

MAZZY J. MARCH



DELIVERED
TO MY
TIGERS

MAIL-ORDER MATINGS

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Delivered to My Tigers

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Anais

I've loved tigers ever since I was a little girl in braids. My degree is focused on veterinary medicine, but my passion is cryptozoology. Tiger shifters in particular, of course. When I downloaded the Mail-Order Matings app, it was to learn more about them.

What better way to learn about tiger shifters than to be matched with one. Or two.

Rocky and Thad:

We've settled down after a life of building up our microbrewery and bar—and a bit of playing around. Okay, a lot of playing around. We've bedded or dated nearly every female both human and shifter in the tristate area but none of them were our true mate. The truth was, we weren't looking for a mate—just a fling. One of our employees found her mate through the Mail-Order Matings app.

We could meet our mate on the app.

Or karma could come for us, and we would get played like we've done to so many others.

Delivered to My Tigers is Book 8 in the super sweet with building heat Mail-Order Matings Series. Delivered to My Tigers features a woman ready to learn more about her passions, tiger alphas ready to stop playing the field, an arranged mail-order mating, unlikely true love, and a twist. And of course, Mazzy promises a happy ever after. If you like true mates, Fate taking a hand, and tigers surrendering to love, one-click Delivered to My Tigers today.

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Delivered to My Tigers
Mail-Order Matings Book 8

By

Mazzy J. March

Chapter One

Anais

Where the heck am I supposed to find a tiger shifter?

Not that I wouldn't love to find one. As a cryptozoology doctoral student, with an emphasis on large cat shifters, I'd dreamed of finding one all my life. A lion, tiger, leopard... Any of them. But when I tightened my focus on tigers, I knew I would have to do research in the library, through folk tales, online...anywhere but in person.

Wolf shifters were everywhere; there were two among my fellow doctoral students. Not that everyone knew, but our department, dealing in mythical creatures, was a unique haven in the university.

I'd asked before, with no results, but I needed to try one more time, and I had the perfect person to try it with. But before I could do that, I had a meeting with my doctoral advisor. I had already turned in yet another draft to her, and fingers crossed this would be the last before I faced the committee.

With the semester ending, the timing would be perfect. I'd been a teaching assistant for five years now, and if I could get a sign-off before fall, I'd be able to take my doctorate and start applying for jobs. My university was, of course, an option, but I wanted to try another part of the country, somewhere less urban, where I could enjoy the out of doors more. Even if it meant a less prestigious school. Maybe somewhere less dog-eat-dog for tenure. Watching the professors fight one another for everything here had almost had me walking away my first semester of grad school.

I might have been dreaming that it would be different somewhere else, but I already had feelers out, via social media contacts, and had hopes for a more congenial atmosphere. It would probably pay less, but I didn't choose academia and my partial field of study because I expected to get rich anyway.

As my last—with any luck—class as a teaching assistant filed out after their final exams, I watched them with affection and a little nostalgia. I even got a few hugs and compliments from those who enjoyed the class. As a TA, I was able to keep things pretty informal. Next semester, if I had success in being hired, I'd be Doctor Richmond instead of just plain old Anais. I'd worked hard for that title, so I couldn't be sorry about that.

Stuffing the exams in my briefcase, I glanced at my phone to see if I had time to eat before my meeting. Knowing what time my class ended, I shouldn't have bothered, but my growling tummy did have its own opinions.

I dug a breath mint out of my purse and headed to Professor Carillo's office, which was, of course, on the opposite side of campus. At a dead run. Arriving out of breath and head throbbing, I settled outside the door and tried to settle myself into a semiprofessional demeanor.

Before I could knock, the door jerked open. "Are you just going to stand there all day?" The prof stalked back to her desk and sat down. "Get in here and take a seat."

Yeah, this did not sound like a meeting where I'd be receiving congratulations for my final draft and/or any other good news. Because there was a big bit besides that I'd been waiting on. I didn't bother to reply, just settled in one of the guest chairs in front of her desk, waiting for the bad news. A year ago, one of my fellow students had failed out of the program, her thesis rejected. She was teaching high school now. Which was fine, but she'd worked so hard and been told that if she wanted to ever be doctor anyone, she'd have to pick a new topic and start fresh. She never even had a chance to defend it.

She had neither the money nor the patience for that.

Please don't let that happen to me.

"I cannot in good conscience let this go forward as it stands." She shoved the hard copy of my draft across the desk.

Before I could stop myself, I reached for it but then jerked my hand back. "I did everything you asked. Did you find

something else wrong?" I didn't cry, but it wasn't easy not to. Tears could come after I left the office and shut myself into a bathroom stall for privacy.

She stared past me at the wall, not meeting my gaze. Bad sign. "I'm going to be honest with you."

"Yes, please." Had I ever asked for anything different? But the idea she had to add that caveat took my stomach from hunger to roiling. "Go ahead."

"I was a little worried about something, so I approached the department head and asked her opinion."

Ouch. "Okay."

"And he agreed with me that it was a matter for concern." She paused again, and I wanted to shake her.

Just say it! But I'd learned from my dealings with this particular academic that it was better to let her speak at her own pace or she'd get thrown off or feel judged.

Finally, after a minute or so of heavy silence, she said, "You need to interview a tiger shifter or two."

"I what?" We'd understood from day one that wasn't going to happen. Although she presented it as if she'd just thought of it, that was anything but the case. "Professor, you know we agreed..."

"That it would be very difficult, correct."

No, that was not what we agreed. Both of us said it would be impossible or close to it, and that nobody could expect me to find one. So far as I'd been able to determine, there were no tiger shifters to be found in the US. If anywhere. Cryptozoology is the study of legendary and possibly extinct animals. Ones who may or may not exist in the wild somewhere. One of my classmates was working on a thesis on Bigfoot. Another the yeti. Were they supposed to track one down or fail. Words sprang to my lips, none of which would help this situation. And I very much feared I was on the edge of losing everything if I misstepped at this point.

But I also could not afford to pussyfoot around. “So, please spell it out. What happens if I can’t find a tiger shifter to interview? I did use due diligence when this all began. You said it was enough.” And my attempts were documented in the thesis.

“If you want to successfully defend this thesis and get the grant for your summer work approved, you will make this happen.”

We did talk a little more after that, but the point was made. And I was screwed. I’d searched hard before determining I could not find any of the shifters in question. Why hadn’t I been smart and gone with something like wolves?

Bonnie, my roommate: wolf. Part of a pack. I could have asked to immerse myself in it and had everything they wanted. But my advisor had told me I was fine with the tigers. That nobody had been able to find one in decades, so they could be treated as near-mythical creatures.

And now, I could not.

I didn’t even stop to eat on the way back to my place, too depressed to swallow anything more than water. Just walked into the room and dropped on the sofa and stared into space. That’s where Bonnie found me.

“Hey! You’ll never believe what happened with Roger today, I—” Stopping dead in the middle of the room, she stared at me. “What’s wrong? Did someone die?”

“No, but I might as well have.” I told her all about the meeting, spewing it until I felt empty inside. “But enough about me. What did you say about Roger?”

“You don’t want to hear about my little problems,” she protested, but when I insisted, she went on, plopping next to me on the sofa. “But since you asked. I thought he was a nice guy, maybe the one...but he sent me a text.” She held up her phone.

I’ve met my fated.

“Oh.” I knew what that meant and so did she. Better than me, since she was a wolf shifter. “You didn’t reply?”

“How could I?”

“Maybe he did you a favor. Your fated may be out there somewhere, you know. And if you’d stayed with him and yours turned up? What would you do?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure I believe in fated mates. Everyone in the pack says you’ll know when you meet yours, but I was ready to settle for a nice guy.”

“Didn’t you get matched with him on that app?” And maybe there were other types of shifters on there? When I was hunting for tigers, I never knew about the app.

“Yeah, well I found him on there. Why? You want to get your heart broken?”

“No...just wondering if I can find a tiger and save my thesis and grant.”

Chapter Two

Rocky

“Almost out of the American Sour and the Braggot.” Thad was taking inventory, his favorite thing to do, at least, of the alcohol. I didn’t personally have a taste for the Braggot but it flew off the shelves. As long as the customers liked it, that was all I cared about. The people in the bar only made us a small percentage of our money, but we thrived on keeping all our customers happy and coming back for more.

“A batch of each will be ready tomorrow,” I replied without taking my gaze from the computer screen. While he was working on inventory of the brews, I ordered supplies for the month. A group of rowdy bikers had come through town two weeks ago, and I swore that half our inventory of glasses was gone in one night. They smashed glasses left and right, no matter how many times we asked them to stop.

“The rest is okay, but I’m wanting to see if the mead is any good.”

“Yeah,” I grumped back. When I was in the zone of ordering and getting all of the beginning of the month things handled, I wanted to focus. Thad was a talker. Always had been.

“I’m going back out there. Finish up, so I can have my friend back.” With a laugh, he closed the door to our shared office while I went through my to-do list. I always felt better when the monthly bills and ordering were done, not that we didn’t have small orders during the month, but the big things were taken care of.

Once the weight was off my shoulders, I went back to the bar where from the sound of it was busy as ever. It was a Friday night after all and even though this was a pretty small town, some people came from all over to spend time at our place. We had live music on the weekends and even a poetry and slam night, along with our unique flavors of beer. We attracted all kinds of people, shifters and humans alike. It had

become a hub for humans and shifters to interact and some couples had started their journeys right here at Alchemy. Thad had come up with that name. He joked about us making beer as alchemy, and it kind of stuck.

“What can I get you?” I said, throwing a bar towel over my shoulder. Gentry was an older wolf shifter who came in every Friday night without fail. I knew what he wanted but asked on the off chance he wanted to try something new.

“Fuck off, Rocky. You know what I want.” He had only sat down a few seconds before. I watched him cross the bar floor with his cane as I walked out of the office.

I chuckled and filled a chilled glass with his favorite dark ale. He often bought cases to take home. He lived alone, his mate passed on years before, and he didn't like casual conversation. He sipped on his beer and then left. Always a good tipper. “There you go. Let me know if you decide you want another.”

The regulars and people from the town trickled in, between when we opened at five and seven. Then there was the weekend crowd. They came in after eight or so, some of them on a date, others after a meal. The bands didn't start playing until that time. Our small staff had been with us since the beginning, and we ran this place like a well-oiled machine, so, in the lull, everyone was restocking and getting ready for the rush.

Vanessa and I were standing with our backs against the back counter while Thad dried glasses, when I heard the screech of the door as it was flung open with a bit too much gusto. My tiger picked up the scent before I saw them. The sweetness of females, along with the undertone of food and perfume, came into the bar and one of them I was very familiar with.

Thad closed his eyes. The thing was, having one of our previous one-night stands or even a short-lived relationship wasn't new. The truth was, Thad and I had always known since we were in college that we would share a mate. Call it instinct. Call it fate. Whatever. All we knew was that one day,

we would meet our fated mate, and she would belong to both of us.

While we hadn't found her, it hadn't been through a lack of trying. We'd dated and bedded every female in the tristate area and then some. We didn't brag about it and, while we weren't proud of it, we weren't ashamed, either. We had made some choices in women in our early life, but we didn't share those same wants or desires any longer.

We had grown up a bit, and the business helped with that. Tell that to the females who had heard about our reputation.

"Thad, we want the regular." One of the females approached the bar and she made sure to prop her ample breasts on top of the counter. Vanessa turned around and pressed her fist to her mouth to stifle a giggle. She was our friend and had seen us through all of our phases of life. We'd met her right out of school and when we decided to make a go of the microbrewery and then the bar, she was all in. No judging. Okay, she did judge and called us out on it frequently.

"Yep." Thad filled two chilled glasses with our banana beer with hints of vanilla and honey. It was one of my favorites, mostly because I preferred the sweet things in life. He pushed the glasses toward the woman who had been joined by her friend. I thought her name was Ruth, but I didn't know the name of the friend.

They passed over a twenty-dollar bill and told him to keep the change. "Are you two free tonight?" the first woman asked, eyeing both me and Thad. Everyone knew, both shifter and human, that we weren't sold separately.

"Not tonight, Ruth," Thad said. Aha, I was right. "Got some things to do, but thank you." I would've given them the cold shoulder but he was always nice, no matter what.

And what in the hell was he thanking her for?

"I'm telling you, you two need to sign up for the app..." Vanessa had her gaze pointed across the bar at her mate, Jenson. On the weekends, he came and spent the evening. He wanted to be there to protect her and drive her home. He was a

good male to her. We had given them some shit in the beginning because of meeting on an app, but after we got to know him and recognized he would treat our best friend well, we were glad they found each other.

“Yeah, yeah,” I answered, but in the back of my head, I was considering it. I would have to talk to Thad, but maybe there was a chance that two former-player tigers could find their mate on that app, too.

Chapter Three

Thad

What a night.

Fridays were sometimes more lucrative than Saturdays, but tonight took the cake. We had wave after wave of people, and even a bachelorette party come in and order a round for the whole bar. It was a good night but a crazy one.

Vanessa counted her tips, her mate's eyes on her. He was loyal as fuck to her. It made me feel some regret for how I'd lived my life. Not shame—I should have come to my senses a bit earlier. “Go on home, Vanessa. Jenson's waiting for you. You did good.”

“The bar still needs to be cleaned up.” She moved on to wiping the counters.

I took the rag from her and ticked my head toward Jenson. “Go on. We've got this.”

“Thanks, guys.”

Jenson rose from the booth he had occupied all night and welcomed her into his embrace, beaming.

Damn, I wanted to have a mate to cuddle and keep warm at night. We'd dated so many people in our wild days, in part because we were on the hunt for our mate. Also, we were two horny shifters in our twenties. Okay, that was most of the reason.

We'd stopped all that nonsense when we realized the only thing that mattered was to find our mate.

Once Vanessa left, I locked the door and began turning the chairs over and putting them on the tables. We'd had one vomit incident that night, and though we'd cleaned it up immediately, never went home without a thorough swabbing of the decks. My shifter vision picked up dirt and grime humans would never notice

“What are you growling about?” Rocky asked after wiping down the last table. He shook the rag out on the floor. Didn’t matter since we still had to sweep and mop the place. We didn’t serve any food beyond snacks on the table, but the place sure did get dingy and fast.

“Was I growling?” I asked. My tiger was restless and had been for a few days, but I hadn’t realized I’d been kicking up a fuss.

“Yeah. But not around the customers. You just started. Something the matter?”

My best friend knew me well. Better than anyone, actually. I was weary of broaching the subject to Rocky, but not bringing it up seemed like the wrong thing to do. I overheard Vanessa talking to him earlier, but I knew his stance on it. “You still don’t want to try the app?” I asked just to get the notion off my chest.

“You, too?” I heard the low rumble of his chuckle.

“Yeah. Me, too. If we get on it and find there’s no one, then we’re right back where we started—no harm no foul.”

He stopped moving around and crossed his arms over his chest. Rocky was more built than I was. I didn’t see how his shirts held up, stretched so thin over all those muscles. His torso resembled a V when he did that with his arms. A brawny, intimidating V. “Who the fuck wants to be mated with a tiger, much less two? A human? Tiger shifters are few and far between, not to mention single female ones.”

“We’re a good catch. We own our own business. We do damned well for ourselves. We’re not bad to look at.”

That garnered another chuckle.

“What’s not to like?”

A grunt was my answer. “Everyone says tiger shifters are the worst. We’re overprotective and possessive and controlling. You know the rumors as well as I do, Thad.”

Even in college, other shifters kept their distance, which was why we mostly dated or bedded humans. Either they

didn't know what we were or were turned on even more when they found out we were tiger shifters.

"That's not us, and you know it."

I went to the side closet and got out the push broom, along with the extra-large dustpan. The swish of the bristles and the repetitive motion calmed my nerves.

"I know it, but most don't."

I stopped sweeping and rested my hands on the handle. "Then let's get on the app and prove them wrong. Maybe our mate is already on there, waiting for two tigers to sweep her off her feet."

"You really think it might work?" Rocky said while wiping down the booth seats.

"I think we should take a chance. Let's face it. We've sampled everything there is around here and come up empty."

My best friend shook his head and didn't respond for a hot minute. He stood right in the broom's path, stopping me. "What if we find someone, and she comes here, and it doesn't work out?"

"Then we find someone else. Plus, our tigers will know right away if she's our mate or not." Which was why we previously had a lot of one-night stands. Our tigers needed the release, but the women under us weren't fated. They would have us drop everything and scour the planet for our true mate.

"You think they will know by looking at a photo on our phone?" he scoffed. I didn't blame him.

"Yes? No? Only one way to find out."

We got the rest of the cleaning and stocking done, and it was very late when we finally shut the lights off and went home. When I unlocked the door to our house, Rocky was behind me. He had to spend some time in silence before making a decision, meaning, I had to be patient and let him process. Finally, he gave a heavy sigh. "Okay. Let's sign up. But don't tell Vanessa unless we find someone. She's going to gloat."

Chapter Four

Anais

By morning, I'd pushed the idea of the app out of my mind. If tigers were impossible to find in more conventional ways, why would they hang out on an app, looking for love? Wouldn't they have all the females they wanted? If there weren't enough of their own ilk, other large cats would beg for them, surely. All I had to do was go back in there and convince the professor to convince the committee that our original statement held.

Nobody knew where to find tiger shifters. Anywhere.

I showered and rushed out the door, anxious to get things settled. The thesis was bad enough, but I could probably buy more time to bring them around to my way of thinking. But the grant? It wasn't even university money but came from an organization entirely unrelated. How could they hold that over my head? I'd worked my butt off, done everything asked of me, and I had to believe that would work out in the end.

Although I didn't want to delay, I could not face a difficult conversation with any kind of coherence un-caffeinated, so I made a quick dart through the campus coffeehouse to get my travel mug filled with their remarkably good dark roast. Two sugars, a splash of real cream. The first sip woke all my cells and set them humming. A quick stop by my lab to pick up a report I hoped would help my case, and then...and then what?

And then nothing. The space I'd been assigned on receiving my grant had a note on the door, and it was not welcome news. My grant had been suspended—and my lab was no longer my own. Until things changed.

Ripping the note from the door, I changed my plan and instead of going to my advisor, I skipped the middleman and went to the committee member I knew was behind all of this. He'd held it against me when I did not choose him as my advisor when he made it clear he would like that role. He did not sit on the committee at that time, but he was quite a

respected person on campus, and those he mentored were guaranteed a smooth ride to their academic goals. It was an honor to be asked, as he pointed out, and I came close to accepting. I'd been informed that it was the student's right to choose, and, at least at our school, to ask, but it was hard not to be a little starstruck.

As I marched up the stairs to Dr. Eliot's office, I passed the spot where I'd made my decision not to have him as my advisor. I could see her as if it were yesterday, the petite blonde student huddled on a step, face buried in her hands, shoulders shaking. That day, I'd been on my way to say yes to the professor, excited to begin the next part of my journey with his guidance. I was due in just a few minutes, but I couldn't leave someone in such distress.

Reluctantly, I stopped in front of her. "Are you all right?"

She lifted her face to me, blue eyes shiny with tears. "You're here to see him, aren't you?"

"Him?" A bad feeling crept up my spine, but I hoped my suspicions were off base. Way off base. "Who do you mean?"

"Eliot. The wolf professor."

I started to say something about it being great if he was a wolf, but then I knew...he wasn't that kind of wolf. "I am on my way to see Dr Eliot. Yes. Did he give you a bad grade?"

"If only. He gave me an ultimatum. Change my thesis or walk away."

I studied her, acid burning in my throat. Change was on the horizon—and not the kind I wanted. "It's normal for an advisor to make suggestions, isn't it? I'm just starting the doctoral program, but I thought that was how it worked."

She blinked, dashed the tears away with the back of her hand. "Not a change to improve it. One to tweak it to support one of his theories."

"He wouldn't do that, would he? He's so well respected; is published in all the journals. I've heard he's even up for dean."

“Naive much?” She sniffed. “If you are considering Eliot for your advisor, let me give you some advice. Walk away. Go and ask any other professor in the department. I was as wide-eyed once as you are, and now I have to choose between holding my ground, my integrity, and going along with what he wants. Ruining my reputation before I even have one.”

She went along with it, or so it seemed, since she got her PhD the following spring. But her warning had me turning on a heel and never keeping my appointment with Dr. Eliot. I sent a text telling him I’d decided to go another way and thanking him for his interest. He’d been just short of openly hostile ever since, no matter how professional or cordial I was in return. And when he made dean and joined the committee I’d have to defend my thesis to...well, on some level, I’d been waiting for him to make me pay for my decision back then.

So, yeah, I knew who had managed to stop me. I just didn’t know how or whether I could fix it. Shoulders back, I strode up the rest of the steps and to his open office door. I stepped inside. Eliot was looking at some sort of a paper on his desk, and he did not raise his head when he said, “It’s customary to knock.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Your advisor may be willing to let you skate by, but I am not.” Most of the rest of what he said was lost in the roar of anger in my head. Skate by? I had always been a hard worker, and I’d never have stuck with tigers if this had been a requirement.

My first instinct was to go to the college president and complain, but I couldn’t imagine them taking my word over Eliot’s, so I just waited for him to stop talking and took my leave. The only way I was going to get anything I’d worked for back was to find tiger shifters. And while I didn’t have any reason to believe there were any on the app, it was the only place I hadn’t looked. If I found one there, I’d pretend to be his mate so I could get my life back.

Seemed like a fair exchange to me.

Plus, I had never wanted to meet one more.

Chapter Five

Rocky

On Mondays, the bar was closed. It was the one day during the week where we weren't up until dawn. Didn't mean we weren't working, simply that one facet of our business was on pause.

"Morning," I mumbled somewhat coherently as I stumbled toward the coffeepot. We had developed a routine over our years living under one roof. Thad woke up before me and made the coffee and breakfast. I took care of lunch. That didn't mean I cooked, but I made one hell of a grilled cheese.

"Morning," he replied but didn't look up. Not one of those people who had their faces glued to their screens twenty-four hours a day, Thad used his phone to look up something specific or respond to a text.

I sat down with a cup of coffee with entirely too much creamer and sugar, along with a plate of eggs and toast. "What's going on?"

"Nothing." The word was loaded with so much more than nothing.

"Liar," I called him out. "Tell me what's going on. We don't keep secrets around here."

Thad and I were such different people in some ways, but we were in complete agreement on the basics. Loyalty. Trust. Truth.

He huffed out a breath and drank the rest of his coffee with a bit too much force. "There's not even a bite."

That damned app. This was the reason I didn't want to sign up for it. It seemed we were paying some penance for our days as players by not being able to find our mates. It was a far-fetched conclusion, but one my mind returned to on a constant loop. While we had no secrets between us, that was the one thing I kept to myself.

Fate could be a cruel bitch, and we had tested her last nerve.

Or maybe I was letting my imagination get away from me.

“It’s only been a few days, Thad. Give it some time. We might need to be the ones to search. I know those questions were specific, but maybe the algorithm is still learning or some shit. You know Aldo told us about that with the social media.”

Our social media manager, Aldo would run ads and talk about the algorithm learning its audience. He would go on and on but, honestly, most of it was like a foreign language. I considered myself a pretty smart guy, but that shit went over my head. Good thing we had him to run it all.

“That’s true. Didn’t think of that. I need to get out of here. Let’s go in and make something new.”

We got dressed and hopped in my truck. When we were aggravated or needed an outlet, we either ran as our animals or went to the lab. It seemed the more our minds were scrambled, the clearer things became in terms of our creativity. We had created some of our best blends and flavors in the heat of frustration and anxiety.

We arrived at the brewery and got to work. We loved our team and were more than grateful for the efforts they gave, but the quiet of the place on Mondays seeped into my pores and gave not only me but my tiger a sense of calm.

Thad had the best ideas when it came to flavors and combinations of them. Once we were done, I was sure we had a winner. Passion Melt. Vanilla and marshmallow undertones, but the main flavors were passion fruit and guava. It would hit for sure with the patrons who loved a sweeter beer.

We were sitting around, still in the brewery with our feet up when I broached the silence. “Check it again. Maybe there’s someone.”

He scrolled through his phone and while some had viewed our profiles, we had no messages, not even a wink. “Nada.”

He waved his phone as if ready to throw the damned thing at the nearest wall.

“So, let’s go on the offensive. We start looking for her instead of waiting.”

“Fine. Get over here. and let’s look together.” I sat next to him on the couch, and we scrolled through the profiles. We searched various categories. There were so many women and men there, looking for all kinds of things from a mate to a breeder and everything in between.

“Whoa...” we said at the same time when a picture of a woman came up. She had long red hair and was standing in what looked like a forest.

“What’s her name?” Thad clicked on her profile. Her name was Anais. She was in college, and not just any college, one of those expensive ones. Hell, all of them were expensive, but hers was quite prestigious. We’d done our research. She studied veterinary medicine.

“She’s only wanting one tiger.”

Thad nodded. “Yeah, but she wants a tiger. What’s better than one?”

I chuckled. “Two of us. What do we do here? She’s fucking gorgeous.” Even my tiger agreed. One look at Anais, and he was chuffing like he’d seen the sun for the first time.

“We could message her. See if she would consider both of us. Tell her we are a package deal.”

I stood up and paced around before answering. “Worst-case scenario, she says no. Then we find someone else.”

Thad threw his head back against the sofa. “Is it bad that my tiger is saying there is no one else?”

“It’s not a bad thing. We may have finally found our mate. Message her, man. I have to know.”

Chapter Six

Thad

Aldo somehow forgot to communicate to us that he had hung posters for our bar and brewery all over a music festival and we should be expecting a crowd.

When I called him, I found out I'd messed up, had missed the email from him telling me everything. Well, me and Rocky.

A female approached Rocky as he delivered a dozen shots to some girls who were wearing little more than strings and see-through material. Once, he and I would've jumped on the chance to bed all of them, but now, nothing held a candle to the idea of our mate, especially since we'd seen Anais.

My animal had been more verbal than ever since coming across her profile. She'd responded to my message, but having a moment where Rocky and I were both available to read it and respond wasn't the easiest when the place was packed as it was that night.

I mentally prepared myself for the worst, of course. Her profile specifically expressed interest in a tiger shifter, as in one. We had taken a chance and messaged her, but just because she wanted a tiger shifter, for whatever reason, didn't mean she wanted two. Hell, she might not even be open to the idea of a male/female/male relationship or anything to do with polyamory.

"Have you looked?" He returned to my side with the empty tray and a twenty-dollar bill. They at least tipped well.

"No. We said we were going to look together." I grabbed a few six-packs of bottles from the glass door refrigerator for a customer who was passing through. It was on the house because he said he owned a small chain of grocery stores in the Midwest and giving some bottles away, most of the time, ended up with us having big orders later.

“Look at what?” Vanessa nudged past me to get a fresh rag and the disinfectant spray. The bar was only occupied by two men at the end, so she was going to wipe the oak bar down before more customers came in.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Come on. Tell me. The old guys who come to the bar never have good tea.” She wagged her eyebrows. Our best friend had a way about her. Rocky swore that she was psychic.

“Not yet. But as soon as we have some news, we will tell you.”

She walked away, not satisfied but placated for a while.

“Let’s look now. I can’t wait.”

I ticked my chin over at the table where he had served shots. “They are already eyeing you, man. The shots are gone. Maybe they’re ready to move on to the beer.”

He growled loudly. “They can wait. Check it. I have to know.”

A chuckle broke out of me as I moved toward the back of the bar, followed by Rocky. We stepped into the shadow between the door to the brewery area and the back door, and I pulled my phone out since I was the one who had messaged her.

I sent a small whisper up to the gods before opening up the app. The gods and Fate.

I read the message three times before looking up at Rocky who had gone pale. “She...she’s interested,” I stuttered while the news stole my breath. I scanned the bar, looking for someone to pop out and say it was a hoax or a joke. Maybe for the world to tilt a bit sideways, anything that would explain this sudden burst of luck or gift from Fate.

“Look.” Rocky took the phone from me and read the message out loud. She said she was happy we messaged her and that yes, she would be open to a relationship with two males. Even two tiger males. “She wants to video chat with us.”

“When?” I asked, taking the phone back.

Vanessa whistled and waved us over, but we didn’t answer until after we messaged Anais back. She had given us her phone number, and I texted her asking what time she would like to talk. Honestly, I didn’t expect her to reply. This whole thing felt surreal. Something that happened in books or movies but never in real life.

Almost instantly, she texted back, saying she was a night owl and whenever it was convenient for us. We told her that we didn’t leave work until the wee hours of the morning, but it turned out that with the time difference, she would be waking up around the time we were free.

She wanted to see us face-to-face before moving forward.

We promised her we would message as soon as we were available. A night had never stretched so endlessly.

“What the hell is happening?” Vanessa said as we walked back and resumed our duties. The group of girls in the booth were being served by a waitress, but their pouty lips told me they weren’t pleased about it.

“We met someone on the app,” Rocky blurted.

“You’re the one who didn’t want to tell anyone.” I dug into his ribs with my elbow.

“It’s Vanessa. Besides, if this goes the way I hope, she will be meeting her soon.”

Vanessa reached for my phone and got into the app to look at Anais’ picture. For the rest of the night, she squealed and clapped and gushed over the possibilities. She and Jenson had spent weeks talking on the phone before they video chatted.

I took it as a good sign. The three of us rushed through the chores that night but still didn’t get out of there until almost three, a full two hours after I’d hoped we could leave. We got home and showered before sitting together at the kitchen table. We both took a deep breath at the same time and laughed.

“I’m going to text her,” I said. Rocky nodded as I hit the send button. Now we waited, but this time, we weren’t waiting on just anyone. We were waiting on our mate.

Chapter Seven

Anais

Two tigers...I spent months hunting for one, without success, the summer before entering the doctoral program. And years before that, just out of general interest. Ever since I learned shifters were real, when I met a raccoon shifter in high school, I was fascinated. The longevity and good health were, according to everything I'd been able to learn, legendary, and it made me wonder if any of that could pass to humans.

I chose tigers initially because the other shifters I interviewed said they lived longer than almost anyone else, and their immune systems were believed to be the best as well. Starry-eyed, I'd imagined learning some secret that would help humanity. But as I'd begun my research, I'd had to change my direction because as far as I could tell, what shifters had in their genetics was not something that transferred to humans. But everything else I learned indicated that my interviewees were correct about tigers, sparking me to make them my focus. Even the shifters I spoke with weren't sure if there were any tigers around, but I did kind of get the impression they were only interested in their own type.

One tiger I'd hunted for. And when I filled out my profile and answered all the questions, I never dreamed there could be more than one. Or that my very boring answers would garner me a pair of them who were interested. Even when we messaged that first time, I expected that to be it. They'd laugh me off. A boring, ordinary human. But they wanted to video chat with me. Reminding myself this was only for research, I lay awake tossing and turning and got up extra early to shower and do my hair, put on a little makeup...like a date.

It was not a date.

And yet, I sat on the small sofa and clutched my phone as if I was a teenager waiting to be asked to the prom. Didn't hurt that I hadn't been on a date in over a year. Teaching and working on my thesis, writing for academic journals who

would take me with my master's degree, as well as doing the "volunteer" projects our department made clear were do or die, took up all my time and energy. My books were a passion project as well.

So if I was horny, I'd have to forgive myself for the feeling. Maybe I could spend some time in the sack with these tigers?

No! Mixing research with pleasure would be a huge mistake. Once we were in the same place, if I was able to make that happen, I'd explain. Surely they wouldn't mind helping to add to the understanding of tiger shifters. Did they even know they'd been relegated to the edge of mythical?

Deep in thought, my phone's combined classical ringtone and vibrate startled me so much, I squeezed my hand tighter around it, and it shot out of my grip like a greased pig. Or a greased something that would fit in a fist. Maybe an egg. Which proved too close for comfort when it bounded off the corner of the coffee table and landed face down.

Hell. I really shouldn't have canceled my replacement insurance. But it was so expensive, I had almost no extra cash, and it was that or give up coffee. And I'd never survive without coffee. I reached for the phone, taking a small amount of comfort in the fact it was still ringing and rattling around on the floor. But that didn't mean the glass was intact, so I whispered a little prayer to the gods for that additional favor. I picked it up and turned it to face me, whooshing out a breath of relief to see the face was fine—just as the phone went silent and still.

"Nooo! They were going to think I lost interest or maybe was ghosting them. "Please don't be broken inside! Let it work." I hit redial. If I'd messed this up and they didn't answer, broken inside would be me without my doctorate or grant.

Not that teaching high school would be the worst thing that could happen, but research was my love, and while I would most likely teach as well as a professor, I'd also be able to do the lab work I dreamed of.

“Hello?” a deep voice said.

I stared at the dark screen thinking there really was something broken then realized I hadn't activated the camera for video chat. It wasn't something I did often—almost never in fact.

“Anais?” A different voice this time. “Are you there?”

“Y-yes.” A quick click and their faces filled the screen. Regal, carved cheekbones, straight noses, golden eyes. The one on the left, Rocky, I remembered from the profile pic that didn't do him the least justice, had curly blond hair and full lips curving up in a smile. Thad had a more unusual hair color, not striped like a tiger but holding all the colors of blond, red, and even into light brown. If it was professionally done, it had been achieved by a master. “Is that your real hair color?” I blurted out like the fool I was, clapping a hand over my mouth too late to stop it.

“Yes,” Rocky said, patting his friend's head. “Thank you for asking.”

Suddenly he rocked out of the picture, a snarl emerging from the one now centered in the screen. Then he was gone, too, and I heard a crash. Oh no. Two tigers who got rough with one another sounded bad for a simple human woman. But before I panicked enough to disconnect, they were both there again, grinning, and my jaw dropped.

“Are you both okay?”

“Thad bumped into me, and I bumped into a plant.” A bit of dirt in his hair confirmed the plant had been the crash. “He's oversensitive because everyone always accuses him of dyeing his hair.”

“Which I do not,” growled Thad. “This is the same color hair that everyone in my sire's line has.”

Before they got into another argument, I cut in. “I think you both have beautiful hair.”

Their gazes fixed on me. “Your hair is the red of sunsets,” Rocky said.

“Sunrise,” Thad put in.

“Yes, that’s it,” his friend agreed.

“Sailors take warning,” I muttered.

“What’s that?” Thad lifted a colorful brow in query.

“Nothing. Just a saying. So, I have a lot of questions about this. I’ve never dated two guys at the same time, and I suspect tigers are even more...” What about these guys had me making such a fool of myself over and over? My cheeks burned as all the possibilities ran through my mind.

“More?” Rocky nodded. “I’d say so, wouldn’t you, Thad?”

“Exactly. Much more.” He snapped his fingers. “But I have an idea. I don’t know how much you know about shifters and mating”—more than I was willing to admit to—“but why don’t you plan a visit to us? We can all get to know each other and see if we’re a match.”

And from there, it was just about making the arrangements. A visit. I could just ask my questions, spend some time with them, and then leave without committing to a relationship. My rent was paid through the summer, since I’d thought I would be working in the lab anyway. It could not have gone better.

Chapter Eight

Rocky

Patience was not my strong suit. Hell, it might not even be a thing I possessed at all, and waiting for Anais was proving that point to me over and over. After the video chat, the process of meeting her and having her come here went faster than a fire through dry forest. We booked the tickets and the car for her to get here. We'd offered to go and pick her up, but she insisted she didn't want us to upend our lives and drive over an hour to come get her.

If she was our mate, which I thought for sure she was, I'd have driven a car across the country to get her if need be.

My stomach, a knot of nervous energy, rolled, making me nauseated and excited. Thad and I had cursed ourselves after the call for not joining the app earlier. We could've already had her here and in our arms. However, if we had joined earlier, she might not have been on there. The timing was perfect. Perhaps Fate hadn't given up on us yet.

That morning, while Anais was on a flight across the country to meet us, Thad and I prepped. We cleaned the guest room top to bottom and went shopping. Vanessa came along and picked out new towels and bedding and we were grateful for it. We kept our home minimal. I didn't know Anais' style, but I gathered some things from the glimpse of her apartment in the background when we chatted. There were books and little trinkets on the coffee table. Her kitchen was a bright blue where ours was mostly white and gray. If she stayed with us—gods, I hoped she would—she could remodel and redecorate to her heart's content. If she wanted to move to a new place or build a house from scratch, we could do that, too.

"You're making me batshit crazy, Rocky." Thad wasn't any better. While I had been actively pacing the living room, he had wiped down the kitchen sixteen times in the last hour.

"At least I'm not trying to take the sheen off the countertops."

He squinted as a wave of frustration wafted toward me, but as soon as it came, it went away and was replaced by his laughter. “Shut up. Do we have time for a run? I’ve got to get some of this frenetic energy out of me.”

I checked my watch and groaned. It had been exactly seven minutes since the last time I looked at the damned thing, though it seemed like fourteen hours at least. “No. She’ll be here in fifteen minutes. You’re the one who has the car app. Check it.”

Thad pulled out his phone. His eyes widened, and all the color drained from his face. “She’s three minutes out. She’s going to be here in three minutes. Three minutes.”

“If you say three minutes one more time...” Shit. Our anxiety was getting the best of us. “It’s going to be okay. I—” Gravel crunched outside, letting us know a car had turned from the smooth highway onto our driveway. My heartbeat amplified, trying to beat its way right out of my chest. “She’s here.”

Thad blew out a forced breath while scanning the room at the same time I was. We were making sure everything was in place. After all, our mate, or potential mate, was about to see our den.

“Do we wait until she knocks?” Thad asked, but I was halfway to the door. A car door closed, followed by the creak of hinges of a trunk.

When I saw her, everything around me failed to exist. I knew what she looked like from not only the pictures on her profile and on our chats, but, in person, the woman was a goddess plucked from some kind of heavenly fire. Her red hair blew in the wind. She tried to put a hand over it, but the tendrils of flame had a mind of their own. Her jeans fit her like another layer of skin. Her dark-green sweater complemented the forest green of her eyes. My tiger was silent and still for the first time in memory.

“Hello, Anais,” Thad said, and somehow his greeting plucked me from my stupor. I moved down the front steps behind him and said my own hi—at least, I thought I did. This

female had been here less than two minutes, and already my damned brain was scrambled.

“Hey!” She had her purse strapped across her body, her smile polite. Reserved.

“We’ll get everything,” I choked out while Thad tipped the driver even though he had already done so through the app.

“Thank you, both,” she said, giving a little shiver. “It’s a bit chillier than I expected. A different cold than where I’m from.”

I knew what she meant. Here in the Pacific Northwest, the wet and sticky cold clung to our bones despite shifters having a higher body temperature. It must’ve really been tough on humans. We’d need to keep that in mind for her—for our mate.

“Let’s get you warm, then. We have a fire going.”

Once inside, we showed her to her room with its attached bath. We, and our tigers, had known each other long enough to be able to read our moods and thoughts a bit. Thad had rarely taken an interest in a woman, but he was enamored. He tended to her every need and hung on every word. Hell, I was doing the same. The stories were true. Once you met your fated mate, nothing else mattered.

“Is this okay?” I asked while she walked around the room. She didn’t say much, but, then again, we were virtual strangers. Her arms were crossed over her abdomen and her fists were clenched. She was a female who had traveled across the country to meet and live with people an app told her would be perfect for her. I didn’t take her reservations to heart, not at all. Plus, she was human. And humans took a while to warm up in more ways than one.

“It’s really great. Thank you.” She turned, and a slight blush graced her cheeks. “You said you wanted to take me on a tour of the brewery?”

Thad nodded. “Yes. Of course. Are you hungry? A local spot serves great burgers.”

“Burgers sound amazing. I’m ready when you are.”

We brought her to the brewery and gave her the tour. She seemed genuinely interested and asked about our process and how we started. I felt like we were talking entirely too much, but our stories and antics only made her ask more questions. We brought her into the bar, next, where Vanessa nearly tackled her to the ground and promised to take her away if she ever tired of us. Before I knew it, hours had passed, and I smelled her hunger.

That wasn't all I scented about her, either. She had a smell like molasses and maple that had my mouth watering and my tiger licking his chops. Her ample hips swayed as she walked. I imagined what they would feel like in my grip. I wanted her already, and I barely knew her. Our mate for sure.

Thad took a sharp breath, nostrils flaring. "We've been keeping you so busy. You must be tired and hungry."

"I'm actually starving. I think my nerves were taking away my hunger earlier..."

I chuckled. "Now you know we're not weirdos or serial killers, you've relaxed and able to feel your hunger. Come on, let's go eat."

The drive to Ruth's Diner was short. Customers filled the booths. I was hoping to have a quiet dinner with Anais and Thad, but that wasn't in the cards. Ruth herself sat us in a corner booth, the only one available, and told us she would come back to take our orders.

"The brewery and bar are both amazing. I can't believe you built it from a hobby in your kitchen. I'm impressed."

My tiger turned around inside me. He wanted to show her his form—impress her even more.

We ordered food and began to eat while she told us more about her studies, but I caught her looking over my shoulder more than once.

Anais wiped her hands on her napkin. "Anyone wanna tell me why every woman in this place is giving me the death stare? Is it because I'm human?"

Chapter Nine

Thad

I would bet my stripes that they didn't give two shits if she was human or not. Rocky and I had been out of the dating scene for at least a couple of years, and some had openly expressed their frustration about it. Now that we were here with a female, they were going to show their feisty sides.

I should've expected this to happen. They knew our reputations, and it had become somewhat of a game to them to see which female could break our no-females-except-our-mate run. We were on the wagon, and they all wanted us off. That wasn't me boasting or puffing out my chest. Vanessa heard a lot of things while tending the bar. Plus, a lot of them had told us right to our faces that we didn't need to find our mate—anyone would do.

That was the thing. No one but our mate would do.

I shared a look with Rocky, who turned around to see who Anais was talking about. A group of females, wolf shifters, who frequented the Alchemy and made their desires clear as day, were giving her the death stare she referred to. "They are females we once...dated," Rocky said.

Anais snickered. "Did you break up with them? I'm not sure they are aware."

Gods, I knew this issue was going to come up, and even though I'd cringed at thinking about it, here it was, and we'd already discussed being completely open and honest. No mating lasted that began on lies.

"We used to be different people. We tended to be in short relationships and dated—a lot."

Anais looked down at her plate instead of us. A sinking feeling took over my chest. I had expected this would be a source of contention but she hadn't even been here a day. "Are you still?" she murmured after a moment of uncomfortable silence.

“No.” Rocky put his hand on hers. I thought she would pull away but she didn’t. “That was when we were younger but, years ago, we decided we didn’t want to live that way any longer. We wanted to wait for our mate.”

After a few long exhales from all of us, we resumed our eating. Anais had ordered the french toast, the same as us, despite our previous longing for burgers, but my appetite was lost. I took tiny bites only to seem less awkward.

“You can ask us anything. We would never lie to you. We are completely transparent about that time in our lives. We’re transparent about everything. Secrets are never a good thing.”

She nodded. “I do have one question. Why in the heck would two gorgeous men who are clearly popular with the local females get on an app to look for a mate?”

Rocky grunted while I paused, trying to word the answer. My best friend beat me to it. “Because, despite getting around, for lack of a better term, Thad and I believe we have a fated mate—a true mate. The one meant to be with us and us with her. We lost sight of that vision at one time, but we regained it, and that’s why we got onto the app.”

The females left after a while, reeking of anger as they passed. As a human, Anais wouldn’t have been able to smell that, and I was grateful that she didn’t.

“What about you?” I asked. “Have you dated much? How did you decide you wanted a shifter and a tiger shifter at that?”

“I…” Her blush spoke before she did. “I dated some but was more dedicated to my work and my education than anything else. Nobody serious.”

Rocky finished his plate and pushed it away. “Why a tiger shifter? Why a shifter at all? Humans usually shy away from us.”

She shrugged. “I’ve studied shifters some. It comes with the territory. I know that once they find their true mate, they are loyal to them. No cheating or leaving them. That’s what I want. A man to be true to me and I to him—or them.” That made my stomach flop.

“You waited for your mate,” I said.

“I did. I...I’m really tired. Would it be okay if we called it a night?”

Rocky and I both nodded, and I escorted her to the car while he paid for the meal. She didn’t mutter a word during the ride, and we didn’t prod her. Of course, my mind was riddled with what-ifs that swirled around the chance she would be repelled by our past.

If she left, it would be karma. By chance, perhaps Fate would honor the change we had made and gift us with her as a mate because my tiger pawed at me from the inside, wanting to get to her—prove to her she belonged to us.

“I’ll shower and go to bed. Thank you for dinner.”

It sounded like goodbye. Maybe I was simply being a naysayer and needed to get a grip on myself.

“You’re welcome. Is there anything you need? Is it cold in here? There’s an extra blanket on the chest at the foot of your bed.”

She smiled. It wasn’t the first time, but it hit me straight in the chest that it might be the last. “Thank you. I have everything I need and it’s not cold in here. Good night.” Frustration built inside me. She would make up her mind about us tonight, I was sure. Lying there alone, at a strange place, in a strange bed, with her covers pulled up to her ears the only thing to make her feel safe. What I wouldn’t do to be able to walk into her bedroom and wrap her up in my warmth, make her feel safe and secure, not only physically but in our presence. She was right about shifters. Once we found our mate, nothing short of the end of the world could keep us from her.

“What are you thinking?” Rocky nudged me with his shoulder after she gently closed the bedroom door. I heard her unzipping suitcases and soon after, turning on the hot water in the shower. The hot water knob squeaked.

I flexed my fists at my sides, wanting to do something to convince her, but my tiger was adamant we leave her to her

rest after her travels. “Did we ruin it? All those years, did we throw away the chance for a fated mate?”

Rocky’s tiger’s chuff emerged from his human throat. Few animals besides tigers could do that. “I hope not. My tiger knows it’s her.”

“Yeah. It’s her. I hope the moon shines down on us tonight.”

Chapter Ten

Anais

I slept well. As in, my head hit the pillow, and my eyes did not open until morning. Eight o'clock. I couldn't remember the last time I'd gotten such good rest. The room was so comfortable, the sheets crisp and new. A few little knickknacks beckoned me to check them out. While I had never been into clutter, I'd held on to bits and pieces of things that held good memories and made me smile when I saw them. Were these significant to the tigers, or did one of them just like cute things?

Tigers and cuteness? While this room was very nicely decorated, nothing in the house besides the items on the dresser top here held anything adorable. In fact, the only thing the place lacked was a woman's touch.

Stop thinking like that!

It was something I'd seen in movies from the 1940s and 1950s. Women who walked in to a man's bachelor pad and imagined adding ruffles to everything. I'd never been that girl, nor would I ever. A few paintings or prints on the wall would be nice, maybe nature lithos? Dark-green jungle with tiger-striped faces just peeking through. Or would that be wallpaper? And I suddenly realized that I'd spent a whole day with them without taking the opportunity to ask them to show me their tigers.

The thought stole my breath. As magnificent as they were in human form, it was easy to forget there was another. I'd only seen Bonnie shift once, and that had left me breathless. Her wolf's fur was thick and luxurious, and she'd come close and allowed me to run my fingers through it for a moment. Without any connection besides friendship, I'd still been melted by her beauty in that form. And shocked to see that the pale-blue eyes held an intelligent being besides hers. She had tried to explain it to me, but until I saw it for myself, I'd had no comprehension of what that meant.

And even now, my understanding was so miniscule, not just of how two beings could inhabit the same what... molecules? Yeah, all of my research, everything that brought me inches from my doctorate, and I knew nothing. It was more than humbling and made me consider whether my work had truly earned me that parchment. Whether my agreement with my advisor had been broken or not, I needed to do more, learn more. Present more, or I couldn't in good conscience accept the honor.

Sunlight poured through the sheer curtains, bidding me to get up and see what the day held.

But first I had things to note. As a researcher, it was critical to get my observations down, but everything I'd written so far paled in comparison to what I'd experienced yesterday. Which made it wildly weird that I didn't do this last night, breaking my own rule of not sleeping until my day's logging was complete. But, after traveling here and spending all the time with the tigers, with Rocky and Thad, it was all I could do to shower and climb into bed. I wanted to go find the tigers right now, but I had to get my impressions down while they were somewhat fresh in my mind.

Fishing my tablet out of my bag that had landed on the chair by the bed, I opened the case and pulled the pencil from its sling. I fluffed the pillows behind me and pictured myself getting off the plane. I hadn't met them in person at that point yet, but my feelings and impressions were important. Maybe not for the actual thesis but for me.

I wasn't sure what to expect, but my knees wobbled as I made my way through the jetway and into the airport. I had told them not to meet me, that it was too much trouble, and I'd take a car. They tried to insist, but I held my ground...

Held my ground. My fingers flew, the pencil slowing me down, so I switched to the onscreen keyboard instead. So much to get down, and I didn't want to miss a detail. Detailed descriptions of the pair of them. I'd already done some of this after our first video chat, but in person, they were so much... more. And their scent like dry grass under a summer sun and jungle leaves dripping with rainwater at the same time. Rocky

was more the grass, I thought, than the leaves, but when they were both with me, they blended in a way that I couldn't describe well enough.

I described their business, the brewery and the bar where they sold their products, talked a bit about Vanessa, and that made me wonder what she was. Not a tiger, I didn't think, but not just a human like me.

Most of what I wanted to describe pertained to the tigers I'd come to meet. To visit. Funny, intense, and overall behaving almost like brothers who loved to tease, and maybe things got a little bit rowdy, but in the end had one another's backs. I had to remember I wasn't really here for a relationship but to study them. They didn't make it easy. They were the kind of good-looking an ordinary girl like me never got this close to, and I was still trying to figure out why they would give me the time of day. Could there be something to this mate stuff?

"Anais?" A rap on the door followed Rocky's inquiry.

"Hi, just a second." I hadn't even brushed my teeth or anything. How could I let them see me like this? But...this was not a date, not a real fix up, and if I went to a lot of fuss, I'd never be able to convince them, or me, that it just didn't work out. "Come in."

The door opened, and he took a step inside. "Oh good, you're awake. What are you writing?"

Oops. "Just some notes for school." Staying as close to the truth as possible. "Before I forget what I had on my mind."

"Oh? I have heard people keep pads near their bed for that, but I guess I never have anything I want to write down when I wake up. I'm usually anxious to be on the move."

"I am, too." I set the tablet down. "Do you have time to hang out today?"

"Yes." His eyes twinkled. "Come have breakfast and then, if you like, we can take a hike?"

"That sounds amazing."

Chapter Eleven

Rocky

I opened my mouth and shut it without speaking about three thousand times while Anais settled in with her coffee. So many things were floating through my mind. So many that I didn't know which one to express.

Finally, I decided not to speak at all. I took in every detail. She poured in a healthy glug of white-chocolate-raspberry creamer and stirred it while she cocked her right hip out. She wore some silk pajamas that swished against her skin and clung to all her peaks and valleys. The fiery strands of her hair were pulled up in a bun that revealed her smooth neck. Gods, what I wouldn't do to get my mouth on that neck—at the very least.

“I waited to make breakfast in case you didn't want anything. If you do, I'll make it right now.” Thad's voice broke through the tension.

Anais sat down and crisscrossed the front of her robe around her front. Both of her hands hugged the Alchemy mug. Her scent was much like the thoughts in my head—a mixture of fear, frustration, general angst.

She was our mate. I was sure of it. It was our job to take away her nervousness, but I thought reaching out and touching her might be the last thing she wanted after our admission the night before. I couldn't erase my past. The best way to put something behind you was to go right through it.

Her green eyes caught me in their snare. “Breakfast would be great, but I wanted to apologize for last night.”

Not what I expected. At all. “Apologize for what?” Thad asked, leaning forward a bit.

“Last night took me a little by surprise, and I reacted instead of responded. I'm not naive enough to think the two of you would be virgins, but seeing those shifter women...” She

took a long breath. “I thought about it this morning. I’m no one to judge you on your past. I want to move forward.”

“It’s behind us. I swear it. We would’ve never asked you to be here or even gotten on the app if it wasn’t.” I went with my tiger instead of my human-overthinking brain and touched her hand.

A soft rose highlighted the crest of her cheeks. “I believe you.”

Thad stared at her and, while I could usually make a ballpark guess as to what my best friend was thinking, in that moment, I had no fucking clue. “You okay, Thad?” I asked.

“Thank you,” he murmured, his eyes never left Anais’ green ones. “I’m glad we can move forward. Now, what do you want for breakfast? We thought we would take you hiking today—to our favorite spot.”

“That sounds fun. Don’t go to any trouble, Thad. Whatever you two usually have is fine with me.”

I snorted. “We are creatures of habit. Always eggs and toast.”

She laughed. Our hands were still touching and, to my and my tiger’s joy, she hadn’t moved hers away. Relief had flooded my system since hearing what she had to say about the night before and who we had once been. Of course, if she had something in her past she wasn’t proud of, I would love her anyway.

Wait a damned minute. Love?

No, it was too soon for that, even for a shifter.

Anais thought it over for a second. “Eggs and toast sound perfect. But for the more important matter—is there more coffee?”

We ate our breakfast and talked about the hiking trail. She had said that she didn’t want to dwell on our past. But I also wanted to ease her in any way I could, so I let her know it was our place to get away from it all, and we’d never shared that with anyone—anyone.

She helped Thad clean up the minimal mess while I got dressed and packed a lunch.

The ride to the trail was a little over an hour. Anais sat between us in the cab of the truck and she asked questions about our work and hours and what else we did for fun. She was as interested in us as we were in her.

Once we found the trailhead, she was the first to start walking, goading us about taking so long. She fit right in as though she'd always been there.

“We have talked your ear off this morning, female. Tell us about you.” Thad hopped down from one boulder to another and then raised his hand to help her.

“What do you want to know?” she asked as a narrow river of sweat meandered its way down the back of her neck. It might've been too warm in the truck, but she hadn't mentioned it.

When she hopped down, one of her feet slipped on the dew-covered rock and she nearly went right off the side, but Thad caught her in his arms. There was a moment where their faces were only inches apart and he winked at her.

“What made you interested in veterinary medicine?” I asked, pausing to let them have their time.

“I've been interested in animals since I was a girl. Mostly the big animals. Predators.”

I chuckled. Hopefully, she was as interested in us. “You're more about the research, right? Not the practice?”

I took a guess since she hadn't mentioned anything about hands-on experience or working at a zoo.

“Yes. It's more about veterinary medicine. I've never done work in a clinic. I probably should. Hands-on experience.”

Thad cocked his head to the side, and I looked at the understory above us. It gave us an umbrella of shadow from the sun. It was a perfect day. When Anais moved on, he and I briefly shared a look. While she was telling the truth somewhat, there was a metallic taste of untruth on my tongue,

which was tricky. Perhaps she was only withholding information since we were still getting to know each other, or maybe she didn't want us to know something. Either way, we noticed. I wouldn't call her on it and Thad wouldn't, either, but I couldn't deny it planted a tiny speck of doubt in my consciousness.

"How were you able to leave your studies to come across the country so fast?" I asked. We kept walking, Thad and I behind her. I couldn't see her reaction to my question. I wished I could.

"Oh, um, I'm on a break. Between grants and such."

Another half-truth.

"Let it go for now," Thad mumbled, enough for me to hear but low enough that she wouldn't be able to. We had been completely honest with her, even when it hurt, even when it meant risking her leaving.

I nodded and let it go. One day, I was sure, she would trust us enough to tell us everything.

Chapter Twelve

Thad

After a few hours hiking the terrain, which was both easy and tough at the same time, Anais was moving slower, taking more breaks.

“Maybe it’s time to stop for lunch,” I suggested.

The relief on Anais’ face was enough to make Rocky and I both chuckle. We hiked this trail all the time, mostly to blow off steam or take a break from the nonstop work of owning our own business.

I didn’t think that it would be tough for her. Hell, it looked like I didn’t think this over enough at all. She was human. She was fit and in good health, but these hills and rocks were a hard climb for most humans. We’d seen enough of them here to know that.

She snorted. “I thought I was in shape. This trail has me in a choke hold.”

“You look great to me,” Rocky said and winked at her. “Maybe we should’ve started with an easier trail.”

“Yeah, we can work up to the tough stuff. What did you bring for lunch?”

We laid a blanket down, not for us but for her. We kept it simple as always with sandwiches and pretzels, and I had some fruit in my bag in case she needed a snack on the way back. While we ate, she told us a little more about her work, but I felt like she was only skimming the surface for some reason. Maybe she was working for the government? There were all kinds of grants. Gods, I hoped she wasn’t involved in any kind of animal testing but, with the lack of information, my mind was free to conjure up all kinds of ideas.

“Your stamina and strength, that’s a shifter thing, right?” Anais asked. She had polished off her sandwich and lay back against a tree stump, eating pretzels right out of the bag. Her posture and scent told me she was getting more comfortable

around us. When she'd arrived, a bit of an undertone of fear tainted her maple-and-brown-sugar scent, but it had faded a bit.

"It is," I responded. "We also tend to be similar to our animals, so we eat a lot of meat and like to hunt and run."

She nodded. "That makes sense. So, can I ask why you would think I am your mate? I mean, that is why you messaged me on the app, right?"

Gods, she was my mate. Rocky's, too. We knew that almost from the second we saw her, but her people were different. "You mean because you are human?" he asked.

"Yes. Are there no female tiger shifters, or is your mate your mate, no matter if she's human or not. Is a female tiger shifter going to come along one day and claim you both?"

A growl reverberated in my chest, and some passing hikers turned to look. "No one else will be claiming us if we are your mate. We get one—one mate. Doesn't matter if she's human, tiger, hippo, or flamingo. One mate. For life."

Anais pursed her lips. "What if something happened to your mate? What then? You live a life all alone?"

Not exactly happy conversation material but if she was curious, I didn't want to hold onto information. "Probably," Rocky answered.

We continued on the trail for an hour longer before I called it. We still had to walk all the way back, and our girl was losing steam by the second. She stopped against a tree and leaned on it. "Will one of you shift and carry me the rest of the way?"

I didn't know if she was serious or not, but Rocky grinned. "No. There's too many humans around, but I give one hell of a piggyback ride."

"Shut up," she said, laughing but I knew he was serious. In seconds, he'd lifted her up with her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. "I'm too heavy."

“You are not too heavy,” he called over his shoulder. “You fit just right.”

We got back to the trailhead, and Anais slept all the way home.

I put her on the couch and covered her with a blanket then told Rocky I would be home later.

Anais opened her eyes. “Where are you going?”

“I have to work. Tonight’s my shift. Rocky will be home with you. Or do you want to come to the bar? I won’t be home until two in the morning or so.”

She groaned, making me laugh. “No way. That trail kicked my human ass.”

I showered and changed, but the last thing I wanted to do was leave her.

“Good night,” I said, placing a kiss on her forehead.

“Good night. Hey, wake me up when you get in, okay?”

“No way. You need your sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.”

When I left, Rocky was stoking the fire.

Chapter Thirteen

Anais

The nap on the way home refreshed me more than I thought, and after Thad headed out to work, I found myself alert and regretting just a bit that I didn't go. Rocky turned from the fireplace, its warm glow. "You're still awake?"

"I am sorry you got stuck staying home with me. Wouldn't you rather be in the bar? We can go now, or I can even stay home so I won't be in the way if you want." I was halfway to standing when he reached me and eased me back down onto the couch.

"Easy, baby. It's my night off, and I'd much rather be here with you than in all that noise."

"I thought you liked it there." I tucked my feet under me and patted the cushion beside me. "Isn't it your dream job?"

"It is." He settled on the edge of the couch, adorably hesitant to get in my space. "But sitting here with you is my dream evening."

"That's very sweet of you to say." My cheeks heated—again. If I kept spending time with these tigers, I could throw out my blush because I'd be permanently flushed. "But I don't want to keep you from things you need to do."

"What I need to do is find out what you'd like to eat for dinner. And it has to be deliverable because I'm not much of a cook."

"Aren't you kind of far out for delivery?"

"Not as far as it seems. All the services come here, so, what will it be? Pizza? Mexican? Chinese? Pho?"

"Pho, really?"

"And it's good. Authentic, bone broth, all the trimmings."

"Yes, please." Sitting here by the fire, eating pho? "It's one of my favorite comfort foods."

He pulled out his phone and brought up the menu for the Vietnamese place. I made my selection and tried not to wriggle with joy when he added spring rolls and baguettes. “In our town, they do all the Vietnamese specialties. Let’s get some desserts.”

We sat and talked while we waited for the delivery, and when it came, I gaped. “That is a lot of food.” Sure, pho came in a big bowl, but I’d never tried to manage even finishing that, and I regretted not telling him I didn’t want anything else.

“Anything you can’t eat, I will help you with.” He grinned, teeth gleaming bright in the firelight. “And I did buy enough for Thad to have when he gets home, too.”

“Oh, of course.” I should have thought of that. These were true friends, business partners, prepared to share a mate even. Not just two bachelors who shared a place for convenience. “But it smells incredible.”

“The owners of the restaurant are the son and daughter-in-law of immigrants who came here after the fall of the capital.” His smile was gone. “Their whole streak died.” Streak: one of the names for a group of tigers. “They are good people.”

And tigers! Apparently I should have looked in the Pacific Northwest for them. “Are there others around here? Tigers, I mean?”

He shrugged. “Not many. Why? Aren’t we enough?”

I giggled. “I suspect you’re more than enough.”

“Let’s sit on the floor and eat on the low table.”

We unpacked everything and sat with our backs against the sofa, spooning up the rich broth and chunks of savory beef. The spring rolls were fresh and crisp, the wrappers delicate, and the dipping sauce just spicy enough to enhance all the flavors. And while I managed to demolish my soup and two spring rolls, I leaned back with a groan when Rocky held up the bag holding our desserts.

“Can we have them for breakfast?”

“Or later, sure.” He packed up all the trash and stood up. “I’m going to get this all straightened up, and then maybe we can watch a movie?”

“I’ll help.” I moved to stand as well, but he waved me down. “You’re going to spoil me.”

“That’s my job.” He bent and kissed my hair. “You don’t know much about tiger shifters, do you?”

“I’m learning,” I said. And it was going to be so hard to leave.

Rocky disappeared into the kitchen then returned and held out a hand to help me to my feet. “What kind of movies do you like?”

Their television was perched above the mantel, and we channel surfed until we came to a 1940s drama, something I loved. “Is this all right?” Most guys would hate it.

“Sure. I haven’t seen a lot of movies like this, but I’m willing. Want popcorn?”

I clapped a hand over my mouth. “Don’t mention food.”

“I thought you were made of stronger stuff.” He plopped onto the couch and pulled me down with him. “I guess we’ll have to build you up.”

“If you feed me like this, I’ll be as big as a house,” I protested.

“You know alphas love to feed their females,” he said, settling back and tugging me to lean against him. “But we probably can find exercise if you want to work it off.”

“Like that trail,” I agreed. “Hiking is great exercise.”

“Yes, that, too.” He tipped my chin up and gave me a soft kiss. “You’re so sweet and warm.”

We watched the movie—part of it, anyway, talking about anything and everything as well, and it was so nice I wanted the night to go on forever. So I didn’t protest when his kisses grew deeper, when his tongue tangled with mine and I lost

track of the movie. Or when he cupped a breast and stroked the hardening peak with his thumb.

Instead, I welcomed his touch, wanting more. I hadn't been opposed to this becoming sexual, but it was more than that. I was getting way too into this, into them, and with that realization, I jerked away and jumped to my feet. "I-I have to go to bed. Very tired." And I fled like a scaredy cat. But I had to. I wasn't their mate or a veterinary student. I was something else entirely, and when they found out, they were not going to be happy with me.

No, I was afraid they'd be very hurt.

Chapter Fourteen

Rocky

Gravel crunching outside let me know Thad was home. Soon after, he opened the front door slowly and closed it quietly behind him. I gave him shit all the time, but he was the best friend a person could ever have. Considerate. Kind. He would have my back until one of us stopped breathing and maybe beyond that.

“You’re still up?” he said. “That kind of defeats the purpose of having a night off.”

“We ordered takeout. Want me to plate it up?”

“Yeah. Thanks. I’m going to shower and then I’ll be back.”

I heated up his pho, set the remaining spring rolls on a plate, and waited for him to get back. Although I had every intention of telling him what happened that night, my skin itched with the unspoken update. We were in this relationship together. Once we were mated, there would be no reason to share all of the details but, until then, I would share what happened between Anais and I. The short make-out session that left me hard and needing her in a way I never knew was possible. Like my next breath. Like a starved animal.

“What did you two eat?” he asked. Beads of water still clung to his hair and dripped onto the towel he had hanging around his neck.

“Pho. How was everything tonight? Anything to speak of?”

“You ordered pho? I didn’t think it was your thing.” It was however his. He sat down and groaned as the first bite hit. We were always hungry but our hours amped up our appetite.

“It isn’t so bad. Our mate likes it.”

“One more thing in her favor.” He bit into a spring roll and sighed. Chewed and swallowed before going on. “You

ever want to burn down the Alchemy and go back to selling six-packs from the basement brewery?”

I laughed a bit too loud, and my gaze darted to Anais’ bedroom, hoping I didn’t wake her. “That awful?”

He shook his head. “Nah. It was just busy. There was a self-help conference somewhere in the city, and they decided the Alchemy was a good place to visit. I had to start turning people away because we were getting past the fire limits.”

“That’s a good thing, right?” I stood and filled a second bowl, glad I’d ordered so much. Usually I just ate their other dishes, but sharing it with our mate made me like pho a lot more. Thad was almost done with the first.

“Definitely a good thing. So what did you and Anais do?” He pinned me with a knowing look.

“We ate and watched a movie,” I answered.

“And? Come on, man. You know I can smell the lust. It’s hours old but still thick. Hit me as soon as I walked through the door.”

“We kissed and a bit more, but not sex.”

He nodded. “You wouldn’t complete the mating without me. That is, if you really believe she is our mate. We talked about it before but are you still sure?”

I paused, taking in the little time we’d had with the fiery female. She was smart and sharp. She got our humor and even made it most of the way on our favorite trail. Hard worker—she had to be in order to get so far in school. “I’m sure. What about you?”

I switched out the bowls, but he didn’t start on the second one. “I’ve known she was ours since she stepped out of the car. Before that, even.”

“She ran out afterward. I know I didn’t hurt her. I was careful. Gentle. Gentler than I’ve ever been with a female, but she ran out like she was on fire.”

Thad sat up. “Too fast?” he asked.

I shrugged one shoulder. The whole thing had left me completely bewildered. One moment, she was writhing against me, the smell of lust and want coming off her as powerful as anything I'd ever smelled, and the next, she was sprinting away. "I don't know."

Thad nodded. "Let's give her some space. This is going to take more time. We're used to females falling into bed with us and holding nothing back. Anais is special, and a strong bond takes time, right?"

"Yes, Shifter Love Guru." I bowed a little, which made him laugh and, in turn, I cracked up.

"But seriously, let's give her space. I want her for always, and that's a long damned time. Let's let her set the tone. She'll come to us when she's ready."

The rest of the night we discussed the new flavor and how Aldo was hyping it up online. It would only be available in the Alchemy and, if it did well, we would bottle it. Vanessa had sent her love and, of course, she had gotten all the updates on us and Anais out of Thad.

"Shit. We'd better get to bed." Thad motioned to the window where I saw the sun had started to rise. Wasn't a big deal usually, but we had a day full of meetings.

"We're stopping in town for coffee this morning. No way you can make any strong enough to deal with today," I added. "Good night or morning. Get a few hours of sleep, at least."

Chapter Fifteen

Thad

“I thought the two of you had eggs and toast every morning,” Anais said, coming into the kitchen. She made a beeline for the coffeepot and stood next to me. “We’re okay?” she whispered and leaned her head against my shoulder briefly. We were still going to get coffee in town, this pot just to give us an edge to the day. Also, in case our mate didn’t want to wait.

“Are you?” I asked. “I didn’t hurt you?”

She shook her head while doctoring her coffee almost exactly the same way I did mine. “No. I know you would never hurt me. This is all moving fast. It caught up with me.”

“We’ll go at your pace, sweetheart,” I answered. Thad could overhear the conversation, but he flipped french toast instead of speaking. He could if he wanted to but I was glad he didn’t.

“Thank you. And you...what is this? This isn’t eggs and toast.”

Thad chuckled. “Yes. It is. Just in a different form.”

“I’ll let it slide this time.” Anais wore jeans and a burgundy V-neck sweater. She wore minimal jewelry and I wondered if it was because she didn’t like it or if she simply didn’t have much. Graduate education was expensive, and she hadn’t talked about her parents at all.

I would find out.

We had breakfast quickly and made our way to the meeting room adjacent to our offices behind the bar. Away from the noise. We treated our small staff as we wanted to be treated. It was the way to keep our employees. When we did better, they did better.

While we walked into the conference room, where Thad and our staff were already seated, I put my hand on the small

of her back, without thinking. She turned and looked at me, smiling.

“Good morning, everyone.” Thad followed us in. “Let’s get this started.”

Aldo already had his eyes on Anais, and while I knew he had a mate of his own, I wanted to put an end to any questions. “This is Anais. She’s going to be here for the day with us.”

She waved then took a seat near the door. We had to start the meeting—the first of many of the day.

Additional grocers and restaurants wanted our beer, but we had to be choosy. We had decided a long time ago, we never wanted to get to a point where we would have to be a macro-brewery instead of a micro one. We liked being small and changing the flavors as we saw fit.

Aldo went over the social media standings and wanted to know if Thad and I were willing to conduct some personal tours. We told him that we would have to think about it. We had little time to ourselves as it was and add a mate into that—We’d waited long enough for her, and I wouldn’t waste one minute. While we spoke, I noticed Anais writing down things in her journal. She was as entranced in scribbling down things as I was watching her do it. She rolled her bottom lip between her teeth and turned her head this way and that.

I couldn’t shake the feeling there was more to her under the surface. She’d only shown us the shallow things. The way she took her coffee. How she laughed and brushed her hair over her shoulders at times.

I wanted to know more. All of her. Every inch inside and out. What drove her to get out of bed in the morning, and especially what the plan was if she decided to stay.

Gods, I hoped she would stay.

While I was busy studying her, Thad kicked me under the table. “What?” I barked but then remembered I was among our friends and employees. “What?” I repeated, in a suitable tone this time. Anais let out a little giggle.

“Aldo was asking you a question. I think you need another cup of coffee, my friend.” Seventeen more cups of coffee wouldn’t cure the Anais hangover and, honestly, I didn’t want it to fade. Last night had been incredible. The feel of her in my arms. The way she poured her passion into every move she made. The sounds she let out when her hips rocked against mine. All of it. I wanted to be Anais-drunk every second of every day.

“Ask again, Aldo.”

I somehow managed to pay attention through the rest of the meeting, but it was soon over. We kept on top of things and had a hardworking team, so there wasn’t much up for debate unless they had new ideas or a new company had reached out to them. We went over budget, but, again, we stayed on top of those things.

“I’m kidnapping her while you two have your video calls,” Vanessa said.

Thad eyed our best friend. There was no telling what Vanessa would spill to Anais about us. She had been with us through some of our toughest times and a whole hell of a lot of embarrassing times as well. “If you tell her anything embarrassing, I’m telling Jenson about the armadillo incident.”

Vanessa’s red lips opened. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try us,” I said, backing up my friend.

“Fine. Are you hungry, Anais?” she asked. “I’m about to get a snack.”

I didn’t want her to leave but we had to focus, and that wasn’t happening with her around—at least not until our bond was complete. Hell, maybe after that. I nodded to her and she smiled in a way that had me wanting her in my lap and not leaving the room.

“Vanessa is our best friend.” I realized in that moment, I hadn’t introduced her properly. “We’ll be here if you need us. She won’t get you into too much trouble.”

Anais followed Vanessa out of the meeting room. Once she and the others were gone, Thad turned to me. “I want her

so badly I can taste it,” he murmured and let out a growl.

“Maybe we need a run sometime today. Get some of this energy out of us.”

Thad leaned forward and thumped his head on the table. “I would need to run about a thousand miles.”

Laughing, I opened the laptop. We would have to be all business for the next few hours. “We’ll do what it takes to make her happy.”

“Yeah. We will.”

Chapter Sixteen

Anais

I hung out with the guys all day. Or maybe it would be better to say, I hung out with their friends. Vanessa, in particular. Rocky and Thad were so busy with meetings and other tasks that they barely found time to break long enough to take me to a really great burger stand not too far from the brewery. It was fun, but although they were charming as always, I knew they needed to get back as soon as possible to continue their busy day.

Something I did not want to interrupt. As we spent more hours with each other, I had begun to feel a combination of guilt and longing that made it hard to swallow the tasty avocado bacon cheeseburger. It was the daily special, and the scent of grilling meat had made it irresistible, but listening to the two of them joke while they devoured their triples, they were just so open and honest about their lives.

If I had a scrap of honor, I'd admit my perfidy before another minute passed and give them the opportunity to pack me off to the airport without any further lies. Veterinary school? Studying animals like dogs and cats? No, not me. I had tracked them down like the wild cats they were and was using them to learn enough about their people. What made them tick. Hopefully to see them shift and really get to see those tigers.

Selfish much?

Suddenly I became aware they were studying me with intent gazes. "What? Is there something on my face?" I brushed at my lips.

"No, you haven't eaten enough to get anything on you."

"Oh, yeah. I guess I'm not that hungry."

The concern on both their expressions had me shoving a big bite of burger into my mouth and chewing vigorously. "It's good, really," I said around the mouthful. "Delicious."

Their faces relaxed, allowing me to slow the chewing before I choked.

“Good.” Thad pushed the basket of shared tots toward me. “Want some?”

Being only human, I did. They were deep fried, crispy on the outside and tender on the inside. “Yes, please.” Although my guilt didn’t go away entirely, being with them gave me such a sense of rightness, of peace, it was hard to stay unhappy at all.

Easy to convince myself I’d tell them later, that it was all right to wait... Soon enough, I’d be leaving them behind, and all I’d have were memories. Hopefully they would remember me with more kindness than I deserved.

We finished eating, the guys telling me anecdotes about the bar and the people who worked and hung out there. If they noticed I wasn’t contributing much, they didn’t say so. Fact was, even if I had been forthcoming about what sent me there, I didn’t have much entertaining to say. A yearning to be part of this, to stay forever, built deep in my gut.

Back at the brewery, I sat at the bar sipping a tonic and lime and chatting with Vanessa between her serving customers. Her affection for Thad and Rocky came through loud and clear and while she didn’t threaten me not to hurt them, I wouldn’t want to face her in a dark alley if I did.

Maybe they wouldn’t care that much?

Right.

“Ready to go?” Thad came up behind me and smoothed my hair back over my shoulder just as I was working up the courage to tell them the truth. “I thought we’d go out for a bite and maybe a little dancing?”

Dang...I’d never be able to do anything to disillusion them if they kept being so romantic and wonderful. “Sure. That sounds fun.” It sounded more than fun. A memory to keep me warm on future cold winter’s nights. They were rapidly spoiling me for any other guy. Was it because they were tigers? Or just them? My physical and emotional

reactions to them would have me believing in the mating thing if I was a shifter and not just an ordinary human woman.

We rode to the next town over, the sun setting over the open countryside in between as we made our way there. “It’s really beautiful here.” Fields interspersed with wooded areas, mountains in the distance. Beautiful was an undersell.

“We like it.” He cast me a smile before looking back at the road. “Glad you do, too.” Reaching out, he took my hand and linked our fingers.

Not long after, we drove into a town with a main street that looked like it had been frozen in the 1950s—but very well maintained. We parked along the curb, and he came around to open my door before taking my arm and escorting me to the front door of a restaurant called Guido’s. “Italian!” I shouldn’t be hungry after the big lunch I’d made my way through after I calmed down, but the scent of garlic and roasted tomatoes had my stomach rumbling.

“Is that a good thing? We can go somewhere else if you prefer.”

“No, it’s a great thing.”

The food was incredible, the music provided by a guy playing piano in a corner of the attached bar, and we danced. Slow danced along with four or five other couples, not one of whom was under seventy. And I loved every minute of it.

On the way home, Thad turned off the highway onto a dirt road between a potato field and a stand of tall trees. He didn’t say why, and I didn’t ask, content to enjoy the ride. The road sloped up a gentle grade leading into the foothills. After another ten minutes, he pulled off onto a vista point. Then he took me in his arms.

His kisses rained on my face before our lips sealed in one of the most intense connections I’d ever experienced. The world shut down and even the lights sparkling from a town in the distance faded as I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him back. I’d wondered whether I’d feel odd being

physically intimate with both of them, but as he stroked the side of my breast, odd was the furthest thing from how I felt.

He unbuttoned my blouse and unsnapped the front clast of my bra before abandoning my lips for my nipples. If second base felt this good, what would it be like to really make love with one of them? Or both at the same time?

The image overwhelmed me. I'd never be able to leave if I did that. If they told me to, I'd huddle on the porch begging them to take me back. I'd be hooked. When he reached for the button on my pants, I shifted back.

"We'd better go." No matter how much I wanted him on top of me, both of us naked and joined. I'd... "Now."

Chapter Seventeen

Rocky

It was almost dawn when I stumbled into the house after a long shift extended by my own device. While mopping the floors, I tipped over the bucket and poured soapy water all over the place. Took me an hour to get it all cleaned up.

Even my bones ached as I took a shower and plopped into bed.

I took a moment to filter out the sound of the house and the forest around us and focused on what I could gather from my mate. I could hear her deep breaths of sleep despite the walls between us. Her scent was now ingrained in the structure of this home and it surrounded me with warmth, no matter day or night.

Still, she was a mystery to me, and that unknown had my eyes wide open while my body cried out for rest. Instead of getting rest, I opened the drawer of my nightstand and pulled out my laptop. My tiger and I were desperate to find out about her—anything would be more than she had shared with us.

It didn't take long to find her name on the internet and on social media. She didn't have a profile anyone could click and add her as a friend, but what she did have was a page devoted to her books.

Her books?

She never mentioned anything about writing, but I supposed with the research she did, it wasn't completely off the spectrum. Anais was smart, but this was something else.

As I clicked the links that brought me to said books and where I could purchase them, the subject of said books had me more awake than a gallon of coffee spiked with energy drinks.

Anais did study animals, but it was the concentration part that she had left out.

Our mate was keeping a secret and a big one as far as I was concerned. Perhaps I was reading too much into it, but being a bestselling author of books about cryptozoology and specifically shifters seemed like something a person would share willingly—even be proud of.

Hell, if she had told us that she was a bestselling author, I would've probably bought out her stock and given out copies to everyone we had on staff. Thad would've felt the same.

And why was she asking about shifters if she clearly already knew?

The more I searched around, the sicker my stomach became. My thoughts had been focused on how she was our mate and how our life might be, and now they were muddied, clouded by what she wasn't more than who she was.

She wasn't honest.

She wasn't transparent.

She hadn't told us the truth—not by a long shot.

And truth was the merit I held above others.

Thad and I had been completely honest about who we were from the beginning—even when I thought it might hurt her or deter her from wanting to move forward with us.

What a fool I'd been.

I got on my phone and went back to the app, hoping I could still view her profile. I scoured it for some glint of her studies and her book only to find nothing. There was nothing in her description that said anything about her writing on shifters or cryptozoology. Did she think it was something she had to keep a secret? We weren't living in the old times where shifters had to hide who they were and humans were shunned from society if they chose to mate with them? Between the movies and romance books, we shifters weren't the outcasts of society anymore, but a part of it—at least that's what I had thought.

If she was hiding something like this, what else was she keeping from us? Did she have another agenda?

I cringed as more notions occurred to me.

Did she have an interest in our money—or our business. It didn't seem like her but, while I felt like we were getting to know her more and more, in reality, the person sleeping in the next room, who my tiger was sure belonged to us, was nothing more than a stranger.

I had to tell Thad.

I called him, and he answered on the first ring. We rarely phoned one another, since we were always together, so he probably thought something was wrong with me or Anais. He wouldn't be so wrong.

“Rocky?” he answered.

“Hey, we need to talk,” I said, shaking my head as I downloaded Anais' books onto my phone. Two sides of me were fighting for control and, this time, neither one was my tiger. One side believed that she had her reasons and that those reasons could be innocent. The other knew we had given her the decency of the truth, but she hadn't felt we were worthy of hers.

“What's up? Is something wrong with Anais?” I heard him throw the covers back.

“Nothing is wrong with her. She's sleeping. Can we talk? I know you were sleeping but...”

“Of course. You want to come in here?”

I shook my head while I told him no. “Let's go on the back porch. I don't want to take the chance of her overhearing.”

He sucked in a breath. “You're scaring me, Rocky.”

“Nothing scary. There are some things you need to know.”

I picked up my phone and, on the screen, was Anais' picture. My chest constricted at the thought that what I felt for her and my care for her were all misplaced. My tiger's instinct was solid, and I trusted in it, but even in the shifter world, mates were sometimes not what they should've been.

Chapter Eighteen

Thad

The tone of Rocky's voice scared me. He wasn't one to overreact. Whatever he had to say to me must've been important.

It had better be. He woke me up from a cold sleep coma.

I threw on a T-shirt and padded out as quietly as I could. Anais' scent still clung to me and had taken hold of my senses. The closer I got to the back porch, the louder Rocky's heartbeat pounded in my ears. I knew the sounds from the years of living with him, but there were only a few times it alarmed me. This was one of those times.

"What is it?" I said after making sure the back door was closed. Anais' soft breaths told me she was deep in sleep.

"We need to talk about Anais."

"Wait." I held up my hand while joining him where he sat on the porch steps that led to our expansive backyard. "I need to tell you what happened tonight."

Rocky put his phone and computer aside. I deduced they had something to do with whatever he wanted to talk to me about, but I proceeded anyway. He would explain. "Go on."

"We went to dinner, and we danced."

He snorted. "Doesn't sound like anything you need to confess," he joked.

"When we got into the car, things got heated. I, well, let's put it this way. She tastes like the finest beer we've never made."

"Shit." He scrubbed his hand through his hair. "She does. At least, her mouth does."

I wasn't going to get into all the details about what we'd done, but he could guess, and we'd leave it at that. She'd stopped before I tasted what I really sought. After the night

before, I was all in. She was mine, and I belonged to her. My tiger did. My whole life was hers.

“That makes what I have to say harder.”

I shoved him playfully. “Just tell me. Whatever it is can’t be that bad.”

“Anais is not a veterinary student. She’s a bestselling author and has also written several course books for colleges and schools.”

I grabbed for the laptop Rocky had put on his lap, but he moved it away. “That’s amazing. Let me see.”

He shook his head. His tiger was giving off vibes to mine, and they weren’t happy or proud. They were nervous and on the verge of angry. A slow-burning rage built. I had no clue why. If our mate was an amazing author, that was a good thing, right? “Thad, she’s not a veterinary student. She studies cryptozoology with what looks like a concentration on shifters—tiger shifters.”

My chest seized. “What?” I was stunned. Slapped in the face. Frozen stiff. There had to be some mistake. “But she has no idea about shifters. She asks so many questions.”

Rocky ground his jaw. “She asks questions because she’s doing research. I did a lot of digging.” He finally handed over the laptop.

My fingers hovered over the touchpad. I didn’t want to know. Ignorance was bliss. “Why were you searching in the first place, Rocky? You don’t trust her?” I put my hand down without viewing the information. Rocky’s instinct was more important than a search engine. I wanted to know what led him to believe our mate was telling us less than the truth.

“Because I felt like I was falling in love with someone I still knew hardly anything about. She talks about movies and books and surface things, but have you noticed she never talks about animals? Someone who is getting a doctorate in veterinary sciences should talk more about animals, right? Or, at least, some? And she’s taking a break?”

“People take breaks from school, right?”

He huffed out a breath. “Yeah, to do research on tiger shifters. And where is a sure place to seek a tiger shifter? Lucky her, she found two.”

There were no lies on my best friend’s tongue, but I still had questions. “Rocky, she’s our fated mate.”

“There’s no rule that says our fated mate can’t lie to us or hide things. It’s not the same for her. She’s human. We have rules when it comes to our fated mate but she doesn’t. They have their own agenda. I’ve never been one to stereotype humans, but this?”

I scrolled through everything as Rocky explained some things. The internet would tell you everything if you were willing to look. Perhaps we should’ve researched before inviting someone to our home—into our lives. I had assumed Anais was a student and someone who had been unlucky with human males. Wouldn’t be the first time a human female searched for a shifter to be mated to. Contrary to human rumors, shifters were loyal and true once they were settled.

After I’d run through all the information, I put the laptop aside. I was sick to my stomach and, even though the sun was rising, my body was alert and awake. A thought dawned on me. “Is this our punishment, Rocky? I mean, we were open about our one-night stands. We never made any promises to those females, but I’m sure we broke some hearts and bruised some feelings along the way. Is this Fate carrying out revenge? Giving us someone who we already love and who is our fated mate only to have her betray us?”

“I don’t know. I’m going to go back to work. I can’t be here when she wakes up. I don’t know if I’ll be able to look her in the eye and not say something I’ll regret.” Rocky got up, and I did as well.

“I’m coming with you. Let’s leave her a note. Maybe a text.”

He nodded but, through our brotherhood bond, I recognized his heartbreak. All of this knowledge didn’t negate the fact that Anais was our mate, but it surely soured the love that I had in my heart for her—or what I thought I felt for her.

Nothing seemed sure anymore. "I hate this," he muttered before we broke off to get dressed.

I hated it, too, but I couldn't shake the feeling that this was karma at its finest.

Chapter Nineteen

Anais

I tossed and turned all night. No more easy rest because something had changed tonight. Something beyond significant inside me. Up until now, I had managed to pretend I was here to learn about tiger shifters. To get the information I'd need to keep my grant and complete my doctorate.

If you'd asked me even a day ago what my priority was in life, it was those things. I'd never put a whole lot of thought into things like romance. Never had time for them or any kind of huge interest even. No, I was not a virgin, but the few times I'd been with a guy had been a real disappointment. Maybe it was that more than lack of time that kept me from bothering to date much.

And that had me thinking I could just breeze in here, spend time with them, and leave, hoping not to hurt anyone. I'd never thought I was a gift to anyone, but from the moment I met them in person, Thad and Rocky were clear that they thought we had something serious.

And I pretended, to myself, that I did not feel the same.

But damn, in the wee small hours, as I lay in the comfortable bed with its crisp new sheets, I began to realize what I fool I was. Maybe humans did not have fated mates. Nobody in the crypto department seemed to think we did. We'd often bemoaned the fact, accepting what "everyone" knew. Only shifters had mates. Humans just had to stumble along in the dark, hoping the person they kissed was someone they could spend their life in happiness with.

Trusting that they would somehow in this huge world track down the one person for them. But nobody I knew even believed in soul mates. Wasn't that our word for what shifters called fated?

The moon was low in the sky, dawn soon to follow when I knew what I had to do. And with that knowledge came sleep.

Not completely restful because my mind decided to put me through multiple rehearsals of the conversation I needed to have with the tigers over breakfast. In each repetition, something different happened.

In one, they demanded I leave their home immediately.

In another, they embraced me and said they understood, but in most, they had a mixed response, with negative emotions dominating. Probably no less than I deserved. No more than two hours after I fell asleep, I was wide awake again and heading for the shower. I'd need to be as alert as possible in order to express my very complicated emotions. And then I took longer than usual in the bathroom, styling my hair and putting on a bit of makeup. If I was going to ask them to let me stay after telling them all the reasons they shouldn't want me to, looking my best might help a little.

But when I entered the kitchen, instead of two handsome tiger shifters, all I found was a cold, empty coffeemaker and a note. *We're at work. If you need to go anywhere, we drove together, so you can use the car in the garage.*

I wasn't sure who wrote the note, since there was no signature, but it was obviously from both of them. Would the day come when I recognized their handwriting? I hoped so. It was one of those really personal things, intimate even. Those same hands that touched me, forming words with a pen.

I could just drive down and tell them what I wanted to, but somehow that didn't seem considerate. If they'd gone in this early, they must have a lot to do, and my emotional turmoil would not be helpful.

Instead, I decided to explore a little, take advantage of the car they left me and check out more of the town. If I got lucky and they did still want me, it might be my home. With that in mind, everything I drove past was more significant. More interesting. Would we pick up a bucket of chicken at that stand on the outskirts? Brunch at the diner? Shopping at the grocery with the two of them sounded heavenly.

I had coffee at a little place with some outside tables and watched people go by. The town was lively, and I recognized a

few different people I'd seen in the brewery, while nibbling a muffin and trying not to stress over the conversation I'd be having later.

Then I just walked the town, window-shopping and even strolling through the neighborhoods off the main drag. But all I really wanted was to be with the guys. Whatever happened, I needed them. Finally, I decided to pick up something good to eat and take it to them. Maybe I could sweeten my news.

Chapter Twenty

Rocky

I hunched over my desk, reading emails and responding, but the act was robotic at best. All my thoughts were on Anais and how betrayed I felt.

And, moreover, how Thad and I might've brought this on ourselves.

We told Vanessa what was going on and she wasn't pleased, either, but like the good person she was, she wanted to hear Anais' side on the issue before reaching a conclusion. She thought there was a chance that Anais really did genuinely care for us, but I doubted everything about every interaction with the red-haired female from the moment we spotted her profile. She had been playing us all along.

My insides soured thinking about how long she would've let it go. Would we have woken up one day to see her gone and her things removed? She'd had enough information and research and would leave us high and dry? Later, we might find that one of her books had information about two gullible tigers who inadvertently became lab rats.

Who fell for her devices.

"Fuck!" Thad called out and shoved his laptop back. He and I were sitting at the conference table instead of in our offices. Sometimes they seemed like cages instead of private places to work. Came with being a tiger. We liked open spaces and, today of all days, I needed room to breathe.

"What is it?" I asked, barely retaining my composure. With all the things on my mind, I was ready to snap at anything.

"I can't concentrate. I-I'm going to inventory the back room."

I got up from my seat. "I'm coming with you."

Thad was the one who loved inventory. There was something about getting down to logic and facts and numbers that calmed him and his tiger. Numbers never lied. I didn't want to leave him alone, and I didn't want to be alone. What happened with Anais left me hollow inside. Carved out.

We were thick into the numbers when I heard the door that separated the brewery from the bar. At first, I thought it was Vanessa, but the scent of maple and brown sugar hit me, and an instant sharp pain pierced my chest.

Anais was here.

“Hey, guys.”

Thad looked up, his stare empty and dead. “What are you doing here?” His tone was flat. No emotion to be found.

She wore a light-blue sweater and jeans, a bag from the local bakery in her hands, and I smelled dough and sugar and cinnamon. “I was at the house and got bored, so I decide to take a walk through town, and I picked you two up some cinnamon rolls.”

Gods, I couldn't make eye contact with her. It would hurt too much. “We just ate,” I responded.

All I had for her was coldness. My tiger raged inside me to go to her, to hold her, but this time, I wasn't relying on him to make my choices. He didn't understand. Our half-human ways always complicated the things that he thought were cut and dry.

“Is something wrong?” She took a step toward Thad, but he moved away, his eyes on the clipboard.

“You know what I'm not sure about?” I heard the words come from my mouth, but they almost sounded like someone else was speaking through me. Perhaps it was my hurt, my pain, speaking when I couldn't.

“What?”

“Why in the world would you get bored at the house when you have so many things to do? So many things to keep you busy?”

Her eyebrows furrowed, and she put the bag down on the table and crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m not sure what you’re referring to, but it sounds like you’re angry. Let’s get it out in the open.”

Her remark flicked my pettiness to life. “Oh, you hear that, Thad? Now, she wants to be honest. Get it out in the open, huh? How’s this? We thought if we left you alone for the day, you would be able to work on your books or maybe jot down all the notes about us stupid, unsuspecting tiger shifters and how we thought you were our mate. How you weaseled your way into our lives via a mating app to propel your career. Yes. Let’s talk about that.”

Thad had abandoned his clipboard and mimicked her posture. All the color drained from her face. The blush that drove me mad was long gone. “How did you find out?” she whispered. I immediately was hit with a jolt of guilt for speaking to her in the way I did. After all, no matter how upset I was with her, she was our fated mate.

“What does that matter?” Thad shook with emotion. The tips of his ears had gone bloodred, his fists tightly balled. He was barely holding in his tiger, not that the animal would attack her, but he was unruly with the conflict. “The real question is why didn’t you tell us? We opened up and told you everything about us—even when it was hard. Even when it felt like you might leave if we did.”

“I…” she stammered. “I was going to tell you.”

“When? When you’d gotten all the information you needed? When we’d thoroughly fallen for you? Tell us everything, Anais. This is your one chance. We scented half-truths on you before but let it slide since we were getting to know each other, but that leeway is over. If anything we had was real, then we deserve the truth.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Anais

When I looked into their eyes, I knew. Or perhaps I should say, they did. But how? I was sure I hadn't given myself away. That was why I'd come here now, but in none of my dreams had they already known. No, I'd been able to break the news myself, in my own way in my sleeping mind. And it had been at home. At their home, which, judging from their expressions, would never be mine. And then Thad said, "Tell us everything, Anais. This is your one chance."

And I was overwhelmed with the knowledge that it couldn't be here. We could be interrupted; it was a place of business. "I will, but can we talk at ho—at your house?" At first, I thought they were going to say no, but then Rocky met Thad's gaze and shrugged.

"Why not. You drove the car here?"

"Yes." I swallowed the tears that were welling up. "I did."

"Good, then go on home, and we'll see you there in a while."

A while. "All right." I wanted to reach for them, to hug them, to ask if I'd blown that one chance by asking to move the location of our talk. It was important...to do it in their den. Right?

I left, giving Vanessa no more than a quick wave because I didn't dare speak. If she was kind, I'd break down, and I still had to drive. But when I climbed behind the wheel, my hands were shaking too hard to turn the key.

Then the driver's door opened again. "Get out."

"What?" I looked up to see Rocky looking down at me.

"You're in no shape to drive."

Did he think I was drunk? No, he knew I wasn't. But he'd somehow sensed I had no business piloting a car right now. Did that mean we did have a connection despite my

dishonesty? One he chose still to acknowledge? He took my elbow and drew me to my feet. “Get in the other side.”

I did as he told me, trying not to take comfort from the fact that he was worried about me. Or it could be he didn't want the car totaled. His silence on the drive didn't tell me anything more, but if I was about to be separated from them, I would soak up every moment in either of their presence.

The truck was parked in the driveway, so Thad had beaten us there. Had they argued about who would have to help me? Rocky parked behind him, and I exited the vehicle and trudged up the walk toward the front door. The energy I'd built to talk to them this morning was long gone, but I needed to find more because I had to explain for my very life.

Inside, Thad had made a pot of tea and set it on the low table in front of the sofa. Without asking, Rocky built a fire, and I sat on the sofa for lack of any other ideas. Even when they were angry and disappointed with me, they still made things so comfortable. Those tears were trying to come again, but I fought them as hard as I could. I would retain some dignity; they didn't need to think I was crying to avoid the repercussions of what I'd done.

Rocky sat on my left, and Thad returned from the kitchen with a plate of cookies and set them with the tea service. He took his place on my other side. If they forgave me, still wanted me, we might be spending many evenings just like this. I wanted it more than I could ever express. When neither of them said anything, I grasped that last chance they'd given me and ran with it. I'd talk until they stopped me, stating my case and hoping they would understand. Or that the mating bond would help.

“Go ahead, Anais,” Rocky said.

“We're listening,” Thad added. They were sitting on either side of me, but as far away as possible. That space hurt. But it was fair. They could have just sent me away from the bar without letting me explain. Or made me stay there to do it.

I needed to state my case and throw myself on their mercy. Pray that they still believed I was their fated mate.

Because I sure did.

“I joined the app because I wanted to find a tiger shifter to interview. Although it was agreed that I did not need to do so, when it came down to the wire, they changed. I had searched everywhere I could think of, talked to the shifters I knew in the program and elsewhere. And then right when I was ready to defend my thesis, they changed it.”

“They went back on their word?”

“Yes. But I know that’s no excuse. I just want to tell you everything.” And everything included my feelings for them. But first, I had to tell them all the things I had done wrong. “I was locked out of my lab, and my advisor said the committee would not sign off if I didn’t have a direct interview with a tiger shifter. Honestly, I had no idea there were any left. Nobody seemed to know anyone.”

“We’re few, and we keep to ourselves,” Thad said. “But we’re here.”

“I know.” I swiped at the first traitorous tear that managed to trickle down my cheek. “And I don’t deserve any of your kindness.” Sucking in a breath, I went on, told them about my fears, my admiration for shifters, and my wishes that everyone could live as long and healthy. “And then my roommate, a wolf shifter, told me about the app. I never thought I’d get a response.”

“And when you did, why didn’t you just ask to interview us?” Rocky asked.

“I-I don’t know. I’d wanted to meet a tiger shifter for so long, I never stopped to think. And then I met you and I told myself it was all right. We’d spend some time getting to know each other and then I could go back. I only committed to a visit, not a lifetime.”

“And is that how you still feel?” Rock’s tone held such pain, more tears spilled down my cheeks. “That you can just leave and nobody is hurt?”

“No.” My voice cracked. “Now I know I can’t leave without my heart shattering. I never understood the mating

bond when my friends talked about it, and I still don't fully get it, but I know I don't want to live without you. Both of you. It would be a half-life at best."

"All right, then." Thad moved closer to me. "I don't agree with how you did it, and you have to promise to be honest with us from now on. To trust that we love you and want the best for you, even if it's hard to explain something you're going through."

"You forgive me? And you love me?" I looked from one to the other. "Just like that?"

"You're our mate." Rocky also shifted nearer. "That's how it works. If you continue to be dishonest, you'll just hurt us more and more, but being away from our mate is very painful, so please try your best not to do it again."

"That is if you're staying," Thad added.

"I don't know what will happen with anything else. But I know I have to stay here and be with you both, as long as you'll have me."

"Because that's how mates work," Rocky reiterated. "And now that we've cleared the air, all we can do is hope you will treat our hearts kindly because you have them in your hand." He picked up my free hand and kissed the back of it.

And then I sobbed. Because I had found my mates, and, even after I lied to them, they still loved and wanted me. As I did them. We sat together with our arms around one another for hours, late into the night while I told them all the details of what got me here and how I realized they were my mates—when I didn't even know I could have mates. And, finally, as the sky was lightening in the east, we went to my bedroom. They turned on the bedside lamp and undressed me like the most delicate package and laid me on those crisp new sheets before taking off their own clothes and joining me there.

My heart fluttered as they kissed and caressed me, my body alive in a whole new way. As if each part of me was not awake until they touched it. They moved together as if choreographed, and I tried not to think of how many women

they'd been with to get so good at this. Or maybe it was the mate thing again.

I'd go with that because if I had to meet another woman who had experienced this with them, it might go badly for them. Me, who'd never been jealous a day in her life, who had been more than willing for her casual lovers to move on, and I was ready to scratch the eyes out of a rival.

As they suckled my breasts, fingers creeping between my legs, I recognized something else about the mating thing. I'd never have to worry about a rival. Any other woman they'd been with, shifter or human, was no longer relevant to them.

Only us together mattered, and I was their mate. When Thad knelt between my legs and bent to place a kiss on my most intimate spot, Rocky straddled me, his long, heavy cock at my lips, and I parted them to take him in.

They took turns bringing me to orgasm in every possible way before Thad fitted his cock to my sopping pussy and drove inside. I wrapped my legs around him and clung to his shoulders, the taste of Rocky's semen still on my lips. After Thad poured his cum inside me, Rocky took his place and rode me to yet another orgasm. I'd lost count and feared that if we continued on like this, I'd have to start sleeping while they were at work just to recover.

And then, as we lay together in a tangle of arms and legs, they marked me, the sharp piercing of fangs on either side of my throat rocketing me into the strongest orgasm of all. The coppery scent of blood scared me until they both lapped at the wounds and sealed them. And we slept together, Thad at my front and Rocky at my back, as if they'd always belonged there. I suspected they had.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Rocky

I tore myself away from the bed to get a shower. While it was cold outside, with three bodies in one bedroom and two of them being shifters, the place was nearly stifling. It was probably the perfect temperature for our mate but, as I looked down on her form, I thought twice about that, seeing her covered in nothing but a sheet. Then again, she was plastered against Thad, and he ran hot.

Once I was showered, I started breakfast, contrary to our normal routine. We kept some easy things for me to heat up in case Thad was tired. After the night we had, I didn't blame him for being tired. As I waited for the frozen biscuits to bake in the oven and the coffee to brew, I leaned against the counter, shutting my eyes, recalling our first night with our mate. Not only that but the things she had said beforehand. Of course, we had been upset that she came here for the wrong reasons, manipulative ones, but it was clear after she told us the whole truth that there was a part of her that regretted ever making that decision.

If not for her motives to research us, we might never have found her.

None of that mattered at all. Now she was our mate. Fully and completely. She bore both of our marks and, while we had a ton to figure out, our mate was all that mattered.

"Good morning." Her voice woke me from my daydreaming. I opened my eyes to see her come in wearing nothing more than a T-shirt I'd discarded the night before. Her scent had changed with the mating. She carried her same maple and brown sugar scent but beneath lingered the scent of her males.

"Good morning," I said, welcoming her into my embrace. Our mate wasn't a morning person, that much I knew. So, when she snuggled in closer and made a little moaning sound, it was my undoing. "You didn't have to wake up early."

“My front was warm, but my back was cold. Then it struck me that you were out of bed. And Thad snores.”

I chuckled. He did snore. Claimed he didn't, but he so did. “I'm sorry I made you cold.”

She shrugged. “I need coffee.”

“Let me.” I grabbed her by the hips to sit her on the countertop then poured her a cup and stirred in the creamer.

“You've been observant,” she whispered, taking the cup from my hands.

“Good mates should be.” I took the biscuits out of the oven and went to the stove to fry up some sausage patties and eggs. Thad would faint when he came in and I'd cooked more than pastries and coffee.

“Have you forgiven me?” she asked after taking a sip and savoring it. Those green eyes held unshed tears. “You seemed the angrier of both of you.”

I put the skillet on the back burner and decided the eggs and sausage could wait. I walked over and placed myself between her knees. I pulled her in for a hug, careful not to spill her precious coffee in the process. “We would not have mated you if there was contention between us, female. I forgive you, and it's forgotten. It's in the past. No need to relive it.”

She nodded, and the tears fell despite her smile. “Okay. That's good. You know, I always wondered if women got upset when shifters called them female but there's something about it.”

“What is there about it?” I asked with a growl and pulled her tighter until her core pushed against my abs.

“Makes me ache,” she said and while I wanted to spread her legs and quell that ache for her, her stomach rumbled, telling me that there were other priorities to be filled.

“You're hungry.”

She nodded.

“Let’s feed you so you have some energy. We’re only getting started.”

She gasped while I moved to cook up the eggs and other things and put them on the table. Thad stumbled in some time later and paid his attentions to our mate before getting his own plate.

“What is your plan, Anais?” he asked after gobbling half the food.

She sighed. “I need to get my things and tell my roommate I’m not coming back. There’s a lot to clean out, but most of it belonged to the university anyway.”

“We can pay for someone to pack all of that up for you. Unless you want to go there and do it yourself,” I offered. *Gods, please let her say that she doesn’t want to go back.* Despite being our mate, there would be a niggling inside me that wondered if she wouldn’t return.

“I think I’m going to take you up on that offer. I don’t see any reason to go back.” Thad dropped his fork while I was caught in some kind of stupor. “What’s wrong?” she asked. Her lips were still red and a bit swollen from the night of passion. It was a good look on her.

“I think it hit him that we’re all mated and you’re moving in. You broke him.” I laughed.

Thad chucked a piece of biscuit at me. “Shut up. She broke you, too.”

“If this is broken,” I said, “I don’t want to be fixed.”

“So, I’m fine to stay?” Anais asked.

“We’re probably not going to let you out of our sight for a while, Anais,” I promised.

“That sounds good because I don’t ever want to be away from you two.”

We finished up breakfast and cleaned up, but I knew that both of our tigers were restless and waiting for their chance to meet their mates. To have her run her hands through our fur.

To see us. The bastards were drooling with want to show off for her.

Animals.

“So, you want to see our tigers? Because they want to see you,” Thad said.

She nodded again. “I would love to. And not because...”

“Nope. None of that. If you want to write about us, that’s fine, but my tiger wants to see his mate. That’s all.”

We went outside and in seconds, we shifted before her, swishing our tails back and forth. At first, our mate took a few steps back. I thought she might. Thad and I were bigger than regular tigers. Shifters tended to be. But our tigers were giants in the world of shifters.

She sat on the porch steps while we curled up at her feet. We would run once she got her fill, but right then, we only wanted to be near her.

“You are both gorgeous,” she praised us while stroking our fur. “I can’t believe you’re mine.”

Epilogue

Anais

Dr. Anais. I thought when I messaged my advisor that I was not coming back, that I'd never get my degree, and also that my grant would be lost for sure. But on the advice of my tigers, I'd called both the organization that sponsored the grant and the university president and told all of them what happened.

The grant was shifted around so I could use it here, with lab facilities at the nearest university at my disposal when I wanted them. And as to the thesis? I was able to prove to the president that I had met the terms of my agreement with my advisor and that it had all been approved then snatched away. Since I was acquainted with two tiger shifters now, I agreed to add on, of course. Then I emailed it off to my new advisor who signed off, a date was set for me to defend...and my mates sat in the audience while I accepted my doctorate.

With the guys' success at the brewery and bar, we didn't need a lot more money, which meant I was able to dip into pure research on my new favorite topic. How humans and shifters could coexist on a small planet. A new book was in the works.

But work was only a part of my life now. What really took up my days and nights was being mate to my two tigers while we waited for our cubs to arrive. That first night, according to the healer, was when I got pregnant. It was at least two babes, but she thought there might be a third hiding behind them. I'd have my hands full soon. My heart already was.

Next up in the Mail-Order Mating App is [Delivered to My Bigfoots](#). One-click today!

A peek at [Delivered to My Bigfoots](#), Mail-Order Matings Book 9



Druscilla

When my friend Anais was called out by the university to find actual tiger shifters or lose the right to defend her thesis as well as the lucrative grant she'd secured, I never dreamed the same thing could happen to me. After all, my subject of study was definitely on the mythical side. But I'm not going to hide it like she did. I'm making my profile on the Mail-Order Matings app clear. *Looking for cryptid shifters and crossing my fingers I find one.* Shifters are loyal. And my taste for human men is nothing less than sour.

Koa and Orion

There have been many things said about bigfoots over the centuries, but only a few have been right. Our numbers are dwindling because of incursion onto more and more open land and the lack of females. But a bigfoot isn't on the top of the list for females looking for a shifter mate. Because of romance novels and movies, they all like wolves and bears. So, when we join the Mail-Order Mating app, we don't disclose what shifter we are. After weeks of nothing, we are alerted to a new profile that matches us. She's a cryptozoology student, and she's looking for a unique shifter.

She probably thinks we are some weird animal or a mixed breed. She couldn't be more wrong.

Delivered to My Bigfoots is Book 9 in the super sweet with building heat Mail-Order Matings Series. Delivered to My Bigfoots features a woman ready to take a step into the unknown in pursuit of knowledge and maybe more, bigfoot shifters ready to take a chance on an arranged mail-order mating, insta-love, and a human caught up in its magic. And of course, Mazzy promises a happy ever after. If you like true mates, Fate taking a hand, and bigfoots with a unique twist, one-click Delivered to My Bigfoots today.

An Excerpt from *Delivered to My Orcs*,
Mail-Order Matings Book 7



Chapter One

Ilya

The reading of the will was a surprisingly formal occasion. Everyone mentioned in the documents of either of our parents gathered around a conference table in their lawyers' office, waiting to hear what part of their estate they could expect to enjoy.

My mom and dad had died exactly one week ago today, in the prime of life, in perfect health, and in such a violent way, I was still reeling from the loss. I'd wanted to allow a little more time before the funeral, but my brother wouldn't have it. He said we needed closure, and since their wills specified they could not be read or acted on until after they were buried, putting it off would only make it hard for us to do.

With little strength to argue, I caved to his wishes and rushed the arrangements for their funeral and everything that entailed. Solo. He was never home and didn't have time to come to the funeral home with me. Or the church. Or the cemetery. We had closed the company for the week, so he wasn't working. But after what happened, it was hard enough for me to take care of what we needed to, and he'd never been good at facing upsetting things. When our grandpa died, he wouldn't come out of his room to go to the funeral.

I suppose I should be grateful he'd come to our parents' funeral—but then, he always was concerned about what other people thought. As we stood side by side accepting everyone's nice comments about the nice service as if he'd had anything to do with it.

If I'd had any sleep in the past week, I might have been annoyed. Every time I closed my eyes enough to doze off, I snapped awake from nightmares of lights bearing down on me, screams and metal grating and grinding. Blood...always so much blood. I was far too exhausted and sad to worry about who got credit for anything right now.

The will reading taking place right after the funeral reception... I thought that was carrying getting things back to

normal a little too far. Sitting in my chair at the table, it was all I could do to hold my head up and keep my eyes open.

I'd worked for my parents since I was a teenager, my whole life tied up in the plumbing supply game. Not glamorous, maybe, but how necessary. Everyone required pipes and faucets and needed them to work well. I liked the security and, unlike my brother, found the day-to-day routine pleasant. Not exciting but who needs excitement anyway?

The attorneys filed in and took their places at the table, and everyone shuffled their feet and tried to look as though they weren't waiting to see how much of Mom and Dad's loot they had inherited.

I leaned back in my seat. Most of those here would be getting mementos, maybe small amounts of cash for some of the employees as a thank-you, but my parents would have had no idea they'd be killed. So, who knew?

The lead attorney began with the small bequests, and there were more than I expected, but they were modest. One person after another left probably disappointed but all too good to say so. They patted my hand or cast me sympathetic looks. I'd known many of them my whole life, and it was good to know they'd be there for us in the coming years.

I'd miss Mom and Dad, but their employees and friends would be a comfort in the coming weeks and months.

"To our beloved son, we leave..." And that was when everything went black.

They left my brother the business, their home, the storefront—which included my apartment upstairs. I was going to be working for my brother going forward, apparently. He would reap the benefits of my parents' years of hard work. Of mine.

I did get some things. Mom's jewelry and personal items. She had never been into fancy things, though, preferring modest items. The monetary value was low, but the sentimental was great. And a savings account that would not mature for a decade and could not be touched until then.

What were they thinking? Did they hate me? As the last few people filed out of the room, I forced myself to my feet and to the attorneys. “Why?” I didn’t know what else I could possibly say. “What did I do wrong? I get a copy of the will, don’t I?”

“Of course.” Mr. Sullivan passed me a manilla envelope. “Ilya, your parents wrote this will over ten years ago, when you were still in high school. Right before you started working here after school, I think.”

“So, Andy was already working in the business. But why...”

“Back then, they thought of you as a child, and they didn’t want there to be any fighting. I think your father believed Andy would take care of you. Your mother’s will read differently, but she left everything to your father, aside from those things you are receiving, if he was still living.”

“And he died after her.” The stolen semi being chased by police agencies from three counties had slammed into the passenger side of their car, and Dad lived long enough to get to the hospital. Mom was killed instantly.

“I had been after him to update his will, but he just didn’t find time to get in and do it.”

“Thanks for telling me.” My eyes burned, already swollen from a week of crying. “I just hope Andy is ready to step up.”

Mr. Sullivan patted my hand. “Me, too. If there’s anything I can do?”

“No, you have to follow the law, and I guess I have to swallow my pride.”

“Ilya, I need to speak with you?”

Speak of the devil. “Yeah, Andy?” I wiped the latest round of tears from my cheeks. “What’s up?”

“Outside.”

“No.” Mr. Sullivan gave me a look of pity before shaking Andy’s hand and offering him condolences. “You kids can talk here. I’ll give you privacy.”

Kids. I was twenty-five, my brother thirty-two. But I guess having watched us grow up, we seemed young to him.

As the door swung closed behind the attorney, I clutched the envelope holding my father's will and Mom's I supposed. "What did you want to talk about?"

"You're going to want to find somewhere else to live."

Chapter Two

Menace

“Let me know if you find the Yeti or Sasquatch. We’ll download it and make a fortune,” Saber said, poking his head into our shared office space. His hair was back in a braid, and he had just come in from getting our deliveries. We’d finally found someone who did what we asked without poking around and asking unnecessary questions. They delivered the things we needed to a set place in the woods, and we paid them handsomely. All our lives, we had paid in some way or another for peace.

Being an orc came with a set of rules most didn’t need to live by. Others had ways to hide their true selves, but we had no other self to shift into—no charms or wiles like the vampires to hypnotize others into our delusions. And so, we hid from the world.

I slid the mouse to the right, trying to pan around the woods that surrounded our mountain home, making sure there was no one around. It was the third time I’d done that, and it wasn’t even noon. “And when I download it, someone might recognize the woods and come prowling around and then we’d be discovered. Good plan, Saber.”

He groaned. “Menace, you worry too much.”

“And you don’t worry enough, my friend.” I turned the security system on monitor and walked out of the office and into the living area at the command of my stomach. Draven was trying out a new recipe on the request of a cookbook author and was working out the kinks, making notes all the way.

“When was the last time you heard or saw anything about hunters?” Saber grabbed a handful of nuts from the jar on the counter and popped them into his mouth. The table was full of boxes. We bought most of our groceries in bulk, but with the focus of Draven’s work, we had to order specific ingredients

sometimes. We never went into town or into the cities, especially. It was a small life but safer for all of us.

“Last month,” I replied, taking out the pantry items. I got them out of the boxes but didn’t dare attempt to put them up. The kitchen and all its branches were Draven’s domain. It was better left to him and his precise organizing ways.

“Wait, last month?” Draven asked, turning around but not fully. He was stirring the big pot which was bubbling with some kind of chicken dish. It smelled divine.

“Yeah. I told you about it.”

After we got all the food unpacked, I collapsed the boxes and put them out for recycling. We dropped that stuff once a month, in the middle of the night so as not to be seen. The truth was, in this day and age, it was probably okay for us to go out in public. There were humans with body modifications of all kinds so, while we might be stared at, they would never think we were real orcs. The hunters were a real threat though. They didn’t go after shifters and vampires as much anymore, but there was a faction of them whose life’s goal was orc hunting.

I chuckled to myself. They were probably jealous of our tusks. I didn’t blame them. They made us look fierce, which we were.

Every day blended in with the other lately. I checked the cameras. Brought in the firewood. Did the chores around the house and outside on the mountain. Ate. Did my training exercises. Ran until exhaustion threatened to end me. Rinse and repeat. It was fulfilling, and I liked my life exactly the way it was, but there was more to be had, to be experienced.

The rest required a female.

Except there were no female orcs. Orc babies were born of an orc and a human female. There were tales of some who successfully bred with vampires or shifters, even witches, but those stories were rare and anecdotal.

“We need more firewood, Menace. The nights are getting colder. Let me help you,” Saber said as we gathered naturally

that night for supper. We didn't share all of our meals, but supper was a given. We no longer belonged to a rage, but we took some of the traditions with us when we left. Gathering at night for a meal was one of them.

"Let's go." We brought in another stack of firewood. It took us only a few minutes, and we spent time planting trees to replace the ones that we cut down. We owned a hundred acres all around the mountain, and no trespassing signs peppered the edges of the property.

And we wondered why we couldn't find someone to have our children. We lived secluded. In a mountain. Surrounded by private woods. And we had tusks and greenish-gray skin.

Orcs also didn't do romance.

I supposed we would if we managed to find our fated mate, but I didn't know of a single orc who had ever found that magical human female.

"Dinner," Draven said as we added the new firewood to the old. I threw a log into the living area fireplace and then into each of the ones in our bedrooms.

"Is this a new recipe?" I asked as we sat down around the table.

"No. My grandmother's chicken stew. That's it. Dig in."

We ate in silence for a bit but while our table was full and our bellies warm and satisfied, there was something big missing from the picture. While I'd only heard it in other households, I wanted the sounds of children and their mother in our home. I didn't dare wish for love. Honestly, I didn't know if I had that in my heart to give, but the rest, I would give anything for.

That night, I scanned the camera for anything unusual and found nothing. Sometimes in the summer, there would be a stray hiker or someone lost but in the winter, the only movement was a deer or maybe some squirrels fighting over the last acorn.

It wasn't like a human woman who didn't mind tusks was going to traipse into our woods and need saving.

Gods, that sounded like the perfect fantasy and as I lay in bed, thinking it over, my hand drifted down between my legs. I was in great need of a release, but what I really needed was a female to sink into. I wanted to feel the softness of her human skin against my rougher exterior. Feel her hands as they ran down my chest and the length of my torso. Writhing underneath me while I made her come over and over. Her hair fanned all over my pillow while the light from the fire danced in her eyes as she screamed my name.

I stroked myself with those images in mind and soon was spilling my cum onto the sheets with a low growl on my lips.

Damn it. There had to be a way to bring a female here. One who wouldn't mind the callous nature of us. One who would provide us children and warmth in our beds. We would take care of her; all of her needs would be handled.

Someone was out there for us. At least, that was my hope.

About Mazzy J. March

Mazzy J. March is a fan of all things paranormal—shifters, vampires, witches...dragons and all the many creatures that inhabit the world beyond the ordinary. She has been plotting her Academy and RH stories for a long time and is thrilled to finally have them releasing and ever grateful to the readers who are offering such support and helping her dreams come true.

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