t want Jolee to be rescued by a stranger, especially if she was injured. “Anthony.”

Tony stepped up beside her. “Yes, My Queen?”

“Please go retrieve my best friend. Second floor, last bedroom on the right.”

“On it.” Anthony withdrew his wings, then he used his shifter speed and was gone in a flash.

Dakota pointed the tip of her sword at Sloane. “She better be unharmed.” Sloane wouldn’t meet her eyes. He crossed his hands over his flaccid cock. No one spoke while they waited. A roar from the second floor rattled the windows. Sloane took a step back, but Kayden gripped the male’s hair, tipping his head back.

“Hmm. Seems like I might get to play after all,” Kayden growled.

Dakota kept her eyes on the door, but Anthony didn’t return. Instead, he yelled, “Dante!”

Sebastian's uncle took off running. If Anthony was calling for the doctor, Jolee couldn't be in good shape. Dakota began pacing, swinging her swords down and up. She wanted someone's head, and that someone was Sloane. She stalked back and forth in front of him as she waited for Dante and Anthony to help Jolee. Sloane whined the closer she got. Did he realize his time on Earth was close to an end? Because if Jolee was as bad as Dakota suspected...

"Look," one of the female betas said, pointing to the door.

Anthony came out carrying Jolee bridal style. A blanket covered her body, so Dakota couldn't see Jolee's injuries. Dakota dropped her weapons as she rushed to her best friend. Anthony's face told the tale, but she had to see for herself. Dakota lifted the blanket, and Jolee's body was riddled with cuts and bruises.

"We need to get her to the hospital," Dante said softly. "Gregor, you drive. Tessa, come with us so she has a female with her."

Major, having put his clothes back on, joined them. "I'll go in case we need to voice the hospital staff. There's going to be questions we probably don't want to answer honestly."

Who didn't offer to go were any of the wolves. Dakota returned to where she had dropped her swords. She leaned over and picked them up, turning to face Sloane when she stood upright. Nikolas strode past Dakota, his claws out. Kayden gripped Sloane's hair in one hand and his arm in the other so he couldn't get away.

Without a word, Nikolas raked his claws down Sloane's chest, tearing flesh from bone. Sloane twisted as he howled in his human voice, but the sound was cut off when Nikolas punched past Sloane's sternum and ripped out his heart. Kayden dropped the male's body and wiped his hands on his jeans.

Nikolas faced the pack, holding the heart in front of him. "That bastard put his hands on my daughter. He abused Jolee. Males like that don't deserve to breathe." Nikolas tossed the

organ to the ground in front of Kingston. “If anyone wants to avenge his death? Come and get me.”

No one moved. Hell, Dakota didn't know if the wolves were still breathing at that point. She looked at each member of the pack who was there. Many weren't, but they would hear what happened that day. Sebastian and Rafael stepped up to flank Dakota. Bas put his arm around her waist, and Rafael placed a hand on her shoulder. When she felt the energy behind her change, she glanced over her shoulder as everyone who had come with them spread out behind her. As impressive as their beasts were, having them stand together in their human forms was even better.

“Please rise and shift so I can see your faces,” Dakota commanded the wolves. Within seconds, all the pack was standing in their skin. Arthur scowled at her as he stood over his dead son's body. “Not that I owe any of you an explanation, but I'll give you one anyway. For years, I have denied Kingston's request to be the Alpha Mate. The reason for that is this male at my side. I met Sebastian ten years ago in Utah. Phoenix attacked Sebastian, leaving him for dead. As you can see, he lived. Our old Alpha made our family move because my brother was too much of a liability. Not only did I have to leave my pack and friends behind, but also the teen who was my mate. Wolves don't have fated mates, but Gargoyles do, and somehow deep down, I knew Sebastian and I belonged together, so I put faith in the goddess that she would bring him to me. She did.”

Dakota took a deep breath, then blew it out. “What could have been a peaceful, beneficial arrangement was shattered today. Lives were lost. I understand when a challenge is made it should be honored under normal circumstances. These were anything but. Sebastian didn't challenge King for the role as Alpha of the pack. He threatened him because he knew I was his mate. If you weren't paying attention, know this – Gargoyles hold females in the highest regard. Not just their kind, but all females. That's a lesson I believe the pack would do well to learn. Whether you do or not...?” Dakota shrugged. “As for your Alpha, Kingston made the right decision – live to lead the pack.”

“Is he still our Alpha?” someone called out.

“He is,” Sebastian answered. “As Dakota said, I wasn’t fighting Kingston to take his place. I am King of Gargoyles, so I have my own Clan.”

“I was referring to Dakota. Her Wolf commanded us, and we had to listen,” the male countered.

“King is still your Alpha. Dakota is my Queen, but she’s also one of you. Should you ever find yourselves in need of assistance, we’ll be there.”

“We don’t want your help,” Arthur growled.

Kingston turned toward Dakota’s parents. “Shut up, Arthur. You don’t speak for this pack unless you would like to fight me?” Arthur lowered his eyes and bared his neck. “If anyone wants to challenge me, do so now.” When no one stepped forward, King turned to Dakota. “You proved today that you are the strongest of us all. I felt your power the day I met you, and that is why I wanted you as Alpha Mate. Together we would have raised some powerful pups. I won’t apologize for fighting for you. I was doing what I thought best for the pack. As for assistance, I appreciate the offer. I won’t say we’ll never need it because no one knows what the future will bring.”

Dakota spoke the words to change her swords back to bracelets. King’s eyes widened, and Dakota might have smirked if she wasn’t still raging on the inside. “I’m going to check on Jolee, and when she’s well enough, I will be taking her to live with me. In a few weeks, we will be back to retrieve our belongings. Until then, I would appreciate it if you would make sure both our homes are left untouched.” King said he would, and Dakota turned to leave.

“Kody!” Diana called out. She was standing a few feet away from Arthur, looking lost. Dakota took hold of Sebastian’s hand, and he walked with her. And even though she hadn’t asked him to, Rafael joined them.

“Mom.” Dakota held her arms out, and Diana rushed forward, embracing her daughter tightly. “Do you want to

come with me?" Dakota whispered.

"I can't. My place is here." Diana stepped back and placed both hands on Dakota's cheeks. "Promise you'll visit."

"I promise." Dakota kissed her mother's temple before walking away, ignoring her father. He could kick rocks as far as she was concerned. Dakota called out, "Hey, Maveryck?" The Gryphon looked her way, and Dakota twirled her finger in the air. "Do your thing."

Maveryck inclined his head. He nodded to Kayden who shifted to his Lion and roared, getting everyone's attention. Maveryck crossed his arms over his chest when the wolves were silent. "You will tell everyone in the pack the truth of what happened today. As for you males, going forward every one of you will be respectful of your females and treat them like the treasures they are." Major was supposed to be the one to "voice" the wolves, but he was on his way to the hospital, and Maveryck had been in on the discussion the night before. Regardless of the outcome, compulsion had been in the plan. The fight wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been, but any loss of life hadn't been necessary. Except for Sloane's. Dakota wished she could bring him back just so she could kill him herself. He'd always been an asshole, but to abuse Jolee that way?

Dakota felt the Gryphon's compulsion, but since it didn't pertain to her, she continued to the SUV with Sebastian and Rafael beside her. Bas opened the passenger door for her, but Dakota turned and waited on the rest of their group to make their way to the vehicles. It wasn't that she didn't trust the wolves, but she wanted to make sure no one – namely her father – didn't get a last second itch to retaliate.

Kingston called everyone into the pack house. As he waited on the porch, he stared at Dakota with a look she'd never seen on his face – resignation. He had three funerals to plan, and that was on him. She climbed into the vehicle and buckled up, blowing out another breath. It was over.

When Bas was in the driver's seat, he reached over and grabbed her face, kissing Dakota soundly. He didn't ask if she

was okay. Instead, he said, “I’m proud of you, *Cucciolina*.” They remained in their bubble as the others filled the SUV. Someone’s phone pinged, and Sebastian moved back to his side of the vehicle.

Rafael said, “That’s Gregor. They were on their way to Welch when Jolee woke up and freaked out. Anthony got her settled, then she shifted. Gregor said they stopped in the Panther Forest so Jolee could get out of the car. I’m forwarding the coordinates to your phone.”

Sebastian started the SUV, then tapped his screen, and the address popped up. He put the vehicle in drive and headed away from the pack house.

“Does anyone know how Lydia is?” Dakota asked.

Nikita was in the back row with Madsen. “She’s rattled. Her dad’s going to take her home with him for a while.”

“First kills are the worst,” Knox said sagely.

Dakota wouldn’t know, thanks to Anthony, and she prayed she never found out.

Chapter 24

SEBASTIAN NO LONGER had to reach out with his shifter senses to gauge how Dakota was feeling. Their bond was amazing. His mate was stronger than he ever imagined. When she threw her head back and howled, dropping the shifted wolves to their bellies and those in their skin to their knees, Bas felt it. He felt her power down to his soul. Now he felt her anxiety. Her worry for Jolee. Bas didn't give her false platitudes of how strong her friend was, or how she'd be fine. He didn't know that, and he would never lie to his mate.

After Knox made the statement about the first kill being the hardest, no one said anything. There were those in the vehicle who had killed and those who hadn't. Sebastian had come close to knowing what that was like. When he held King in his grip, Bas was close to ending the male's life. His beast demanded it, then Dakota brought everything to a halt with her Wolf's voice. He thanked the gods for his mate's timing.

Rafael called Kaya and let her know it was over and everyone was safe. As soon as they got Jolee squared away, they would be back to the hotel. Sebastian found the others easily enough, and when he parked behind their vehicle, Dakota was out her door before he got the engine turned off. She stopped long enough to speak with Tessa, then she was running through the woods. Sebastian and the rest of his crew exited their vehicle to join Dante, Major, Gregor, and Tessa.

"What's going on?" Rafael asked Dante.

"As bad as Jolee's injuries were, shifting took care of most of them. She was chained up in Sloane's bedroom so she couldn't shift and heal herself."

"Why is she in the woods and not out here with you all?" Bas asked.

“She probably feels safer in her fur,” Tessa said. “That, or she doesn’t have clothes for when she shifts back.”

“We need to get clothes for her then,” Bas said. “We can’t take her to the hotel as a wolf nor naked.”

“Gregor and I will take care of it. We’ll be back shortly.” Tessa grabbed her mate’s hand and pulled him toward their SUV.

Sebastian looked toward the woods and opened his senses. Not for Dakota. He could feel both relief and anger in his mate. He felt irritation and confusion as well as sorrow and hope. Since Anthony was with the females, he chalked the first two emotions up to his cousin. Instead of barging into the woods, Bas reached out to Dakota.

“Tessa and Gregor are going to grab some clothes for Jolee. Is it okay if I approach?”

“Yes, and maybe send Anthony back to the car? He’s stomping around like an ape.”

Sebastian grinned. If he didn’t know better, he’d think Anthony had feelings for Jolee. Then again, he probably did after spending the night with her. Too bad they weren’t mates.

“I’ll be right back,” Bas told his papa and took off jogging. When he neared the sound of Dakota’s voice, he slowed his steps. “Tony,” Bas whispered. All three heads turned. “Can you go wait on your parents? They’ve gone to find Jolee some clothes.” Anthony narrowed his eyes, and Bas nodded his head to the clearing, wordlessly telling his cousin to get lost.

“Fine.” Anthony took a step toward Jolee, but Dakota’s glare stopped him from getting closer. With a huff, he took off.

“Sorry about him. He can be a little zealous with his protectiveness.” Jolee’s Wolf was on its stomach with its head resting on Dakota’s outstretched legs. Bas sat on the ground, mimicking his mate. “I’m sorry we didn’t get to you sooner. If I had known—” Jolee raised her head, whining. Not wanting to remind the female of her trauma, Bas changed the subject. “I wish you could have seen Dakota. Gods, she was fierce. She

proved what I already knew – she was the true Alpha of the pack. Anyway, we haven't discussed where we're going next, but I think heading to Atlanta to relax for a bit might be best. What do you think, *Cucciolina*? My house is plenty big enough for all of us."

"What about your new office?"

"Even if the space was move-in ready, I won't utilize it until the remodel of the lodge is underway, and we are living on-site. Jolee, Dakota already mentioned you helping us with the lodge, and I hope you'll take us up on the offer. I want the three of us to sit down and go over the vision I have, and while I'm getting my office squared away, the two of you can oversee the renovations. If that doesn't interest you, we'll find something else that does."

Jolee raised her head again and yipped. Sebastian didn't speak wolf, but Dakota's hand paused in her friend's fur. "Oh, my goddess." Jolee turned her furry face toward Dakota's, angling it like a dog trying to figure something out. Dakota laughed, and Jolee yipped louder. "Somehow, I can hear her in my head."

"She's part of your pack, and I would hope part of our Clan."

Dakota stroked Jolee's fur. "What do you say? Want to be part of our Clan?"

Jolee rolled to her back, giving Dakota her belly. "She said yes."

With Dakota translating, Jolee assured Sebastian her injuries were mostly healed. He wanted to see for himself that it was true, but he had to trust Jolee to tell the truth. When Tessa returned with clothes, Bas gave the females privacy and strode back to where the others were waiting. He didn't relay their conversation since everyone had been able to listen in if they wanted. Instead, Bas went to Anthony and asked about the condition Jolee was in when Tony found her. As Anthony described what he'd found, Sebastian wished he'd been the one to rip out Sloane's heart.

When the females walked out of the woods, Sebastian met them halfway. Jolee, now dressed like Tessa in jeans, a tee, and leather boots, smiled at Sebastian. Holding out her arms, she said, “See? Good as new except for one thing. I’m freaking starving.” Anthony growled, and Jolee walked straight to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. “Thank you for getting me out of there.”

“You’re welcome. Let’s get you some food. I know how you females get when you’re hangry.”

Jolee stepped back and play punched him in the stomach before asking, “Can we get pizza?”

Anthony slung his arm over her shoulder, angling her toward one of the SUV’s. “As long as there’s no—”

“Pineapple. Yes, we’re all aware of your aversion,” Jolee sassed.

“What is happening right now?” Tessa whispered.

Dakota grabbed Sebastian’s hand. “You probably don’t want to know.”

“Sure I do. Are they—?”

“Let it go, Red.” Gregor picked his mate up and carried her to the car, kissing her the whole way. Bas would say it was to shut his mate up, but Gregor and Tessa wrote the book on PDA.

Once in the car, Bas asked Frey to call the others and tell them what was going on. He expected some of them to head on back to the hotel, but when they arrived at the Italian restaurant, their smallish group turned into a large one with everyone in attendance except for Lydia, Nikolas, and Locke. They were on their way to Sophia, and their family was planning on flying home early.

Throughout lunch, Bas kept his eye on Jolee, as did several Goyles. The female was too bubbly. Too happy. Too quick to laugh at Anthony’s stupid jokes. Dakota leaned against Sebastian’s shoulder as she reached across him for the red pepper.

“I’m worried about her too, but right now, in front of everyone, she needs to put on a brave face. When we get to the hotel, she can break down in private.”

Bas kissed the top of his mate’s head. She knew Jolee better than anyone. He also felt his mate’s sorrow. He wanted to get her alone and take care of her.

Sophia left their room keys with Kaya, so when Sebastian and the others arrived at the hotel, Kaya passed one of the keys to Bas, but not before grabbing his shoulders and checking him over. She then wrapped her arms around Dakota, kissing her hair and telling her how proud she was. Dakota let Kaya comfort her as long as her mother-in-law wanted.

“Jolee, this is my mother-in-law, Kaya,” Dakota said once Kaya turned loose.

Bas could tell his momma wanted to take Jolee in her arms and smother her with love too, but she refrained. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Jolee. Tessa said she got you plenty of clothes, but if you need anything else, please let me know.”

“I will. Thank you,” Jolee responded quietly. The exuberance was gone, and the female was flagging.

Bas and Dakota accompanied Jolee to the room Lydia had been using. Sebastian left his mate to deal with her best friend and went to his parents’ suite. Kaya already knew what happened, but when he walked through the door, she still grabbed him up in another hug.

“I wish I could have been there,” she said as she stepped back. “Your papa told me how fierce you and Dakota both were. He also told me about Jolee. She was putting up a good front, but that young woman is hurting. You can see it in her eyes.”

Bas kissed his mom’s cheek before moving to sit down on the sofa. “Her physical wounds healed when she shifted, but I have a feeling the mental wounds are going to take a while for her to get over. Dakota was talking to Jolee on the phone on Wednesday, and Jolee hung up abruptly. I’d say that’s when Sloane got to her. When Tony went up to rescue

her from Sloane's room, she was tied to the bed and unconscious. She had multiple bruises and gashes like he'd clawed her. Since she was tied up, she couldn't shift and heal herself. What sucks is that Jolee and Sloane went out a few times, and Jolee had hoped they would be mates one day."

Kaya fisted her hands. "I hope his death was painful."

"Uncle Nik ripped his heart out, so I would say it was."

"Good." Kaya sat down on the other end of the sofa. "Now that her pack has been handled, what's next for you and your mate?"

"We'll probably head to Atlanta and chill for a bit. If we get to purchase the property next to the lodge, we'll come back and decide where to build our house and get started on clearing the trees off. Jolee agreed to help Dakota with overseeing renovations on the lodge, so that'll give her something to occupy her time and mind."

"I can see why you like it here. Atlanta was never your style."

"No, it wasn't. I understand why Papa settled there. It's easier to get lost when surrounded by half a million people. Speaking of Papa, where is he?" The last time Bas saw his father was in the lobby.

"He drove Sin to the airport. Now that the fun is over, he wants to get back to Rocky."

"He's leaving already? I didn't get to say goodbye or to thank him. Damn." Bas scrubbed a hand down his face.

"Sin knows you appreciate him showing up, as does everyone else who was here. That's what Clan does, Bas. They have your back no questions asked, and no thanks needed."

"I get that, but not everyone is in our Clan. Knox and the wolves, the Gryphons..."

"The Gryphons are family through Harlow, so they're going to show up if you call. The wolves had a vested interest in the meeting. And that's what this is all about, different species coming together and forming a council to keep our

secret safe. It's been many years since something like this happened, not since you were a baby, but I've seen it happen time and time again. Your father, his brothers, and their cousins went through hell with Alistair and then Drago. The Gryphons had their hands full with The Ministry. I just pray this is the last incident for many years. You and Dakota deserve to have some peace while you get to know one another and start your new life together. Why don't you go wait for Dakota in your suite? Maybe take a shower and relax?"

Bas rolled his head toward his mom. "Trying to get rid of me?"

Kaya reached over and smacked his leg. "Of course not, but you've had a rough day. So has your mate. She's going to need you after she gets Jolee settled."

"Shouldn't I go downstairs and, I don't know, mingle? Talk to everyone who was with us today?"

"You have plenty of time for that. Besides, your aunt Tessa will no doubt have everyone rounded up in the bar. She and Tony will entertain them while you take care of your mate."

"Okay, but don't you and Papa leave without telling me."

"We won't. I promise."

Bas stood, leaned over and kissed Kaya on the cheek again, then headed to his room. When he opened the door, he froze. His mate was standing by the window looking out. She didn't turn when he approached. Bas pressed his front to his mate's back, snaking his arms around her waist. "Are you okay? Never mind. I can feel you aren't."

Dakota placed her hands on top of his and leaned her head against his chest. "I was thinking about what Sloane did to Jolee. He knew she was on the phone with me. He stood outside her door and listened in on the conversation. He told her King wanted to see her, but when they arrived at the pack house, Sloane forced her to his room. He called her a whore for sleeping with Anthony. Sloane told her she had to convince me to come back and accept the Alpha Mate role. Jolee

refused, so he beat her. She tried to tell him you and I were already mated, but he didn't believe her. That, or he didn't care. Sloane has always been a hothead, and I warned her more than once that he wasn't the kind of male she should tie herself to, but she wanted to feel important. Since King had his sights set on me, the Alpha Mate position would never be hers, but she could be fourth in line if she was Sloane's mate."

"Why was that important? Being that far up the line?"

"She's an omega. Without being mated to someone with status, that's all she would ever be. In our pack, omegas weren't considered anything more than pup breeders. You saw how my father treated my mother."

"And I also saw how he and your brother treated you, yet you're an alpha."

"Yes, but I was an unmated female. That's little better than an omega unless you are part of the Alpha's security force, and King wouldn't hear of me being an enforcer. When I was talking to Jolee, it dawned on me that my father was looking for the same thing – status. If I were Alpha Mate, my family would have been just as important as King's. That's why Arthur was adamant I accept the position. It had nothing to do with saving the pack. It had everything to do with elevating the Young name so that Nix wouldn't be just another wolf. None of the females were interested in my brother."

"Because he was an asshole," Bas seethed. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize for speaking the truth. Nix was a bastard to me my whole life. Am I sad he's gone? Not really, and that's something I'll have to deal with. But back to the females not wanting him. If Nix had been an important asshole, they would have overlooked his attitude, the same way Jolee overlooked Sloane's." Dakota turned in Sebastian's arms and pressed her cheek to his chest. "My heart hurts, and my brain is tired. Is it okay if we shower and take a nap?"

"Anything you want, My Love." Sebastian lifted Dakota in his arms and carried her to the en suite where he started the shower, and while it was heating, removed his mate's clothes. He set her in the stall, then quickly got naked. Bas bathed

Dakota, washed and conditioned her hair, and once they were done, he dried her body. Then he sat her on the closed toilet lid and detangled her hair. Having watched her add the special serum, Bas did that for her as well. He needed to learn to braid it so he could take care of that task too, but for now, she had to do it herself. While Dakota finished in the bathroom, Bas turned down the bed, closed the blackout curtains, flipped the AC on low, and when she was ready, Bas tucked her in next to him. His mind wouldn't let him sleep, so he held his mate while she rested.

By the time they made it downstairs, everyone was gathered in the same room they'd met in the day before. Another buffet was set up, and Bas was pleased to see Jolee sitting with Kaya and Tessa. He felt it would do the female good to be around her new Clan instead of holing up in her room alone.

After he and Dakota finished eating, Bas stood and clinked his fork against his beer bottle. "Can I have your attention please? I wanted to take a moment to thank everyone for being here. A highly intelligent female told me thanks wouldn't be needed." Sebastian winked at his momma. "But I wanted to extend my gratitude regardless. In some way, we are all family. The Gryphons through Harlow, and the wolves of Charleston through Nikita. As those of us in the younger generation meet our mates, I have no doubt we'll encounter even more species than we're currently aware of. It's more important than ever to remain vigilant as well as united. If any of you ever need assistance, the Gargoyles will be there for you the same as you were for Dakota and me. I want to thank my papa for his wisdom and Uncle Frey for the training you gave us. You prepared us for today. With the love and guidance of those who raised us, we're ready for whatever is thrown our way. I raise my glass – uh, bottle – to you all." Drinks were raised, and shouts of cheers sounded from everyone.

Bas took Dakota's hand, and they mingled throughout the room. Most everyone was departing the next day for home, but in true Tessa fashion, the dinner spilled over to the bar where another party ensued. As Bas danced with his mate, he kept an

eye on Jolee, but he needn't have worried. Between Tony and Tessa, the mother and son team kept the female laughing and dancing the whole night.

When the party was winding down, Jolee bounced over to where Bas was leaned on a stool with Dakota between his legs. "Is it always like this?" she asked.

"If Tessa's around, pretty much," Bas answered.

"It's so different, your Clan. It's like everyone is equal. You two are King and Queen, but no one is afraid to joke around. There's no baring the neck and lowering of eyes just because you're the Alpha, yet they still respect you. And the Gryphons don't have a King. How does that even work?"

"From what Nikita has said, they pretty much police themselves. Her grandfather, Maveryck's dad, is sort of the leader in the Northeast. If anyone steps out of line, either Sutton deals with them, or he sends one of the Hounds to do it."

"I think I'm going to enjoy being part of your Clan. Is there some type of initiation or paperwork to fill out?"

"Nope. We just claim you, and if you haven't figured it out yet, you've been claimed already. Welcome to The Stone Society."

Chapter 25

DAKOTA PLACED A case of Michener's IPA on the bar with a clank. The lodge was a week from opening, and she was ready. Past ready, truth be told. When she agreed to oversee the renovations, Dakota had no idea how much work it would be. She didn't mind hard work when she knew what she was doing, but a couple weeks in, Dakota knew she was in over her head. When she told Sebastian as much, he tasked Lydia with finding a project manager, wanting to keep his cousin involved with the lodge even if she was across the country. It was Lydia's mom who recommended Oliver "Ollie" Lynch. Ollie had overseen the remodel of Lydia's parents' house, and the male was a godsend. Or goddess send, as the case was. Ollie was a lion shifter, adding another species to the list of those who needed their secret protected.

Even better than the male taking over the project from Dakota? Ollie was in love with Jolee. Together, the couple had taken the lodge from a nice establishment to something straight out of a magazine. They had yet to officially mate, but Dakota knew it was only a matter of time. Her bestie lit up like the Fourth of July whenever Ollie was in the room, and she gushed like a teenager with a crush when he wasn't.

"What's all the racket?" Bas asked as he entered the bar area.

"The last case of IPA. Rob Michener also sent a couple cases of their stout free of charge as a thank you for our business."

Bas made a beeline for Dakota, dipping her low, and kissing her silly. Dakota giggled when he stood her upright. Yeah, yeah. She had no room to make fun of Jolee. Being in love was the best feeling in the world. Her mate doted on her. Spoiled her rotten. Gave her the perfect date night often of eating steak and potatoes, then taking her outside to sit by the

fire pit where they drank beer and gazed at the stars. Made love to her whenever the mood struck. She was the luckiest female alive.

Dakota walked around the bar to put the beer in the cooler. “Have you heard from Lydia?”

Bas pulled out one of the stools and sank down on it. “No, and that worries me.”

After leaving West Virginia, Lydia stayed with her parents for a week before taking off across the country for some alone time. She told Bas she was searching for shifters to join the council, but she confided in Dakota that she needed time away to heal. Dakota felt for the female. Having killed someone by accident, even if she was defending her Queen, would be hard on anyone. Dakota made sure Lydia checked in once a week, and each time her friend called, she sounded more despondent than the last. Dakota was worried about her. She planned to reach out over the next few days and make sure she wasn't spiraling.

“Sophia is due to give birth any time now. There's no way Lydia won't make it home for that.” At least Dakota hoped she would be there.

“You're right. I just wish she was here with us.”

Not only was Holt Lodge ready to open, but their home in the woods was complete. It amazed Dakota at how fast the house had come together. Then again, her mate was brilliant and hired the best in the business. They had lived out of one of the suites on the second floor while their house was being built. Jolee had also taken one of the rooms, and as part of her compensation for being manager, she would live onsite. She argued with Sebastian for about two seconds, saying he was already paying her way too much for doing a job she loved, but he pulled the King card, and she quickly gave in. Jolee had been instrumental in making their business a showcase, but she'd also helped Dakota with the décor of their home. Both were stunning.

Sebastian asked Dakota's opinion every step of the way apart from naming the lodge. When he told her the name he'd

chosen and why, she might have teared up. Jonathan and Priscilla Holt had been humans who managed Rafael's household for years, until Jonathan passed away from cancer, then many years later, Priscilla died of old age. Bas had been given their last name as his middle one, and he wanted to continue honoring those who had been there for not only him and his parents, but the Clan as a whole. Rafael had learned to make Priscilla's famous cookies upon her passing, and that recipe was being used in the lodge's kitchen. The cookies would be presented to guests upon checkout as a thank you gift.

After getting the bottles put away, Dakota pulled Bas a stout from the tap. She tossed a branded coaster on the bar before setting the frosty glass in front of her mate. He took a long drink, letting out a deep "ah" afterward. Yeah, Bas was more than ready for the lodge to open as well. He had transitioned his business from Atlanta to Carlton, leaving Grace behind with Travis. Grace was still Bas's assistant. The only difference was where he met his clients. He had the Clan's jet at a nearby hangar in case he needed to travel farther than he wanted to drive, and so far, things were going smoothly. With Jolee and Ollie overseeing the renovations, Dakota had been free to travel with him.

The one job she didn't pass off was hiring the bartenders and servers. While Slade and Matthew made good on their promise of helping design the kitchen and hire the kitchen staff, Dakota had worked at The Depot long enough to recognize the right type of people to pour drinks and serve their customers. Their bar was a different animal being it was catering to humans. It wasn't going to be a rowdy party place with a jukebox blaring music so loud you had to shout to hear yourself think. But Dakota vowed it would be a welcome environment for anyone who ventured inside. Carlton had a dive reminiscent of The Depot, but once the residents set foot inside their bar and got a taste of the gourmet food coming from the kitchen and the multitude of options from the taps, she had no doubt it would be a gathering place for many.

"You sure you want to work?" Bas asked again. When Dakota told him she wanted to bartend the day shift while he

was at the office, he smiled and said, “Whatever you want, My Love.” It was his answer to everything she wished for.

“For now. It’ll give me a chance to get to know the staff better.” Dakota wasn’t one to micromanage, but this was Sebastian’s dream, and if she worked alongside her bartenders and waitstaff, she could ensure she had made the right decisions when hiring them.

“Kody, I’m here!”

Dakota rolled her eyes. “Let the games begin,” she joked as Tony strolled into the bar, pushing his sunglasses on top of his head. His platinum blond head. They had invited several of their Clan to stay for a few days. That would allow the employees a chance to “practice” before the first real customers arrived. She poured an IPA and placed it beside Sebastian where Tony sat. Dakota had a déjà vu moment, thinking of a different Alpha and his second sitting across the bar from her. Only now, the touches and compliments coming from her Alpha were welcomed.

“You are the best bartender ever,” Tony gushed before taking a sip.

“Yeah, yeah. What’s up with your hair?”

Anthony set the glass down, then propped his chin on his hand. “It’s a long story. See, what happened was...” And he was off, not worried about whether or not she had time to hear his long story. By the time he was finished, though, Dakota was crying from laughing so hard.

“What lies is my twin telling?” Tabitha strolled in looking like a runway model with her tight figure and long auburn hair. Tony’s twin was one of Dakota’s favorite beings in the world. She had her brother’s wit, her mother’s don’t-give-a-fuck attitude, and her father’s sweetness. Tabitha Stone was the whole package. Oh, and she could kick your ass fifteen ways to Sunday. The female was a beast.

Tabby wasn’t alone. Seven was with her. Bas’s sister was pretty as a picture with blonde hair and blue eyes, basically a younger version of Kaya. Bas was five years older than Seven,

but the two couldn't be closer if they were twins. Dakota wasn't jealous of their relationship, but it did make her wish things with Phoenix had been different. Dakota chalked it up to being wolves versus Gargoyles as well as who their parents were. Dakota now had a younger sister in Seven, and that went a long way in healing the pain from having a brother who hated her.

Dakota mixed Tabby a tequila sunrise, then pulled Seven a sour as more voices infiltrated the lodge. She couldn't be happier. It had been months since they had been around so many of their Clan at one time. Dakota had met quite a few of Bas's family when they stayed in Atlanta. They had visited Sebastian's parents at Christmas. Jolee went with them, and Tony, Tabby, their little brother Andy, and their parents were there as well. The twins had come to visit several times, sometimes together, and others by themselves. They chatted with the Trio via face messaging. But getting a bunch of them together at the same time hadn't happened again until now. Who they hadn't seen was Diana. Arthur was still furious at how things had played out, and he refused to allow Diana to speak to Dakota. Tabby offered to kidnap Dakota's mom, but Dakota didn't want to cause more trouble for the female. One day, she would find a way to talk to her mom, but until then, she had a whole Clan who loved her and kept her heart full.



SOMETIMES, LIKE NOW, when Dakota worked her magic behind the bar, looking sexy as all get out in her cowboy hat, her smile as bright as the sun, Sebastian had to pinch himself. His momma told him one day his dreams would come true, and they had. He'd found his little she-wolf. They were mated as well as married. His idea to open a lodge was at hand, and he was King. He might have balked at that last one, not because he didn't want the title, but because he hadn't wanted it so soon. Now? The title and responsibility that went with it

were second nature. Bas chalked it up to having his mate by his side. Dakota was as intelligent as she was gorgeous. She was also kind and funny. He and his Clan couldn't have asked for a more perfect Queen.

Bas wasn't the only one completely awed by Dakota. Everyone who met her fell under her spell. She was the best friend. The doting daughter-in-law. The fierce warrior. The gracious hostess. The tough but fun boss. Late at night while Dakota slept and Bas held her in his arms, he thought about Kingston and why he had wanted Dakota for his own. Bas understood. No one would have been a better Alpha Mate. The only problem with that, other than she was destined to be Sebastian's, was that King wouldn't have allowed Dakota to shine. It wasn't in his wolf's nature to take a step back so that Dakota could lead the pack. Sebastian had no such qualms. When his mate spoke, he listened. When she took charge of a situation, he let her. Dakota offered sage advice. Sometimes it was tough love, in Jolee's case, and others, it was a sympathetic ear, in Lydia's case.

After killing the she-wolf named Tinsley, Lydia spent a week with her parents before jetting off to the other side of the country. She was radio silent for a while, but Dakota finally wore her down. She might have pulled the Queen card to get Lydia to respond, but once she did, Dakota demanded Lydia call her at least once a week to check in. When she failed to do so one time, Dakota was calling on Bryce to ready the Clan jet. Before she got her bags packed, Lydia phoned, apologizing for the delay. Her excuse? Not having cell service in the wilds of Alaska. Dakota's solution? She bought satellite phones and shipped one of them to Lydia. When his mate wanted something, she usually got it.

The most recent thing Dakota asked for was to have a soft opening at Holt Lodge with several of their Clan present. Sebastian had already planned on it because Dakota's birthday was in three days, and what better way to celebrate than with a bunch of their family present?

Seven twirled the drink between her hands while staring at Bas. He stared back. "What?"

Seven looked around, then lowered her voice. “Can I come live with you?” Bas tensed. If someone was messing with his sister— “Calm down.” Seven rolled her eyes. “Nobody is after me. No one has hurt me. I’m not running from a big baddy.” Seven blew her hair off her face. “I just need a change of scenery.”

“Have you talked to Momma?”

“I’m twenty-two, for fucks sake. I don’t have to get Mom’s permission to move, Bas.” Uh oh. If Seven was cursing, she was in a mood.

“I know you are, but she’s going to wonder why you’re leaving New York.”

“And I’ll tell her the truth. I need to get away from Papa. He doesn’t want me dating anyone if they aren’t my mate. I don’t want to be an old cat lady, sitting at home knitting while the world passes me by.”

Sebastian grinned at his sister. “You don’t knit.”

“And I don’t want to start! I’ve been to college. I’ve trained with Frey. I’ve been the dutiful Princess, but now...” Seven’s shoulders slumped. “I just want room to breathe and be Seven Stone for a while, not Stefania Di Pietro. I want to live here with you and Kody. Ride four-wheelers. Go ziplining. Take up skiing or maybe snowboarding. And I know I could do all that in New York, but I want to be where you are, Bas. Heck, I could do the books for the lodge. Put that college degree to good use. I’ll even wait tables. Something. Anything. I’m begging you,” Seven whined.

Bas playfully shoved his sister’s shoulder. “You’re ridiculous. Of course you can live with us, but you might want to invest in noise-canceling headphones.”

“Gross,” Seven muttered before taking a sip of her sour. She placed the pint glass on the bar and looked over at Bas with misty eyes. “I’ve missed you. That’s the main reason I want to leave home,” she whispered.

Bas placed his hand on Seven’s nape. “I’ve missed you too. And don’t worry about Papa. If he knows you’re living

with me, he won't have a problem with you moving."

"Excuse me, Sebastian." Bas turned to Ollie's brother, Theo.

Sebastian kissed his sister on the temple as he slid from the bar stool. When Dakota arched a brow, Bas shrugged as though he didn't know why the lion shifter was there. He led Theo out of the bar, through the lobby, then outside where they would have privacy. Once they were far enough away that Dakota wouldn't be able to eavesdrop, Bas said, "You're early."

Theo inclined his head. "The task was easy. Arthur wasn't at the house. According to Dakota's mom, he left town without a word. She had already packed a couple of bags and was ready to go when we arrived. Nobody questioned who we were, and no one tried to stop her from leaving."

"Damn, that's brutal. Where is Diana now?"

"She's upstairs in Jolee's room. We took her through the back door so Dakota wouldn't see her."

"Thank you, Theo. And thank your stepfather for me."

"You're welcome. I'm going to go have a beer if that's okay."

"Absolutely." Sebastian escorted Theo inside where the male took the empty seat next to Seven. Bas leaned over the bar, and when Dakota turned, he said, "Get everyone settled with drinks, then I have a surprise for you."

"Go ahead, Kody. I'll handle the bar for a few," Seven offered.

Dakota tipped her hat to Seven and joined Bas at the end of the counter. He took her hand and led his mate to the elevator. "What kind of surprise?" she asked, looking up from under her hat.

Bas tapped her on the nose. "A birthday one."

"But it's not my birthday," Dakota countered.

“Not yet, but I’m pretty sure you won’t return this gift.” Bas tugged her close once inside the elevator and kissed her. Having both Seven and Diana living with them would put a damper on where they could make love in the house. Bas would have to get creative.

They exited the lift, and Bas took Dakota’s hand once more. If he was anywhere close to his mate, he wanted to touch her. They stopped in front of Jolee’s room, and Bas knocked. Jolee answered the door and stepped aside.

“Mom?” Dakota rushed into the room and grabbed Diana up in a hug. “Oh, my goddess.” Dakota looked at Bas with tears in her eyes.

“I hope this is okay,” Diana said.

“It’s wonderful, but how?” Dakota placed her hands on Diana’s biceps so she could study her. If she noticed how thin her mother was, Dakota didn’t mention it. Instead, she pulled her mom to the sofa and sat beside her. “How did you manage this?”

Diana took Dakota’s hands in hers. “It started right after you left. Your father blamed me for you leaving. He blamed me for Phoenix misbehaving. Everything was my fault. Arthur asked the Alpha to consider him for the role of second, but Kingston turned him down. Arthur said you had poisoned Kingston’s mind against him. It was all such a mess. There’s more to it, but your father left. I kept waiting for him to come back, but the longer he was gone, the more frightened I was. Not of being alone, but of not being able to pay the bills. So I walked over to The Depot and asked Vernon if he could contact you. Instead, he called Jolee and told her the situation.”

“That’s where I come in,” Jolee interrupted. “I didn’t know what would happen if one of us went back to get your mom, so I had Ollie ask his stepfather to go, since he’s a Gryphon and could voice the pack. We didn’t tell you in case there was trouble, or they couldn’t get your mom out of Panther.”

Diana's smile was sad. "Turns out, it was no trouble at all. I already had my bags packed, and all I had to do was get in the car."

Dakota hugged her mom again. "I'm sorry about Phoenix. I had no idea he hated me."

"I blame your father, not you or the one who... took Phoenix from us. From the day we figured out you were an alpha, Arthur tasked your brother with being your protector. It was no wonder he acted out. I tried to get Arthur to lighten up where Nix was concerned, but he was too focused on using you to elevate our status in the pack. Maybe wherever he is, he'll find what he's looking for."

"I'm so glad you're here. I think you'll enjoy Clan life. It's certainly different than living in a pack. Our house is just through the woods. Let's get your bags, and we'll go get you settled. Then we can come back, and you can meet more of the Clan."

Instead of asking Dakota, Diana looked over at Sebastian. "Are you sure you have room for me?"

"We have more than enough room. You'll see." Sebastian grabbed both of Diana's bags and followed them out of Jolee's room. Dakota rambled on about the lodge and her still working as a bartender, and the two of them building their home.

When they reached the edge of the pathway, Diana froze. "This is your home?"

"Yes, ma'am. And now it's yours too," Bas assured her. "Oh, and my sister's for a little while. She asked me earlier if she could move in."

"Yes!" Dakota did a little dance. "Mom, wait 'til you meet Seven. She's like the sister I never had."

Stepping inside the large log structure that Bas and Dakota had designed together, Diana turned in circles. "Oh, Kody. It's gorgeous. But didn't you say you recently built it?" Dakota nodded. "Don't take this the wrong way, but it looks lived in and homey."

“That’s thanks to Jolee. She is a whiz at bringing interiors together. Come on. I’ll show you the bedrooms and you can choose the one you want.”

“But what about Seven? Shouldn’t she pick first?” Diana offered.

“She has a suite upstairs. There are four other bedrooms for you to choose from.”

“How in the world do you keep this clean? That has to be a full-time job,” Diana mumbled as Dakota led her upstairs.

“Nah, we have a housekeeper who comes in once a week, so don’t be getting any ideas of taking her job. You’re going to learn to relax and possibly snowboard.” After choosing the room at the end of the hall, Dakota helped her mom unpack her bags.

While Bas waited, he texted Lydia. The night before, Sebastian dreamed about his cousin trudging through snow somewhere in Alaska. Was it merely a dream or foreshadowing? He wasn’t going to call her parents yet, but if she didn’t check in soon, Bas would use his power as King and bring his cousin home. If she was still hurting over killing the wolf, he would send her to the best shifter therapist he could find. That’s what being King meant to Sebastian. Being there for each of his Clan members whether they were related by blood or not. Protecting them. Helping when they were hurting. Offering a place to stay when their fuckhead mate ran off on them. Bas didn’t understand the ways of wolves, but he didn’t have to. He wasn’t an Alpha wolf. He was the Gargoyle King, and by the gods, he was going to be a great one. And his greatness? It was all due to the feisty female he called Queen.

The End

A Note from the Author

Thank you so much for reading *Clash of Kings*. Sebastian has been in my life for almost ten years now, and to me, he's family. If you enjoyed reading about him and Kody, a review would be greatly appreciated. And suggesting the book to your reader friends? That is the chef's kiss of helping my books get into more hands.

As you might have guessed, Lydia's story is next. The working title is *Blades of Blue*. Lydia struggles with killing Tinsley, so she sets off across the country to not only heal her soul but to continue the search for different species leaders. Her trek leads her to Alaska where she finds herself immersed in a world of new shifters. One in particular has her heart pumping faster than ever. Stay tuned to my newsletter or follow me on Bookbub to find out when *Blades* will be available for preorder.

If you are a fan of my Hounds of Zeus MC series, *Sultan's Pride* is next in my writing schedule. In this book, you find out all about Ollie and Theo as young'uns.

If this is your first foray into the Rebels books, [Strands of Gold](#) is available in KU.

Acknowledgments

Things are getting back to normal in the Gibson household with my little momma happily tucked away in the assisted living facility where she is thriving. That doesn't mean I don't need my cheerleaders, because without my core group, life wouldn't be the same. Candy, Jen, Katie, Kerstin, and Nikki are my life preservers in this stormy sea of life.

I adore my reader group, Faith's Furies. I love the enthusiasm you show. A big thank you to both Candy and Tina for suggesting Phoenix's name, even if he is a douchebag, lol.

When searching for cover photos, I knew what Sebastian looked like in my mind. Tall, handsome, dark hair, etc. When I saw the photo of Sean Rae, it felt like kismet. Yes, Sean is older in real life, but he is my perfect Sebastian. Sean is an absolute doll, just like my Bas, so thank you, Sean, for being you, and thanks to Golden for taking such fabulous pictures.

I wanted Bas's cover to be purple like Rafael's, but it also needed to reflect the same tone as *Strands of Gold*, and Corey knocked the cover out of the park with this one.

The man and I celebrated our 15th anniversary recently, and that is something special. Here's to many more. I love you.

About the Author

Multi-genre author Faith Gibson began writing in high school, and through the years, penned many stories and poems. Since she was a child, her dreams (and sometimes nightmares) were vivid constructs, making her shake her head and ask, “where the hell did that come from?” Many of these nighttime escapades have led to a line, a chapter, or even a complete story.

“Love is love, and there’s not enough love in the world.” This belief she holds strongly, and it’s the prevailing theme in her works, all of which come with a happy ending.

Faith believes her purpose in life is to entertain the masses, even if it’s one person at a time. Aspirations of becoming a rock ‘n’ roll drummer didn’t come to fruition, but she’s fulfilling a different dream, and that’s bringing stories to life one book at a time.

Faith lives just outside of Nashville, Tennessee, with the love of her life and her American Staffordshire pup, Luna, the writing partner. When she’s not hard at work writing her next adventure, Faith can often be found reading, cooking up something in the kitchen, listening to live music, or off on an adventure of her own.

Connect with Faith via the following social media sites:

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