

MATCH MY FALL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LISA CARLISLE

MATCH MY FALL

A WITCH AND WOLF SHIFTER ROMANCE

SALEM SUPERNATURALS



LISA CARLISLE

LISACARLISLEBOOKS.COM

Match My Fall

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ABOUT MATCH MY FALL

Fall into a wickedly charming romance when Salem witch Cassandra takes a wild ride with a wolf shifter!

After I drop my daughter with my parents, I head to the White Mountains for some much-needed me time at a ski resort. My friends convince me to try a chairlift dating event, but when date after date turns out to be a dud, I take an escape route. Only my skis send me flying off my feet, and I end up tumbling downhill like a human snowball.

Ski patrol comes to my aid in the form of handsome wolf shifter Valen, and we have more chemistry than a combustible potion. Chairlift dating was a disaster, but a fling with a rugged mountain man in his slopeside cabin is tempting.

Until Valen thinks I'm his fated mate...

Read a fun, paranormal, age gap romance that will have you on the edge of your broomstick! If you like quirky characters, awkward meet cutes, meddling matchmakers, and enchanting settings, you'll love *Match My Fall!*

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CHAPTER 1



CASSANDRA

“Want to help me put a hex on an ex?” I asked my friend Pandora, who was also my boss at the Salem Supernatural Network.

We were sitting across from each other at a booth at the Danger Zone, a retro rock bar north of Boston that was owned by Gianna, a half siren. Although the club was a trek from Salem, my daughter Paige was with her father tonight, so I had to take advantage of a girls’ night out. It was especially welcome after last night when I’d had the “pleasure” of interrogating a surly vampire about his questionable methods of feeding.

Pandora’s dark-lined eyes widened beneath her bangs. “You’re joking, right?”

“Of course.” I grinned at her.

She chuckled with relief and tossed her dark hair over her shoulders. “You had me there for a minute. Not only is it forbidden, but think of the bad karma it would bring back on you.”

“I know, I know. I’d be a hypocritical witch if I cursed my ex.” Especially since part of my responsibilities at the Network involved interviewing others about using magic inappropriately. “But picturing the ways I could put a spell on Thorne brings immense satisfaction.”

I flashed her a conspiratorial glance and raised my glass of sangria. It was a new selection on the menu, dubbed Spellbound Sangria, although not for magical ingredients. That was likely Gianna’s tongue-in-cheek reference to her

unfortunate recent encounter with an age spell in her drink. My drink had a fragrant bouquet of cinnamon, cloves, berries, and pomegranate, as well as a kick from the brandy. I didn't detect anything suspicious, but perhaps drinking too many of these would make me feel bespelled after all.

I leaned back in the booth and gazed around the club. A few twenty-somethings were singing along to Ratt's "Round and Round" on the dance floor, drink glasses in hand. Ah, to be twenty again and without responsibilities; not a single mom in her mid-thirties trying to raise her daughter right while also making a living to pay the bills.

Pandora tapped her long fingers together. "So, what did Thorne do now?"

I grumbled, "Aside from not just being a thorn in my side but an ache in my head?"

"In other words, the usual?" Pandora turned one hand palm up.

"Yes, that, and he likes to find new ways to irk me." I adjusted my position in the booth. "My parents asked me to bring Paige up to visit them in Maine over the weekend. He's giving me a hard time about it, saying I need to discuss these things in advance with him and blah, blah, blah. Funny how he only wants to be a father when it suits him—or to rankle me."

Pandora gave me a sympathetic look. "Frustrating."

"Men." Or, in this case, an arrogant fae. I blew out a rough breath. "I really know how to pick them."

Not only had he broken my heart and destroyed my trust when I'd learned he was cheating on me while I was pregnant with his child, but he continued being a pain in the broomsticks since we'd broken up. He's lucky he still had all his appendages. With hormones surging through my system

during my pregnancy, it was a challenge not to conjure a spell to make his wandering weenie shrivel up and fall off. But I had a daughter to raise and that wouldn't have been easy to do from a jail cell.

“They're not all bad,” Pandora noted. “Not when you find the right one.” A slight smile flitted across her face as if considering her situation.

Pandora had her own drama with an ex from her past who'd tried to force his way into her present. With that finally behind her, she was now happily living with a bear shifter, who was a good decade younger than her in her early forties. They now lived in her house with four cats—a his-and-her feline version of *The Brady Bunch*.

I sighed. “Unfortunately, finding the right guy doesn't appear to be in the tarot cards for me.” My feeble attempts at resurrecting my love life by trying to date again in the last couple of years had proven that. I found more pleasure in scribing or creating potions over slogging through a date as bland as soggy, spice-less oatmeal.

The next song came on, Rob Zombie's “Dragula,” and I tapped my foot along to the beat.

“You never know. Sometimes, love comes when you least expect it.” Pandora gestured with a wave around the club. “Perhaps there's a tall, dark, and brooding vampire in the shadows for you.”

“Haha.” I gave her a skeptical look. “After dealing with that broody bloodsucker last night, I'll pass. Besides, I enjoy daylight, thank you very much.”

She laughed. “Good point. But you never know who'll come knocking on your door.”

Her private smile returned, but I sensed I knew why. She met her bear shifter neighbor, Austin, when he'd come over to ask her to hide a kitten.

She slanted her head to one side and added, "Or who'll be sitting next to you at a club."

I raised an eyebrow. "Are you saying I should hook up with a stranger tonight?" I glanced around the club. "No one strikes my fancy."

Pandora shook her head. "No. I'm just saying if I was able to find someone after my nightmare of an ex, there's hope for everyone." Her gaze moved to the bar. "Look at Gianna and Sebastian."

I followed her gaze to where Gianna now stood near her usual spot at the bar. Sebastian had arrived and stood beside her. He was a broad-shouldered wolf shifter with a trim beard who loved to cook. Gianna wore a sleek black dress that hugged her curves and blended with her dark hair, aside from the red streaks. She'd rebuked Sebastian's awkward attempts to woo her at first, but now they appeared tremendously happy. Sebastian seemed almost unable to tear his gaze from his wife, and I didn't blame him—she was gorgeous. But I suspected the attraction was more than just her looks—she was his mate, and they were in love.

Good for them. Some people could make relationships work. I'd learned from my mistakes and wouldn't subject myself to the potential cruel heartache again. That was fine. Who had time for a relationship, anyway? I had enough to keep me busy with working, raising a child, and taking care of the house.

Gianna scanned her club. When she made eye contact, she smiled and said something to Sebastian. They walked over to us.

“Hey, ladies,” she said with a smile. “I didn’t know you were coming in tonight.”

“It was a last-minute plan since Paige is with her father,” I replied.

Sebastian tipped his head and greeted us.

“Scoot over,” Gianna said and slid into the booth beside Pandora. “What’s new?”

I moved over so Sebastian could sit beside me. We caught up as we chatted about life for a few minutes.

When we got to my update about taking Paige to my parents’ next weekend, Gianna rubbed her hands together and her eyes sparkled. “You have the weekend free. What are you going to do?”

I shrugged. “Probably drive back home and catch up on stuff around the house.”

Gianna scoffed at that idea with a wagging index finger. “No, no, no. You might as well make the most of it.” She gestured with a turn of her hand. “Do something fun for yourself while you’re up there. Have some Cassandra time.”

“In Maine in the winter? That’s not where most people flock to—unless they’re skiing.”

“So go skiing,” Pandora suggested.

“Franconia Mountain isn’t far from there,” Sebastian said. He’d grown up in a pack in the White Mountains region of New Hampshire. “I haven’t skied there yet, but I hear it’s a great resort,”

“And Aurora lives there now,” Pandora added. “You could visit her.”

Aurora was a witch from the Network who'd gone up the mountains to mediate between two quarreling wolf packs. She met Grayson, a wolf shifter and beta of the Franconia pack, and ended up staying. Another instance of love conquering all—unless you choose an arrogant fae who betrays you.

“We want to go up this winter when we can find a time that’s not so busy,” Gianna added. She pulled out her phone. “In fact, when I looked into it a few weeks ago, they listed events like races, bands, and stuff like that.” She squealed. “Oh, look at that! Chairlift speed dating next weekend.” She showed us her phone and then nudged me. “You should do it, Cassandra.”

I shook my head with adamance. “No way. I tried speed dating here recently, remember?” I took a sip of my drink.

“But you weren’t into it,” Gianna dismissed. “It was all part of a ruse.”

“Oh, I remember quite well,” Pandora noted in a wry tone.

We exchanged a glance, and I gave her a sheepish smile. A few of us at the Network had conspired with Gianna during one of her speed dating nights here at the Danger Zone to help get Pandora and Austin together.

“And look how it all worked out.” Gianna beamed with a proud smile. “You and Austin are now living in domestic bliss.”

“True.” Pandora’s gaze traveled from one of us to the next.

“Thank you for your *misguided machinations*.” Her lips quirked into a grin.

“You’re very welcome.” Gianna ignored the teasing sarcasm and raised her chin. “So, what do you think?” She turned her attention back to me.

I tapped my fingers on my sangria glass. “I don’t see how being stuck with a stranger on a ride up a chairlift counts as ‘Cassandra time,’” I joked. “It sounds more like *I-could-be-trapped-in-an-awkward-conversation-with-nowhere-to-escape* scenario.”

Gianna’s eyes widened with excitement. “Then you’d have to tell me about it. There’s nothing I enjoy more than a story with lots of ooey awkwardness.”

“Oh yes, I’m itching to be mortified for other’s entertainment,” I drawled.

Gianna and Sebastian both chuckled.

Pandora motioned around the club. “Since you lured me here for speed dating, I think there should be payback. You need to give this chairlift speed dating thing a try.”

I groaned. “Couples. Always trying to play matchmaker.”

Pandora cleared her throat. “Weren’t you part of the matchmaking shenanigans here?”

“Guilty.” I grinned and took a sip of sangria. “I suppose you’re right, and since I coaxed you here, it won’t kill me to try chairlift dating. After all, what’s the worst that could happen? I get stuck with a yeti?”

Gianna leaned forward with a twinkle in her eyes. “That could be interesting. If that happens, I want to hear *all* about it.”

VALEN

While eating eggs and sausage, I glanced out the window of my slope-side cabin. It was a good day to ski. The sun was shining, and the sky was a bright blue without clouds. We'd had six inches of snow last night that was light and powdery. This bluebird day would draw crowds. Compared to the gloomy rain that kept people away last weekend, this was a perfect one to visit the mountains, which meant I'd be busy.

After cleaning up my plate and finishing my coffee, I prepared for my shift on ski patrol. Many of us wolf shifters had a job at the Franconia Mountain Resort as well as a role in the Franconia-Sacco pack. Our pack alpha Rafe and beta Grayson dealt with the business side of things at the resort. I wanted nothing to do with it. Who wanted to sit in an office or discuss business in meetings when they could be outdoors? As a pack enforcer, I patrolled our territory at night.

The threat from outsiders wasn't as prominent as it had been since our rivals, the Sacco pack, merged with us, yet we had to remain vigilant. If there was anything I'd learned at a young age, it was that others would do what they wanted without considering the impact on others.

I donned my ski pants, jacket, ski boots, helmet, goggles, and gloves and grabbed my radio before heading out of my cabin. The scent of pine trees wafted over with a light breeze. What a view. I never grew tired of it. It shifted over the seasons, from a vast expanse of greens in the spring and summer to the brilliant reds and oranges in the fall. Now the mountains were covered in snow, twinkling beneath the sun's glow. This might be my favorite time of year—not only did it look the most

magical, but I could ski. This mountain had been my home for most of my adult life, and I never wanted to leave it.

The freshly fallen snow gave way beneath my heavy boots as I trekked over to the ski rack I'd built to mount my skis. I'd make the most of the fluffy snow and get some fresh tracks in before the lifts opened to guests. With the numbers we expected to visit today, they'd muck up the trails in no time.

I snapped into my skis and navigated down a path that cut through the woods leading to an easy trail. The sound of my skis carving through the snow pierced the otherwise quiet of the mountain. As I passed in between spruce and pine trees, I inhaled. Aside from the fragrant pine, I caught a hint of small critters that were brave or foolish to trek too close to where wolves lived.

Once I broke out of the glades, I steered onto a wide, groomed trail with a view of the serene mountains in the distance and the valley below. Then I skied down to the base and greeted Pete, one of the lift operators, who was already listening to his favorite classic rock station, which now played the J. Geils Band's "Love Stinks."

It did indeed—for most of us.

I braced myself for the ascent. For a shifter who didn't like heights but loved to ski, I had to face my fear multiple times a day. It didn't make it any easier. How could it? Only a narrow bar kept me from a haphazard slip forward. A strong wind could unsettle that meager safety option.

Do it. Don't show fear. I psyched myself up and sat on the chair.

After taking a few calming breaths, I searched the trails for any obstacles that needed to be cleared. Nothing stood out.

When I reached the top, I checked in with others at the patrol hut. We reviewed any recent changes in trail conditions and discussed our plan for what was sure to be a busy day.

“Chairlift dating this morning?” my pack mate Aldric uttered in disbelief.

I snorted. “Humans and their ridiculous ideas.”

“No, it’s one of Grayson’s,” Damon said. “Sophie created the graphics.”

That made sense. Grayson often tried new tactics to draw visitors to the resort and keep the business flourishing. Damon shared the same responsibilities as me—as ski patrol and pack enforcer. Since I was older, I looked out for him like a younger brother. But since he’d found his mate, a human named Sophie, I didn’t have to worry about him as much. They seemed happy and took care of each other.

I’d long since given up on finding a mate. In my mid-forties, I was settled in my routine. If I was going to meet one, it should have happened years ago.

“You should give it a go, Valen,” Aldric nudged. “Meet a ski bunny or two.”

“Not going to happen.”

If I wanted to meet a woman, I wouldn’t have to join that silly setup. Many of them ended their day in one of the pubs and were happy to enjoy a fling while away on a trip. Although I’d enjoyed plenty of company in the past, it was starting to feel empty, and I’d often return to my cabin alone than to a hotel room with a woman. Something was missing from these meaningless encounters.

Maybe it was because so many of my packmates had found their mates, and with it, a sort of contentedness. That sense of

peace eluded me. Although my coworkers and I often finished shifts with après-ski specials at Kelly's Pub and then headed out after dark to run in wolf form, those times were shorter and less often than in the past. My packmates were no longer as restless to burn through energy. They preferred to return to their cabins to be with their mates.

Which meant I often hunted alone.

After I left the hut, I squeezed in two more runs while surveying the mountain before the lifts opened to guests.

The day started slowly enough, but the base was soon packed with lines for the lifts. With it came the first call for help on my radio. Since many of us who worked on the mountains were shifters, we could communicate telepathically, but there were others on our team with whom we also needed to coordinate.

"A young skier is down who needs help," came the call from the hut.

Since I wasn't far from the trail, I responded, "I'm heading over."

I cut through the trees to hasten my way to the trail. As I skied over, a small group gathered around a school-aged boy lying on the ground.

His mother fretted. "It's his leg. Do you think it's broken?"

I kneeled beside the boy and carefully examined his leg. By the bend, it sure looked that way. Humans didn't heal as quickly as shifters, so if it was broken, the boy would likely be in a cast for weeks.

"Let's get him down to the lodge so the medical team can check him out." I assured the boy, "You're going to be fine."

The boy's expression appeared pained, but he nodded. As we waited for the sled, I tried to distract him by asking about his favorite video games and movies.

“Almost everyone falls at some point,” I noted. “Even expert skiers.” I told him about a few funnier ones. “I think I once skied this entire mountain on my butt,” I exaggerated, and he chuckled.

Minutes later, Damon arrived on a sled. The two of us carefully lifted the boy onto the sled and skied him down the mountain. After we carried him into the lodge with his parents following us, Damon and I returned outside.

“Chairlift dating is starting soon,” he said.

I groaned. “Don't remind me.”

“It's supposed to be fun and for a good cause,” Damon replied. “The proceeds will go to conservation efforts in the region. Why don't you give it a go?”

“Man, you mated wolves are all the same,” I teased. “Once you find your mate, you try to convince the others to find theirs.”

Damon was the last wolf I thought would settle down with one. His father had been so bereft and broken after losing his mate that Damon declared they could only bring pain. But then he met Sophie and fell hard—almost provoking a pack war in the process.

He chuckled. “Just want what's best for you.”

“Appreciate it, but I'm all set.”

Damon shrugged. “We'll see. When your wolf knows, things change...”

I grunted. “If I haven’t found her by now, it’s not going to happen.”

Besides, I didn’t see the appeal of being tied down to one person. I enjoyed my freedom and not having to answer to a partner.

“Never say never.” Damon wagged his index finger. “Look at me.”

“You’re much younger than me. It’s easier to keep hope alive.” Sure, when I was in my twenties, I’d pictured a future with a mate and a family. As the years went by and flings went nowhere, I came to terms with that not happening.

“Come on, you old curmudgeon,” Damon teased. He gestured over to the chairlift with a slight raise of his ski pole. “Let’s check on this event you’re so against.”

I skied over with Damon to the base of the chairlift. The music pumped louder, this time playing *Bon Jovi’s* “Livin’ on a Prayer.” Pete loved his classic rock.

People lined up at a table and were given a number. Did they really expect to meet their special someone during a random pairing? It was as I had suspected. “Ridiculous.”

“Looks like they’re having fun, though,” Damon pointed out.

“One thing I can guarantee is that no one taking part in this foolish event is interested in anything serious. They just want a fun hookup while on vacation.”

Damon teased, “Look how cynical you’ve become in your old age.”

Tapping my chest, I replied, “I call it experience.” How many short-term romances had I seen that both started and ended here at the resort? I’d lost count.

Gazing at the couples lining up together, I added, “The snow will last longer than any relationship sparked on the mountain today.”

CHAPTER 2



CASSANDRA

Chairlift dating might be a terrible idea.

Once I'd checked in at a registration table, they gave me a ribbon to pin on my jacket. I did so in addition to my lift ticket for the day and put my ski gear on. A light snow started to fall. It was expected to do so on and off today, with a couple more inches of accumulation to the base. I glanced over at the lines forming at the chairlift. A crowd of skiers and snowboarders had gathered around—far more than I'd expected.

I couldn't believe I'd agreed to do this. Chairlift dating? Come on. I had bad enough luck with dating on the ground. How would it be any better when I was trapped with a stranger as we hovered in a metal seat dozens of feet over a mountain?

Nope, don't sabotage this. Stay positive.

Right. This was supposed to be something fun, if nothing else. When was the last time I went away for a weekend on my own? It was a beautiful sunny day with plenty of fresh snow on the mountain, and I should make the most of it. I'd dropped Paige off at my parents' house earlier, and they were all thrilled to spend some quality time together. I'd stayed for coffee and freshly baked banana bread before leaving and would have dinner with them when I picked Paige up in a couple of days.

I raised my chin and skied over to the lines where Van Halen's "Pretty Woman" cover blared from a speaker. When I was paired up with a tall, handsome skier with graying hair at his temples and a dazzling smile, my mood lifted. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

Behind us in line, a woman pointed out, “They play classic rock at the chairlifts of every mountain I’ve skied at in New Hampshire this season.”

A man with her chuckled. “It must be the official soundtrack of New Hampshire winter sports.”

Once we moved up the line, I hoped I wouldn’t do something disastrous like miss the seat, lose a ski, or any other mishap I’d seen with people simply trying to sit on a chair.

Our turn. I moved my butt into the chair. Poles still in hand. Skis on feet.

Success!

Once we ascended and pulled the bar down, he introduced himself as Tom.

“Cassandra,” I said.

“Cassie.” He nodded. “I like it.”

My shoulders tensed. “I prefer Cassandra.”

“But Cassie is more sassy,” he teased and then laughed with far more vigor than was necessary for a bad joke.

“Still, I like Cassandra.” It was my name, after all. To move past my irritation, I glanced out over the mountains. The view of snow-covered trees and glimmering snowflakes dancing looked almost magical.

“What do you do?” I asked Tom.

I bit my lower lip. While he told me, I had better come up with my answer. Telling him I worked in a network that helped supernaturals navigate the human world might not be wise outside of Salem. Many of the residents there didn’t give a flying fig about witches living in their town, and visitors

considered us a tourist attraction. But there was a reason we provided services to help supernaturals travel underground, and that was because of humans. They could freak out and cause chaos. They already did enough of that even to other humans. So, telling Tom that I spent my days working on spells and potions or investigating forbidden magic might lead to an awkward encounter.

It turned out I didn't have to provide any more info other than my name. My one question provided all the incentive he needed to tell me how he worked as an investment adviser. He told story after story about his clients and their financial situations as if these were fascinating tales. I thought they were as entertaining as counting the bristles in a broom.

My leg twitched, causing my right ski to bounce up and down, so I forced myself to stop. Willing the lift to move faster was as productive as waiting for a cauldron to bubble.

Once we reached the top of the mountain, I practically threw the safety bar overhead.

Although we could have skied down the mountain together, I said, "Nice to meet you, Tom. Have a great day!" Then I skied off, hoping he wouldn't follow.

He didn't.

That short-lived "date" lacked more sparks than a fireplace doused by a firehose. I shook it off and focused on the gorgeous scenery ahead. Then I pointed my skis downhill, tried to remember proper form, and skied down an easy green trail. After I meandered to the bottom, I headed back to the lifts for round two.

My next date was...interesting. He wasn't as handsome as Tom but appeared friendly. He introduced himself as Jimmy.

His vintage ski jacket had so many neon stripes that it appeared to have been resurrected from the eighties.

“That’s a unique jacket,” I pointed out.

“Ah, yes,” he agreed with a smile. “You’ll never guess where I found it.”

“A vintage store?” I asked.

“Nope.” His eyes gleamed with excitement.

I thought flea market but didn’t know if that would offend him, so I said, “I give up.”

“The dumpster!” he declared with pride. “Can you believe I found this baby while dumpster diving? You wouldn’t believe all the cool stuff I find.” He slanted toward me, causing the chair to bob, and my muscles tensed. “I have a collection of things,” he added. “From coins to all kinds of tchotchkes.”

I blinked slowly. That was the strangest hobby to reveal to someone he just met.

“Oh, wow,” I said. I wasn’t sure what else to add. I pictured him living in a place cluttered with furniture and items pulled from the dump.

Don’t judge, I scolded myself. Sure, I had many second-hand and thrift shop items myself. How could I be sure they weren’t pulled from a dumpster?

I winced, not wanting to think of them. My apartment was going to get a thorough cleaning when I got home.

We talked about skiing and other mountains we’ve visited on the rest of the way up. It was clear this wasn’t a match.

I skied down by myself. Partner number three was tall, dark, and handsome, with a rugged appeal. Perhaps I’d have better

luck this time.

Once we started riding up, my hopes dimmed. The conversation was strained as we tried to find topics to talk about. I started with skiing, since that seemed to be a safe topic, but he was simply fluent in one and two-word sentences. Either that or he didn't have any interest in me.

But then, our discussion about mountains took a strange turn. He declared that aliens land on mountains cleared by ski resorts. The friendly nature was gone as he started to rant about conspiracy theories. Oh, fizzling potions. Good thing I didn't tell him I was a witch.

I glanced down at the mountain below us. How many feet was it if I dared to jump? Too many. Not that I was serious. It was nice to visualize the escape from the torrent of craziness spilling from number three's mouth. I'd already forgotten his name. Maybe Gianna would get one of the awkward stories she so loved after all.

Once the chairlift reached the top, I jumped up all too quickly and lost my balance. Fortunately, I righted myself before I fell on my butt.

"Nice meeting you," I said. "Have a good run."

His mouth turned downward. "Come on, let's take this trail." He motioned with his poles.

Oh, twin toads. I tried to think of a reason but came up with nothing. So, I skied behind him. With the way he snowplowed, I guessed he was a beginner. Off to the left was a cutaway to a black trail.

"I'm going to head this way," I shouted.

He paused to glance over. Since he was already past the cut, he'd have to climb up the mountain to join me—not that I

thought he could handle it.

“I’ll meet you at the lift.”

“Go on ahead with someone else,” I motioned. “Part of the fun is to meet different people.” Ah, what a lie spilled without any forethought from my mouth. I wouldn’t call any part of this dating event fun as of yet. Then I skied away before he could protest.

Phew. I exhaled. Enough chairlift dating for me. I headed over to the other side of the mountain to get away from the event. I could spend the rest of the day alone, enjoying the beautiful mountain scenery and the fresh powder beneath my skis.

When I saw the black diamond trail, I wondered if I’d rushed it. It was my first day out skiing this season, and I needed to smooth into it, remember how to use my ski legs, and proper form. I should have had a couple of easy groomers before tackling this pitch with some unsettling bumps.

Still, it was too late now. The alternative was to claw my way back uphill, which would be even more difficult. I was a decent skier, so I’d be fine.

Once I positioned myself and started skiing, I eased into my stance with more confidence. I was doing okay. Sure, it was steeper than I wanted just yet, but I cut my skis into the snow with wide turns to slow me down.

But then...

What happened?

I didn’t feel myself lose balance or go airborne, but in the next second, bam! I was eating snow. Without any warning, I’d faceplanted. The cold slap of snow on my skin could wake the dead.

Worse, I was moving. Oh no, I was sliding downhill headfirst—and without my skis. Where did they go? As my jacket rode up, snow slid onto my neck. What fun. I attempted to slow myself down, but it was several more heart-wrenching seconds before I halted.

I sat up and wiped the snow from my goggles. My skis must have been knocked loose in the fall. Oh shit. They drifted diagonally downhill in opposite directions. I winced. What a disaster.

A guy in blue skied over and retrieved one of my runaway skis. Another guy in black skied over and grabbed the other. Eek, how horrifying.

I pulled myself up to my knees and brushed snow off my face and stomach. It had already started to melt and left an unpleasant chilly wetness on my skin.

A third guy with a red jacket that indicated he was ski patrol skied over to me and stopped with expert skill. “Are you okay?” He had a deep baritone.

I glanced up at him, mortified. He was massive, as tall as a tree and blocking out the sun with his broad shoulders—or perhaps it was just this angle. I couldn’t see much of his face as he wore a helmet and goggles. Plus, the embarrassment of my graceless fall still stung.

“Yeah, I’m fine, I think.” I tried getting up and plopped back down. “Aside from my bruised ego,” I grumbled.

“Let me help you up.”

As we attempted to get me back on my feet, I stumbled. It was a terrible angle on a steep pitch of the trail. I glanced up. It was also a dangerous spot. Skiers and snowboarders came over the bump where I must have been in a blind spot as they

had to swerve to avoid me. If I made it off this mountain without a collision in the next ten minutes, it would be a feat of epic sorcery.

The guy in blue who had retrieved a ski brought it over. Ski patrol guy thanked him and said, “Got it. We’re good.” The guy skied away.

As I tried to slide my foot back into the binding, it kept popping out.

“It’s flatter over there.” Ski patrol guy grabbed my ski. He then motioned ahead to the guy in black who’d retrieved my ski farther down the slope and was trying to climb up to me. “Wait there. We’ll come to you.”

Ugh, I was such an instant calamity out here that three guys had to help retrieve the pieces to put me back together. I plodded through the snow over to the side of the trail with ski patrol guy. He moved quickly downhill and retrieved my second detached ski.

When I caught up, I muttered, “Thanks.”

The guy in black ensured I was all set before he continued downhill.

Ski patrol guy wiped out snow from the binding and popped it into the proper position. He put it down beside my boot. “Here you go.”

I attempted to wedge my boot back in. Nothing. “I can’t get it in.” I tried jamming it in, hoping to end this scene soon enough.

My boot didn’t connect. Worse, the movement shot the ski forward and into the woods.

“Oh no,” I muttered. Humiliation flooded me. My cheeks burned. Now would be a good time for an avalanche to sweep me away.

VALEN

My wolf stirred inside and roused with sudden alertness.

Then a deep rumble rolled from within his chest. *Mate.*

Don't be ridiculous, I replied as I skied over to a snowbank. The woman's ski had wedged itself in and peeked out, half-buried. The snow was so deep that I had to remove my skis to venture in. I popped them off and planted them upright into a snowbank.

It's her, my wolf insisted. Can't you sense it?

I ignored the question. *I'm trying to work here.*

It had been a challenge to retrieve her gear and get her to the side of the trail. Where she'd fallen had left her in a blind spot for those coming downhill, leaving her in a vulnerable position. Someone skiing downhill fast might not be able to avoid her. The two skiers who had stopped to help were also in a precarious position as they'd stopped to retrieve her skis. I tried to get everyone moving off the main trail, so they'd be less likely to be caught in a collision. At least the other two were gone now, and she was off to the side, no longer in such a dangerous location.

As I trudged through the deeper snow away from the groomed trails, I gritted my teeth. With heavy boots on, this wasn't a stroll in a meadow. By the time I reached her half-buried ski, my heart beat much faster.

I grabbed the bottom edge of the ski and yanked it out of its snow cave. "Got it." I declared in victory as I lifted it for her to see.

"Oh, good!" she shouted from the side of the trail.

It was covered in snow, and I brushed off as much as I could so she'd be able to put it back on. I carried the ski over to her.

As I approached, my wolf wagged his tail inside. *It's her.*

I suppressed a scowl and focused on doing my job. What was wrong with him for thinking a woman we barely said two words to and knew nothing about was our mate? We hadn't even made eye contact yet. She appeared so shaken by the fall, and her face was half-covered by her mask and goggles. Blond ringlets extended from under her helmet, wet from snow—as was much of her.

“Thank you so much for your help,” she gushed with gratitude once I reached her.

“No problem.” After I brushed more snow out of the bindings, I positioned the ski beside her white boot. “Careful, it's as slippery as a salmon,” I joked to lighten the mood. “Hold on to me for balance.”

“Okay.” She placed her hand on my shoulder and attempted to wedge her foot into the ski.

I inhaled, trying to get a sense of what was making my wolf go so batty inside. She smelled good, for sure. And she wasn't a typical human. With the heady scent of the pine in the crisp mountain air, her fragrance wasn't easy to distinguish. I sniffed again, homing in on her to get a better read. With the earthy, herbal undertones beneath her alluring aroma, I guessed she could be a witch. Although I hadn't met many here on the mountain, Grayson's mate Aurora was one. I'd been wary of witches, like many in my pack, until we'd met her.

It would be outright rude to ask this woman, especially while she was recovering from a fall and stumbling to get her boots

back on. Still, now that my wolf had put the idea of her being *the one* in my head, I grew curious. Who was this woman? Was she here with anyone?

It took her a few attempts before she managed to pop her ski on.

We repeated the attempt with the second ski, and it went much smoother. “This one isn’t such a squirmer.” I gestured to her ski.

“Guess not,” she agreed.

Once she was back on her skis and properly equipped again, she brushed off more snow from her maroon jacket and black ski pants. She wore one of the ribbons for the chairlift dating.

“You’re trying chairlift dating?”

“Past tense,” she answered with a groan. “Tried. Failed. Ran away.”

“That bad?”

She snorted. “I think I’d rather take another tumble down the mountain than try that again.”

I chuckled. She was cute. Or I imagined she was beneath all the gear.

I scanned her for any injuries I might have missed. “Are you sure you’re okay? I can get you to first aid, and they can check you out.”

“I’m fine,” she declared, again avoiding eye contact. “I’m going to skedaddle down and try to forget my mortification with a stiff drink.”

“We’ve all had unexpected yard sales,” I said with a chuckle, referring to when a skier loses their gear during a fall. “I think

I spend most of my time as ski patrol rescuing lost skis and poles from a snow burial.”

She laughed. “Thanks again.”

“No problem. That’s why I’m here.”

She took a deep breath and stared down the mountain. “I think I’m good now.”

“I can escort you to make sure you get down okay.”

She shook her head abruptly. “Oh, no. That’s okay. I promise I’m fine.”

I assessed her once again to ensure she didn’t appear to be dizzy or off balance. She turned and glanced up the mountain before she positioned her skis and navigated downhill.

Don’t let her go, my wolf said. Follow her.

Yeah, that will make her feel comfortable—if I stalk her after she’s already shaken up.

You can’t let her go, he insisted. She’s the one we’ve been waiting for!

I’m not waiting for anyone, I dismissed.

But I could check up on her later and see if she was as cute as I surmised under all her snow-covered gear. If she’d tried the chairlift event, that meant she was open to meeting someone new.

Perhaps my wolf had a good idea after all. I’d give her some space and then go find her in a little while. After all, I’d just be doing my job.

And if it led to an exciting night later, even better.

CHAPTER 3



CASSANDRA

All I wanted to do was get to the bottom of the mountain without another incident. As I skied down, I could all but feel Mr. Ski Patrol's eyes boring into me. Yes, he was helpful and doing his job, but it ramped up my self-consciousness. Did he think I'd fall again, turning into a meringue as I tumbled down the mountain?

I navigated downhill with caution. When I reached the flatter area before the ski lodge, I skied over, took off my skis, and set them against a rack. That was it; I was done for the day. What I needed was a long break and a hard drink to take off the edge.

Once I trudged inside like Frankenstein's monster in my ski boots, I grabbed my ski bag from its nook and found an empty bench. The first thing was to get the boots off. Wielding them on or yanking them off was a short workout in itself. I pulled and pulled and then exhaled. The moment of relief after getting them off was almost orgasmic. Okay, not quite so euphoric, but it felt damn good.

I slid my feet into my fur-lined snow boots. They felt so cozy in comparison—not slippers in front of the fire comfy but better than the alternative of having my feet clamped into the vice-like ski boots. Removing my helmet, goggles, gloves, and ski pants was next. Everything was wet and bulky, and I desperately wanted to warm up after that cold spill. I stuffed whatever I didn't need into my ski bag, shoved it back into the storage space, and stopped by the restroom. When I glanced in the mirror, I groaned. My hair still had snow clinging to it. I finger-combed through my curls, attempting to tame them to

look somewhat decent. I laughed at the attempt, telling myself the tousled look was in. Forget summer beach waves; I'd start a new trend with tumble-down-the-mountain style. I snorted at the results and headed upstairs for a drink.

The dark-paneled pub looked like any other in a ski resort—high-back tables, booths, and retro ski signs. It was still early in the day, well before the time for après-ski music and specials, but many of the tables were already full of families with hungry or tired children ready for a break. I hear that, kiddos. I slid into one of the empty stools at the bar.

A bartender with graying hair who appeared to be in her fifties stepped over to me. “What can I get you?”

“What do you recommend to take off the sting after face-planting in the snow?” I quipped.

“A Franconia coffee,” a voice said from behind.

That low voice was one I recognized, since it had only been minutes since he'd helped me recover from my fall.

“It's a solid choice,” the bartender said and named off ingredients that included Bailey's Irish Creme, hot cocoa, and Kahlua.

“Sounds good,” I said.

The bartender turned and grabbed a glass, then started to make the cocktail.

“Mind if I sit here?” Ski patrol guy motioned to the empty stool beside me.

If it meant a lecture about skiing in control or some other admonition, I'd rather melt like a snowman sliding down the mountain in spring. What I said was, “Go ahead,” and avoided eye contact.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Aside from the battered ego?” I snorted. “Fine.”

He chuckled. “It happens to us all. You don’t know how many times I’ve seen it. I’ve had to help people in far worse situations. Some skis aren’t found until the snow melts.

“Really?” I asked, my tone sounding strangely hopeful. At least I wasn’t the worst catastrophe out here—and he didn’t appear to come over to give me a hard time. I turned to meet his gaze and then sucked in a breath.

He had bright blue eyes that twinkled with a hint of mischief. His hair was dark with a sexy hint of gray in his beard. And he was as massive as I’d first thought when staring up at him on the mountain. His features were rugged, jaw hard, and nose strong. His magical vibration signaled he was some kind of shifter; considering who owned the ski resort, I guessed wolf.

He arched a brow. “Everything okay?”

“Yes.” I raised my chin. “Just surprised to see you in here. Did you follow me?”

He inhaled and stared at me for several heart-pounding seconds before he replied. “You seemed pretty shaken up out there. I had to make sure you were alright.”

Shaken up might be a good way to describe how rattled I was. “That spill took me by surprise. When I’ve fallen before, I sensed it coming. The slip—the oh shit—and then the fall. But this time—BOOM!” I clapped. “No warning.”

“I know what you mean.” He nodded. “I’ve had some of those sneaky spills.”

The bartender returned with my drink. “Here you go.”

“Thanks so much.”

“Valen, what are you having?” she asked him.

Valen? What an interesting name, one I hadn’t heard before.

He ordered a beer on draft. “Put the coffee on my tab.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I said.

“I want to.”

“Thanks.” I took a sip of my cocktail. The warmth of the coffee blended with alcohol and sweetness rolled over my tongue. “Mmm, perfect. Thanks for the rec.” I glanced at him. “I’m Cassandra Capwell, by the way. And thanks for helping me earlier.”

“You’re welcome. I’m Valen Aldridge.” He held out his hand.

I shook it. Not only was it large and warm, engulfing mine in his grasp, but oh... what was with those tingles? Heat traveled up my arm.

Valen stared at me with surprise in his eyes while he kept my hand in his for far longer than usual. He then rubbed the back of my hand with his thumb before he let go. “Cassandra,” he repeated.

My name never sounded as wonderful as it did coming from his rich voice.

I had to stop myself from gaping so I sputtered, “You’re allowed to drink on your shifts?” Jeez. What was I—the ski lodge narc?

He grunted. “It would take a lot of alcohol to affect me.”

His high tolerance confirmed my inkling that he was a shifter. I bent closer. Damn, he smelled good. “Wolf?” I whispered.

He studied me with an intense look before nodding. Then he leaned close and said, “Witch?” in a low rumble that vibrated

against my ear. His warm breath fanned my skin in an oddly titillating way.

When he pulled away, I almost moved with him. I turned to him. “Yes.”

We exchanged a look, as if confirming we’d keep each other’s secret. “What brings you to the White Mountains, Cassandra?”

I arched a brow. “What makes you think I’m not a local?” As soon as I asked him in that tone, I sensed it might sound flirtatious. Was it? I didn’t know. I was so out of practice.

Valen gazed at me with amusement. “I’d know if you lived around here.”

“Oh, really?” I countered. “Do you know everyone in the region?”

“No, but I’d recognize someone as beautiful as you.”

Heat rose in my cheeks, and I turned to focus on my drink. I might be rusty with men, but it didn’t take too many brain cells to notice that there was something going on here. The bigger question was—did I want it?

After taking a sip of my delicious hot beverage, I put it down and then said, “Now that’s a line if I ever heard one.”

“Not a line.” He shook his head. “A fact.”

Before I could think of a suitable reply, he asked, “Are you here with anyone?”

“No. I’m visiting for the weekend while my daughter is visiting my parents. They’re not far over the border from here in Maine.”

“Are you from Maine?”

“No, Salem.”

“New Hampshire?”

“Massachusetts,” I clarified.

“Ah, the Witch City.”

“If the pointy shoe fits,” I joked. “Now my turn to ask about you. Where are you from?”

“Here. Well, not originally. I grew up in a pack in Maine.”

“What brought you here?”

He motioned to the mountain before us, visible in the picture window. “The scenery. You can’t beat it.” With a sly grin, he added. “And the skiing isn’t bad.”

“If you manage to stay in your skis,” I added.

He chuckled. “Are you going back out after a break?”

I shook my head. “I think I’ve had enough of a beating today. Mountain 1, Cassandra 0.”

“You’re done?” His eyes widened. “You came all this way. You can’t let a little tumble keep you from skiing.”

I chuckled. “It didn’t feel so little when I was doing the tumbling.”

“As someone who’s had his share of falls, here’s my advice. Take a break but don’t stay away too long. Otherwise, the fear of falling might prevent you from going back out.”

No way was I going back out this afternoon. What I wanted after this drink was to return to my hotel room and change into pajamas, at least for a couple of hours. “Maybe tomorrow. I’m done for the day.”

“Make sure you take a hot shower when you head back to your room,” Valen said. “And stretch out your legs. It will make your body feel less sore tomorrow morning.”

I caught his eyes, and my mind snapped to a visual of a hot shower with *him*. Not what he intended—or maybe so? There was *something* between us, unless I was still dazed by the fall and hallucinating about my rescuer. That might be more accurate.

But now that the idea of being with him in my room was in my head, I couldn't pry it out. Spending the night with someone as sexy as him to snap me out of my dry spell warmed me more than the hot beverage.

“Will do,” I managed to say, although my voice sounded slightly strained.

His eyes gleamed with more brightness. “One more thing, Cassandra.”

“What?”

“Have dinner with me tonight.”

I blinked at him. Did I hear him correctly? Was this hot wolf shifter asking me on a date?

A pleasant tingling grew inside, one I'd recognized from so long ago—before I became a single mother and my life revolved around juggling caring for my daughter and work. There hadn't been any space for these strange sensations, but what happened inside me was definitely *something*.

Duh, Cassandra. You're not that out of practice.

His brows drew together. “Am I out of line? There's a guy in your life.” He grumbled to himself. “You did say you had a daughter, after all.”

I groaned. “Her dad is most definitely *not* in the picture.” Ugh, with my gawking at Valen while he waited for a reply, he must

have thought it was a hard no. I smiled and said, "I'd love to have dinner with you tonight."

He grinned with satisfaction. "Where are you staying?"

"The hotel across the street."

"I'll meet you in the lobby at seven." Then he stood and said, "I better get back out there. See you tonight."

As he walked away, my gaze lingered on him. Damn, he was huge. All muscle. And the way he carried himself with that slow, confident stride. He turned before he exited the pub and caught me staring. He smiled and then walked out.

After continuing to gape, I pulled my slackened jaw back together.

I texted Gianna: Chairlift dating was a bust. And I took an embarrassing tumble down the mountain.

Are you okay?

Fine. Actually, interesting twist. A guy from ski patrol helped me. And we're going out to dinner tonight.

Enjoy!

I planned to.

VALEN

As I headed outside to return to work, the snow glittered, reflecting the sunlight. Since conditions could change as quickly as a gust of wind blowing snow off trails to leave a sheet of ice, I tried to refocus on my job. Although the lines for the chairlift were shorter than when I headed inside the pub, people still spread across the mountain like colorful dots sliding down. The more people on the slopes, the more likely there could be a fall or collision, so I had to get my head in the game.

One of the staff had started a fire in an outdoor pit. Kids gathered around for marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate to make s'mores.

“Time to get back to your lessons,” a woman encouraged a couple of school-aged kids.

The kids finished their treats, evidence that was still visible with chocolate on their faces and headed in my direction over near the ski racks. Snowflakes drifted from a tree, and they paused, tipping their heads back to catch them on their tongues. They giggled and continued to head to the ski rack.

After I put my helmet and goggles on and then slid my hands into my gloves, I pulled my skis from the rack and popped them on. Then I grabbed my poles and skied over to a chairlift, the ever-present sound of skies and snowboards carving through the surrounding snow over the backdrop of Poison's “Every Rose Has its Thorn.” I couldn't stop thinking about what happened inside with Cassandra. My attraction to her was strange—almost overwhelming, considering we'd just met. I blamed it on my wolf and his insistence that she was our

fated mate. I inhaled the crisp mountain air to clear my head—and his fixation. The scent from the outdoor waffle hut with chocolate syrup drifted over, one of the popular options for a quick and tasty bite without needing to head inside to search for a table.

She's simply another woman visiting here for the weekend, I told him.

No. Mate, he insisted.

You're confused. Maybe it's because she's a witch.

That had to be it. Something about her scent or magic threw my wolf off, and he confused the attraction as something else. Or she used some sort of enchantment that intoxicated him. What did he know about mates, anyway?

Sure, Cassandra was beautiful, and I wanted to see her again, but that was all. She wasn't any different from any other women who visited the mountain for a weekend of fun.

Yet, thoughts of her distracted me throughout the rest of my shift that afternoon, and I couldn't wait until I saw her again that night. Time ticked by slowly until I finally headed into the ski patrol hut at the end of the day. That was odd; I loved my job, and it usually rushed by quickly. I wasn't used to it dragging like it did today.

Then again, I had a date that I was looking forward to. And my wolf was practically chasing his tail in the excitement of seeing Cassandra again.

“See you at Kelly's Pub?” my packmate Aldric said.

That's where many of the mountain staff ended up after we closed the lifts for the day. It had good food and cold beer and was a welcoming place to unwind before I returned to my cabin or let my wolf run loose after dark.

“Not tonight,” I replied.

“Why not? Have a hot date?” he teased.

“Exactly.”

Aldric thumped me on the back. “I should have known.” He chuckled. “Who is she? A cute little ski bunny looking for some weekend action?”

My muscles tensed. Although that might have been my first impression, especially after seeing her with the chairlift dating ribbon, hearing Aldric say it irked me. My skin prickled.

“No. She’s a witch.”

Aldric’s eyebrows lifted. “A true witch? Like Aurora?”

“Indeed.”

“Is she from Salem?”

“Yes.” In dealing with my perplexing attraction to Cassandra while trying to get my wolf to knock off his constant interruptions, it was a wonder I could string words into a sentence, let alone enough ask her out. Fortunately, she said yes.

“Wow, surprising.” Aldric chuckled. “I thought you didn’t bother with basics, like names.”

I grunted. “I know her name. I’m not *that* bad.”

Perhaps his assessment wasn’t totally off base. After all, how many names of women could I remember over the decades? Ever since my ex had left me for her true mate and broken my heart in my early twenties, I’d shielded myself from getting too close to another woman. And thus far, it had worked. I hadn’t felt anything close to that overwhelming feeling of

young love. Lust, sure. But that's all it was. When the women left the resort, it marked the end of our time together.

There was no reason to think it would be any different this weekend with Cassandra—other than my wolf's misguided idea about her being the one. Although I was no longer a lone wolf, like I had been during the period in between leaving my former pack and joining the Franconia one, I was an unmated one. And nothing my wolf urged would change that. Not only was I set in my ways, but I'd learned the hard way that love could only lead to pain—devastating pain that would drive a shifter to leave his pack and live as a lone wolf in the forests. Why would I risk that kind of heartache again?

Exactly—I wouldn't.

“Enjoy your night,” Aldric said.

I left the hut and skied through the glades to cut over to my cabin. After I removed all my gear and clothes, I turned the water on in my shower to as hot as I could manage. It helped to work out the tautness in my muscles from skiing. Since I'd suggested that Cassandra do the same, I pictured her doing so. Naked. Languidly running her hands over the tightness in her legs...

I could massage them for her. Make her feel good. Ah hell, now I had an erection as hard as ice packed on the mountain.

Damn, my wolf had really gotten to me today. I'd have to keep him in check tonight, lest he lead me to act like a fool and scare her away. Because as much as I didn't want to admit it, I was just as excited to see her as my crazy canine.

CHAPTER 4



CASSANDRA

I pulled my coat tighter around me as I made my way through the shops in the valley. It had been a long time since I'd seen Aurora. The last I'd heard, she'd opened a witch shop here in the mountains.

The window display with a number of colorful glass witch balls twinkling in the sun indicated I'd found the right spot. When I stepped inside, wind chimes announced my arrival. I scented sage and other herbs. It was a familiar scent, reminding me of my workspace at the Salem Supernatural Network.

Aurora stood at a table, her dark hair pulled into a high ponytail with loose tendrils falling around her face. She'd been measuring herbs into plastic bags but raised her head as she said, "Welcome." Upon recognizing me, she exclaimed, "Cassandra! I didn't know you were here." She wiped her hands on her black apron and walked over to greet me.

"Good to see you, Aurora." I glanced around her shop. Every wall and display were artfully arranged with books, crystals, herbs, tarot cards, gifts, and so on. "Your place looks great."

She shrugged one shoulder. "I learned a lot from Aunt Colleen. She came up for a bit to help me get set up."

Her aunt owned a magical supply shop in Salem and was one of the founders of the Salem Supernatural Network there.

"That's fantastic. I'm sure she misses you a great deal."

"I miss her too. We visit each other when we can." After I nodded in acknowledgment, Aurora asked, "What brings you up to the mountains?"

“I have the weekend to myself after dropping my daughter off at my parents, so I decided to get some skiing in. I thought I’d stop by and say hello.”

“I’m so glad you did.” Aurora took my arm. “Come on, I’ll show you around.”

Aurora gave me a tour of the space and asked about people we both knew at the Network. After her mediation assignment here didn’t go as smoothly as planned, she ended up falling in love with the Franconia pack’s beta, Grayson, and now lived here with him.

“Let me make some tea so we can catch up.”

She stepped into a back room and steeped a pot of tea with herbs. When the wind chimes tinkled, she said, “I’ll be right back. Feel free to look around.”

While she tended to a group of customers, I perused the store. The women oohed about the different crystals and sniffed herbs. They had several questions about things, such as which crystals and herbs to use for different concerns. When it became clear that Aurora would be occupied for several minutes, I said, “I’ll be back in a bit.”

She didn’t need to be distracted from her customers. I perused the village shops and restaurants. It was a cute, walkable area, which was quite busy this weekend. I dipped in and out of a few shops and picked up a trinket and sweater for Paige.

Twenty minutes or so had passed by the time I returned to Aurora’s shop. She had more customers in there, so I waited outside for a few minutes, sitting on a bench until the shop was empty again.

“I’m glad you came back,” she said. “Sorry about that. You never know when it’s going to get busy.”

“Busy is good.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Our tea. Don’t worry, I kept it warm.”

We were able to sit in a nook at the back of the store and chat while we sipped our tea.

“I have a reading here in twenty minutes,” she said.

“I won’t keep you.”

“Stay,” she encouraged. “I may need to get up to help a customer, but I want to catch up while we can.”

“Sounds good,” I agreed. “Tell me about your life in the mountains.”

Aurora brought her fingertips to her lips before she lowered her hands. “I like it. The air feels so clean and so fragrant. It’s a less hurried lifestyle. I live on the mountain surrounded by woods. It’s so different from Salem.”

“I bet.”

“The stars are incredible at night. And you’ve seen the views of the mountains.”

“I have. They’re spectacular.” I took a sip of my tea and savored the warmth and soothing herbs.

She described other things she liked about mountain life, such as spotting wildlife in the forests. “And Grayson is wonderful. He’s so good to me.” She motioned around the shop. “I wouldn’t have this store if it wasn’t for him.”

As she spoke about him, the admiration for Grayson was clear. It was the same look I’d see in the eyes of other people when they talked about the person they loved, such as my coworkers: Pandora with Austin, Nova with Diego, and Lucas with Zoe to name a few. Sure, I was happy for them and a bit

envious. After all, my love life hadn't turned out the same way, and now I had an ex-husband who gave me more grief than anything positive.

"How's Paige doing?" she asked.

Joy spread through me as I talked about my daughter. After a quick update, I added, "She's growing up so fast. Soon I'll be wrestling with a teenager who's giving me an attitude problem. I'd like to slow down time to put that off," I quipped.

"You'll be all right," Aurora said with an assured nod. "She's a good kid."

I hoped so and would only know with time. Thinking about my date with Valen tonight, I asked, "Is it strange living with a wolf shifter?"

Aurora tilted her head as she appeared to consider the question. "It was at first. I mean, he can shift into a massive wolf at any moment." She chuckled. "But he's such a kind soul. Considerate and caring." She motioned out the windows. "He's the reason most of these businesses exist. He's helped many people get started. He says it's not only good for business, but for the community and the pack."

"That's good to hear. It sounds like you're happy."

"I am." She assessed me with a sly smile and arched brows.

"Anyone new in your life?"

I leaned back in my chair and held my cup with both hands. "Ha, no. I don't have time to date." I glanced around the back room as I considered revealing more about my current interest in wolf shifters. The bookshelves were lined with tarot cards, tea leaves, and other tools for readings. Then I brought my gaze back to Aurora. "But funny story. I had a tumble on the

mountain earlier. I'm fine, but the ski patrol guy who helped me out was hot. And nice."

"Did you get his name?"

"Yes, Valen." I cocked my head. "Do you know him?" I asked, trying to keep my voice sounding nonchalant.

"Valen?" Aurora nodded. "Yes, I know him. Not well, though. He's also an enforcer for the pack. Seems like a decent guy."

I hesitated for a moment before admitting, "That's good. Because he asked me to go to dinner tonight."

Aurora raised an eyebrow. "And you said..."

"Yes."

"Oh nice." She smiled but then it faltered.

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

"Aurora," I persisted. "That wasn't a *nothing* comment. That was an *oh-I-just-thought-of-something* comment—one that sounds like it might not be so nice after all since your smile disappeared."

She bit her lower lip. "Ah, well. It's... he's kind of a loner, but it sounds like he enjoys the company of women who come here for a trip. *Many* women. I don't want you getting hurt."

My heart sank at her words. I wasn't interested in a womanizer, but this was simply a weekend to have some me time. I raised my chin. "Good to know, but we're simply going out for dinner. If it leads to a little fun, who cares?" I quirked a lopsided smile. "We're both adults."

Aurora nodded. "Got it." The shop door opened, and she stood. "I've got to get that."

“Go ahead. I’m heading out, anyway. Thanks for the tea.”

“It was good to see you, Cassandra.” She smiled. “Have fun tonight.”

“I plan to.” I grinned and then left the shop. Despite my words, I had to shake off the discomfort from Aurora’s description of Valen. Even if it was true, I wasn’t interested in a relationship. After this weekend, I’d never see him again.

VALEN

When it was time to meet up with Cassandra, I walked down the mountain road and cut across the street to the other side of the resort where many of the visitors stayed. The village had various options from hotel rooms to condos, restaurants, and stores, all of which were a walkable distance. My pack leaders did well in developing this area as we were able to live comfortable lives both as humans and wolves. It was a good life here, one I had no desire of leaving.

I arrived a few minutes early and headed inside to wait in the lobby. The interior was impressive with a soaring ceiling, chandeliers, and polished marble. Floral arrangements lined tabletops. A massive stone fireplace crackling with a roaring fire filled the space with warmth. Plush seating was arranged around the fireplace, inviting guests to relax.

My gaze drifted to the elevator door before they even opened. When Cassandra walked out, my wolf stirred inside and wagged his tail.

Don't, I warned before he started up again about the mate business.

She looked stunning in a black-and-white striped dress. Her hair, which had been wet and mussed up earlier, now fell in alluring ringlets I wanted to touch. My mouth went dry while my palms turned clammy. What an odd reaction. I wiped my hands on the side of my black pants, one of the nicer pairs I owned.

When she caught my gaze, she smiled. It was as bright as sunlight breaking over the mountain to signal the start of a new day.

I gulped and walked toward her while she did the same to me. Why did it feel like we were moving in slow motion, like in some sort of cheesy romance movie? Even the soft sound of classical music playing in the background added to the ambiance.

Despite my warning to my wolf to stay calm, he urged me to hurry. *Mate. Don't you feel it?*

I paused. Did I? I definitely felt *something* for Cassandra, but doubted it was something as monumental as a connection between mates. Then again, I couldn't exactly identify this intense reaction to her. Whatever it was seemed more than lust.

Something knocked into me. It was a school-aged kid with a rolling suitcase. I tried to move so as not to crush him, but another kid rolling a suitcase darted past. Trying to avoid this young girl did me in. I tripped on the edge of her suitcase and lost my balance. As I tumbled to the ground, I attempted to avoid crushing any small humans.

Dazed, I blinked and glanced around. What the hell just happened? I was flat on my ass on the rug in a fancy hotel. Worse, I'd fallen in front of Cassandra. I wanted to catch her attention tonight, but to impress her—not think I'm some kind of gravity-challenged fool.

"I'm so sorry," a middle-aged woman lugging a suitcase said. "Michael, Ella, watch where you're going!" she scolded as she looked across the hotel lobby.

I turned to see the two kids dashing ahead, dragging their little trip machines behind them.

"Sorry!" the girl exclaimed.

"We didn't mean it," the boy said. "We were just walking."

Ah, it was probably on me when I'd stopped short. I pulled myself to my feet. "That was my fault," I explained to her.

She pursed their lips as she stared at her kids. "They need to be more careful."

"It's fine." I called over to the kids. "My fault," I repeated to them. "Are you both okay?"

They muttered yeahs. The woman apologized once more, but I insisted it was fine and to go ahead. She rushed to catch up with her kids. Half the people in the lobby appeared to be staring at me; some with concerned expressions, others amused. Great, I had an audience witness my clumsy entrance.

Cassandra stepped before me, her expression tight with concern. "Are you alright?"

"Splendid," I muttered.

"What happened?"

My wolf has this crazy idea that you're my mate and distracted me, I thought. Yeah, I would not be mentioning that at any time tonight—or ever. Not if I wanted to see her again.

Confessing something that ludicrous to someone I'd just met would be enough to send her dashing away from here as fast as her skis could glide.

No, something lighter would be better. I grinned at her.

"Seeing you in that dress knocked me off balance. Gravity took care of the rest."

Too flirty, too soon?

Her lips spread into a small smile. "Can I do anything to help?"

"I'm fine. But next time," I joked, "Catch my fall."

She giggled. “Oh, I thought you were trying to mimic my debacle on the mountain earlier. You know, *match my fall*.”

Yes, she was flirting back. “Exactly,” I replied, liking how we’d turned my embarrassing fall to this playful banter. “How did I do?”

Cassandra tipped her head and studied me. “Hmm. It was far less dramatic with the danger levels.” She placed her hand on her chest. “I mean, mine involved a steep black diamond pitch, lost skis, potential collisions with skiers or snowboarders shooting down at high speed, and super-cold snow sliding over my skin.” She straightened and raised an index finger. “But you had a near catastrophe with the possibility of toppling onto kids. And you managed to avoid crushing them.” She nodded and assessed me with a teasing gleam in her eyes. “Not bad, overall. I’d say we’re about even.”

I chuckled and offered her my arm. “I accept the judge’s ruling.”

She took my arm, and we headed out of the hotel.

See what happens when you get overexcited? I scolded my wolf. You make an ass out of us. But I’m the one who has to deal with the consequences.

My wolf whined inside in response.

As we stepped outside, I added, Fortunately, we didn’t scare her away. But we can’t blow it. Try to restrain yourself tonight.

CHAPTER 5



CASSANDRA

*A*fter we left the hotel, with my arm looped through Valen's, he showed me around the village. The brick sidewalks were paved and lined with solar streetlamps. Snow was piled on both sides of the walking path. The quaint area was walkable, its pathways leading to unique shops and restaurants. The scents from the various establishments stirred my appetite.

"What's your favorite place to eat?" I asked him.

"Too hard to choose. Usually, I end up at Kelly's Pub for après ski. After finishing a shift, we head over for cold beer and good food."

"Sounds good. Let's go there."

He grunted. "On second thought, too many of my pack mates will be there. They'll want to gab. I see them enough as it is. I'd rather go someplace where I can be alone with you."

The way his gaze traveled over me when he said that sent tingles to my toes.

I took a deep breath to center myself. "Okay, since you know the best places, what else would you suggest?"

"Do you like Greek food?"

"Love it."

"Let's go to Athena's Restaurant."

"Sounds good."

We cut across the shoveled brick sidewalk over to the restaurant. Valen led me inside, and my mouth watered at the

aroma of grilled meat and spices. I was hungrier than I thought. The interior was warm and inviting, with deep orange and red hues dominating the color scheme. Framed pictures of Greece hung on the walls, and Greek instrumental music played at a low volume in the background.

Once the host seated us at a table for two and handed us menus, I glanced over the options on the drink menu.

“Would you like to share a bottle of wine?” Valen asked.

Ooh, now that wasn’t something I’d done with a man in a long time. With girlfriends, yes. A glass or two alone at the end of a long day, sure. But on a date? It had been so very long.

“I’d love that.”

We scoured through the options and picked one we thought we’d both like—a white wine from Greece.

“When in Greece,” I noted. “Or a Greek restaurant.”

Valen chuckled. “It’s good. I usually drink beer but on a special occasion like this, wine is a better option.”

I arched my brows. “Oh, is this a special occasion?”

He appraised me with a gaze that lingered long, and his lips quirked with a hint of a smile. “I think so.”

Heat curled inside me. That look reminded me of desire and being desired—and it felt damn good. I resisted the urge to squirm or make a snappy comeback. He was working his charm and working it well.

Fortunately, the server arrived with the bottle of wine before I could ruin the mood. She uncorked it and poured us each a glass. The rich aroma of the wine filled my nostrils as I lifted the glass to my lips and took a sip. The velvety texture and fruity notes danced across my tongue, and I savored the flavor.

After she left, we glanced at the food options.

“Anything look tempting?” Valen asked, a sensual edge in his voice.

Oh yes, he knew exactly what he was doing. Aurora’s words returned. Anything that happened tonight would be one night and one night only. Besides, that’s all I’d want. We lived in different states and led different lives. Whatever this spark was between us had to simply be attraction. Did I want to pursue it and see where the night went?

My body replied, hell-freaking-yes-you-do, mama bear.

“I’m debating between the spanokopita or moussaka,” I answered Valen, hoping my voice sounded normal. When I lifted my gaze to meet his, I asked, “What about you?” The breathless tone in my question surprised me.

“Why don’t we order both? And we can add a platter to share?” The flirtatious edge to his tone was unmistakable.

What next? Would we play footsie under the table? I really needed to start dating again to remember how exactly to act on dates.

He asked you a question. Right. I needed to reply. “That sounds like a great option.” It would be far too much food for one person, but between the two of us, we could manage—especially if Valen ate as much as it appeared he could with his impressive height and muscular frame.

Once we ordered, we chatted about the mountain and the area. My conversation skills returned for the most part. When Valen asked me about myself, I told him about Paige and how I worked for the Salem Supernatural Network. He asked about them both, being polite without being overly intrusive. Then I asked him about his life here in the mountains. He shared how

much he loved living here. While he did so, I noted how much I liked his voice. It was deep and rich. I was so intrigued by it, I missed his next question.

“Sorry, what was that?” I shook my head while the heat rose to my cheeks.

He started to repeat a question but then stopped when the server approached carrying a tray with plates.

“It was nothing important.” Valen leaned back in his chair.
“Here comes our food.”

“Smells delicious,” I pointed out.

The server placed a plate of moussaka, spanokopita, meatballs, stuffed grape leaves, and more between us. She also placed a large Greek salad covered with feta cheese on an available spot.

Once she left, we dug in. The layers of eggplant, tomato sauce, and beef were perfectly cooked and seasoned, and their flavors exploded in my mouth.

“So good,” I murmured, my eyelids lowering in blissful satisfaction.

After I swallowed and reopened them fully, Valen was watching me with his dark eyes. “I’m glad you like it.”

The gleam of hunger in his gaze sent a jolt of awareness tingling between my legs. I squirmed and straightened. I’d never been on a date quite like this before with the chemistry instantaneous and almost impossible to ignore.

As we ate, he said, “Tell me more about yourself, Cassandra.”

I finished a hearty bite of the tasty spinach and cheese spanokopita and swallowed. “Well, you know I’m a witch who lives and works in Salem. And that I’m a mom. There’s not

much more to tell.” Ugh, that made me sound boring—that all I did was work or take care of my daughter. Sadly, that was mostly the truth. I’d only recently started to get out more now that Paige was older and Thorne took her on some weekends.

“Then tell me about your daughter,” Valen said.

“Her name is Paige. She’s nine and loves to draw. She’s very sweet.” My gaze drifted off. “It’s been the two of us since she was born.”

Valen’s brows drew closer. “Her father isn’t part of her life?”

I grumbled. “Not for many years and only recently—*when* he wants to be.”

“I’m sorry,” Valen said. “That must be tough.”

I drew a long breath and exhaled slowly to move beyond any talk about Thorne, which would definitely ruin the mood. “I know a wolf shifter in Salem who grew up here in the White Mountains. His name is Sebastian Serrano. Do you know him?”

Valen cocked his head. “From the Sacco pack?”

That sounded familiar from the quarreling between the two packs before they joined. “Yes, I think that’s the one.”

Valen rubbed his jaw. “I don’t think we’ve met. The Franconia and Sacco packs kept their distance for many years. I think I’ve met his parents, though.”

We continued to talk while we made a dent in the platters of food. Conversation came more easily as we grew more comfortable with each other. He told me how he also worked some nights as an enforcer for the wolf pack, a responsibility he took seriously.

“It’s not often I can share that side of my life with others,” he noted.

“Meaning being a shifter?” I asked.

“Right. We pretty much keep that part of ourselves quiet. You never know with humans.”

How strange and somewhat sad it was to live that way. I grew up as a witch and was usually able to be open about it. Of course there were times when we had to be careful. There were always people you came across who could be hostile if not downright violent to those who didn’t look or think like them. Fortunately, they were in the minority and were outnumbered by others who welcomed living and learning from people with different perspectives and lifestyles. I pictured who I spent time with on a regular basis, mostly at the Network. My life would be so bland without the variety of people I met there.

Conversation with Valen flowed without break all through dessert. What was it about him that made chatting so easy?

For dessert, we indulged in baklava. The layers of flaky phyllo dough, chopped nuts, and honey syrup melted on my tongue.

By the time we left the restaurant, I was stuffed. We walked at an easy gait along the village shops, which was welcome after that hearty meal. The moon was out, twinkling above us among the countless stars, far more than I’d ever see back in the city.

“Dinner was delicious,” I said. “Thank you.” I rubbed my stomach. “I’m stuffed.”

“Glad you liked it.”

We meandered a bit more. “I better get back to the hotel.”

“Good idea,” Valen agreed. “Get a good night of sleep before you go skiing tomorrow.”

“*If* I go back out,” I said. “The memory of today’s tumble is still fresh.”

“Come on, Cassandra. You need to get back out there.” He fixed a steady gaze on me. “How about we go out together tomorrow?”

I slanted my head. “You want to go skiing with me?”

“Yes.”

I narrowed my gaze. “I’m sure you’re way more advanced than I am.”

He shrugged. “Did you see my trouble with gravity in the hotel lobby? And that was with boots on a flat surface.”

I chuckled, appreciating his effort to make me feel more at ease.

“We’ll start with the easy groomers and just go out to have fun. And if we run into any problems, you’ll have ski patrol nearby,” he added with a conspiratorial grin.

Oh yes, he was definitely flirting. And I didn’t *not* want it.

“That might help reassure me. Help me ease back in to skiing again,” I added, matching his smile.

We reached the hotel, and when we turned and glanced at each other, our gazes locked. A flutter swirled in my stomach, and my heart started to beat faster. Would he kiss me goodnight?

A breeze stirred through the branches of a nearby tree, sending snow drifting over us. I shivered and crossed my arms around myself.

“Are you cold?” he asked. “Come here.”

He opened his arms, and I leaned closer to him. Then he wrapped me against his broad torso. His warmth enveloped me, like a cozy fire in the lodge. His heart beat loud in his chest, unless I was hearing mine echo.

I could have stayed there for hours but forced myself to pull away. “Thanks. You feel good,” I muttered. Ugh, did that sound weird? “I mean warm. Urm, I mean your warmth feels good.”

Stop talking.

He gazed down at me, his eyes now glowing brighter with an amber hue. “You feel good too.” He took a deep inhale. “And you smell incredible.”

That glimmer in his eyes whispered of desire, and goddesses, I wanted it. I couldn’t look away; didn’t want to. Valen’s stare pinned me in place, and my pulse galloped with heated anticipation.

He leaned forward and bent down. With his height towering over me, I felt petite. I moved up to my tiptoes.

Then slowly, ever so slowly, we came together. His lips brushed mine, and his soft beard tickled my cheek. Sparks of awareness jolted me. How had I forgotten how good it was to feel like this?

He wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me closer. I looped my arms around his neck. Then he kissed me more deeply, and passion curled from the depth of my core all the way down to my toes.

No, I’d never felt like this.

I lost all sense of our surroundings as I fell deeper into that kiss. When he pulled away, I blinked and readjusted my bearings to where we were. The twinkling of lights in the

village establishments and solar streetlamps rekindled my awareness.

Valen stared into my eyes, his eyelids still lowered and gaze utterly smoldering. “I had a great time tonight.” His voice was smooth and rich, like dark chocolate cocoa.

“Me too.” My body remained ignited like a furnace. I didn’t want the night to end. “Valen?”

“Yes.” His voice was a sexy low rumble.

Invite him in. Just do it. “Thanks again for dinner.”

“Anytime.”

“I’ll see you in the morning.” Damn it. I chickened out.

As I stepped into the hotel lobby, I sagged with regret. But as I made my way to my floor, the high of the kiss lingered. I stepped inside my hotel room, leaned against the door, and pressed my fingers to my lips.

I wanted more. I wanted to see Valen again.

It looked like I’d be strapping on some skis and striving to keep up with him tomorrow.

CHAPTER 6



VALEN

As I waited for Cassandra in front of the hotel, my heart raced. I couldn't stop thinking about her after that kiss. Last night, I'd paced around my cabin, which wasn't easy considering the confined space. Too restless to sit still, I went out for a run in wolf form after midnight. My wolf was giddier than I'd ever experienced, still insisting that she was our mate. That was a big part of what left me unable to settle down and rest until I burned through my energy.

Yes, I was attracted to Cassandra. The chemistry that built during dinner last night had almost detonated when we kissed not far from where I stood. And yes, I liked her—a lot. Of course, I wanted to see her again, and I most definitely wanted to sleep with her, but that didn't mean she was my *mate*.

But when she stepped outside the hotel, her blond ringlets trailing beneath her black helmet, my tongue almost rolled out of my mouth like a cartoon dog. My wolf stirred, anxious to get close.

She walked toward me, and I inhaled her scent. Dear gods, it was as intoxicating as the promise of fresh morning snow on the mountain. A hint of floral notes wrapped around me, stirring my senses like spring in the valley with all the newly formed buds.

My wolf clawed to attention, all primal instincts, which were attuned to her.

“Good morning, Valen.” Her eyes were bright, sparking with warmth. And her lips curled slightly as if we shared a secret.

Did it have anything to do with our kiss?

“Nor mooring,” I replied.

She chuckled. “Someone needs more coffee.”

What the hell was that string of vowels and consonants that tumbled from my mouth? How did I garble such an easy greeting? I cleared my throat and straightened. “I mean good morning.” Then I laughed to offset my sudden unease. “I forgot you don’t speak wolf.”

Settle down, I told my wolf, although I suspected he had nothing to do with my verbal garbage. That was all on me.

Cassandra arched her brows. “That was wolf speak?”

“No.” I grinned. “Just seeing if you were listening.” I motioned to the mountain ahead. “Come on. Let’s get out there before it gets too crowded.”

“Hold on, I need to bundle up some more. It’s much colder than yesterday.” In a lower tone, she added, “And I don’t have shifter heat to keep me warm.”

“But you have a shifter,” I uttered before I could censor myself. Last night, I’d wondered if I’d been coming on to her too strong. But she didn’t run off. In fact, she seemed interested, but I better not push my luck. The last thing I wanted was for Cassandra to ski away from me the way she’d taken off from the chairlift dating event.

She pulled on her gloves and then tapped my forearm. “I might take you up on that offer later if I get too cold.” The playful gleam in her eyes struck me with a sensual promise.

Or that was wishful thinking on my part. Still, a low moan edged with longing rumbled out of me. Before I did something foolish and suggest we skip skiing and get right to warming up naked in her room, I pointed to a rack. “My skis are over there.”

Once we were geared up, we skied over to the chairlift line. I schooled my face not to show discomfort, the way I did every time I had to face my fear of heights. We settled into our seats, and a chilly wind nipped at us.

“Brr,” she said and leaned over to me.

“Agh!” I jolted to the side and then cringed at my high-pitched squeal.

“What is it?”

“You jerked and moved the chair. I thought you were going to fall,” I said. It wasn’t a complete lie since my fear could equate to either of us plunging.

“No, I’m fine,” she said. “I was just trying to scoot over and steal your warmth.”

“Oh.” What an idiot I was. To cover up my awkwardness, I raised my arm, inviting her closer.

She leaned against me, and it felt nice, even if her head was covered by a helmet.

As we ascended, she asked me questions about the area, and I pointed out locations in the distance. The sky was darker than yesterday, with clouds that led to more gray than blue, but the visibility was still good with the morning sunlight.

We reached the top of the mountain and adjusted our poles back onto our wrists. After skiing over to the map, I noted some trail options from this location.

“Want to start with an easy groomer?”

“Yes, please.” She grinned. “I need to break in slowly so I can forget yesterday’s debacle.”

“You got it.” I raised my pole toward the green trail. “After you.”

She arched both brows. “Are you planning to follow me in case I fall? Trust me, I’m already contemplating rolling down like a witchy avalanche.”

“You’re *not* going to fall,” I assured her. “One of us has to ski first. If you’d rather I do so, I will.”

She exhaled. “I’ll do it.” She pushed herself forward a few feet and then turned over her shoulder. “Besides, it might be better that you’re behind me, just in case.” She grinned, turned forward, and launched herself ahead.

As I followed her down the groomed trail, the wind tousled her blond ringlets, mesmerizing me. She skied stiffly at first, which was to be expected after being cautious, but soon loosened her stance and glided down.

Following her down the mountain was more difficult than I expected—not due to issues skiing but the instincts woken in my wolf. The urge to hunt and chase her grew, and anticipation built the closer we approached.

I wanted to catch her.

And then claim her.

Wait, what? I shook my head. Pursuing her was one thing. Getting her into bed tonight would be epic. But claiming her as my mate was *out of the question*. Besides, what would be the point? She’d be returning to Massachusetts tomorrow.

We made it to the bottom of the trail without Cassandra falling or me doing something off the wall like confessing what my wolf kept hammering at me about her being my mate.

“How did that feel?” I asked her.

“Great.” She beamed. “I felt a little anxious at first, but as my confidence grew, it became easier. Enjoyable.”

“I’m glad. I enjoyed that. Ready to go for another run?”

“Let’s do it.”

The primal urge returned as we progressed to a more difficult run, and I pursued Cassandra down the trail. Anticipation soared inside me, driving me to capture this beguiling witch.

We continued for several more runs. I managed not to make a fool out of myself with anymore squeaks of fear due to my fear of heights. We took breaks when she wanted to go inside to warm up.

I pictured a better way of doing so in my cabin but kept that thought to myself—for now.

Each ascent up the chairlift seemed to draw me closer to her as our conversations deepened. The sun broke through the clouds later that morning, bathing the mountain in a golden glow.

We stopped for an early lunch inside the lodge, each of us opting for the hot chili, that smelled so good, and tortilla chips. The conversation flowed as easily as it had while we rode up the lifts, and I was almost reluctant to leave the comfort of our table to return outside. That was a first for me as I’d ski as often as I could.

“You did great this morning. Are you up to heading back out there after lunch?”

Cassandra bit into a chip and then gazed out at the mountain. After she swallowed, she said, “Yes, I’m feeling pretty good out there today.” She flashed a flirtatious grin. “It must be because I have ski patrol assuring me I’ll be safe.”

Always.

What? Where did that thought come from? *Always*? I wouldn't even see this woman again after tomorrow. I gritted my teeth. This was all my wolf's doing. He got a crazy idea in his head, which was messing with me.

Cassandra and I returned to the trails after lunch, and her confidence grew as she braved a couple of black trails. Skiing with her was incredible. It wasn't only the physical experience; I enjoyed the conversations up the chairlift. The more we talked, the more I wanted to know about her. We shared stories about our lives and families, where we grew up, and more. I didn't want the day to end.

Cassandra stopped after the next run, cheeks red and breathing hard. "My legs are telling me I've had enough for the day."

But I didn't want to leave yet.

"Perfect timing. *Après ski* is about to start at Kelly's Pub. Want to grab a drink?"

Cassandra glanced at me for several seconds before her mouth spread into a beautiful smile. "Sure, that sounds great."

We made our way over and entered the pub. A band played AC/DC's "Back in Black," and many sang along, a beer in hand.

"It's pretty lively in here," she pointed out.

"It often is on the weekends. Everyone is ready to relax and have fun after a day on the slopes."

Near the bar, a few packmates had already gathered. Since the mountain was still open for business, it was likely those who enjoyed a day off, like me, or they worked an earlier shift.

"I see some friends at the bar." After nodding in their direction, I said, "Let's go say hi."

I led Cassandra through the crowd, resting my hand lightly on the small of her back. They glanced up as we approached.

“Hey.” I tipped my chin up in greeting. “This is Cassandra from Salem.” I turned to her. “Cassandra, these are my pack mates, Kaleb and Riley.”

Kaleb appraised her for a second too long for my comfort and then greeted her with a warm smile. “Cassandra,” he drew out her name.

My wolf stood vigilant within, gearing up for a challenge.

It's okay, I assured him. *They're not a threat*. Despite my attempt to calm my wolf, a possessive instinct flared inside me.

Riley nodded. “Hey there.”

She gave them both a friendly smile. “Nice to meet you both.”

Kaleb, ever the joker, cocked an eyebrow. “Valen found someone to put up with him. Must be magic.”

I groaned.

“Here, have a seat, Cassandra.” Riley gestured to the empty stool beside him.

Hell no. I wasn't going to share her attention with him. “That's okay, we're going to head to a table,” I interjected. She was *mine*. I grumbled inside. Not technically, but at least for the night.

Hopefully.

After a couple more minutes of them chattering about nothing of importance, I finally steered us away to an empty table for two, closer to the fireplace. The tables nearer to it were already taken, which was usual. At least this table was small enough

and with only two chairs that I shouldn't have to worry about other packmates trying to squeeze in.

Cassandra rubbed her hands together in the direction of the crackling fire. "Ooh, that feels good."

"Yeah, that's what I like to do at the end of a cold day in my cabin—warm up by the fire."

Her eyes sparkled. "That sounds even better." She tipped her head and smiled. "You don't have to share it with anyone."

"True. No one to block the warmth." I pictured Cassandra there with me in the cabin. I didn't typically invite women back there as it was easier for me to slip out of their hotel rooms or condos with an excuse that I had to work or take care of something else. It was strange how much I enjoyed the vision of her in my place.

After I ordered a cold beer and Cassandra a spiked hot chocolate, we glanced at the menu. "Hungry?" I asked her.

"I'm still full from the chili." She rubbed her belly. "Besides, I better save room for dinner."

"I'm already hungry and nothing would ruin my appetite." I grinned at her and immediately heard the sensual edge to my words, which hadn't been intentional. Could I spend five minutes around her and not think of sex? Not likely.

"I'll order a couple of apps in case we want to snack on them."

Over the next hour or so, we chatted and ate buffalo wings and a spinach dip while we listened to the band play more classic rock covers. More pack mates streamed in once the lifts closed. They came over to say hi, and I introduced her. Diverting her attention was an unfortunate price to pay by coming here; it was countered by the immense pride that filled me, knowing she was with me.

The band announced they were going to play their final song, and then they started Van Halen's "You Really Got Me."

Now was that accurate in my response to Cassandra or what? She'd gotten to me in a way that I didn't know what the hell I was doing.

The music ended, we clapped, and they left the stage. People would start to leave, perhaps rest in their hotel before they went out for dinner.

"Any plans for dinner tonight?" I asked her.

"No. It's been a long day, though. Maybe something easy."

"The restaurants will be packed tonight," I noted. "Always are on Saturdays. Likely long waits. What do you think about a quiet dinner away from the crowds?"

"Oh? Where?"

"My cabin," I proposed, trying not to sound too forthcoming, but judging by the low thrill edging my voice, I failed. "We can order pizza." I shrugged. "Keep it simple and relaxed." With a grin, I added, "Plus, there's no one to wrestle with for a place close to the fire." I gestured at the fireplace.

Cassandra stared at me with a sparkle in her brown eyes as she appeared to consider my offer. A smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

Did that mean she'd say yes? My heartbeat raced as I waited in anticipation.

"That sounds wonderful," she replied. "I'd love to see your cabin."

CHAPTER 7



CASSANDRA

A couple of hours later, Valen picked me up from the hotel and then we picked up pizza. The scent of them from the boxes in the back seat filled the car. His headlights shined ahead, illuminating our path up the mountain road. We rounded a bend, and his cabin came into view. The weathered logs, snow-covered roof, and surrounding forest had a rugged appeal.

“We’re here,” he announced.

“How beautiful. And private,” I marveled as we climbed out of the car.

He carried the pizzas and a six-pack of beer to the front door and then asked if I could hold the boxes so he could open the door.

“You don’t lock it?” I asked.

“No.”

“That’s an advantage of not living in the city,” I noted.

He opened the door, turned the light on, and welcomed me in. When I stepped inside, the wood smoke from a recent fire filled my nostrils, and I inhaled more deeply. It smelled inviting, like somewhere you’d curl up with under a blanket with a good book. The exposed beams and large stone fireplace provided a warm and soothing appeal.

He took the pizzas from me and placed them on a coffee table as well as the beer.

“I’ll take your coat.” He extended his hand.

After I shuffled out of it, he hung it on a coat rack and followed with his own. We removed our snow-covered boots and placed them on a boot tray. I wore black jeans and a soft blue sweater, which was one of the only non-layering ski outfits I brought for the weekend.

“Make yourself comfortable.” He motioned to a brown sofa before the fireplace.

I sat down on it, sinking to the plush seat and glanced around. The cabin had an open layout, and everything was tidy. It was so different from sharing a space with a child, who seemed to leave something on every surface or corner. Vast picture windows didn’t reveal much outside in the dusky twilight other than the outlines of trees. A basket with blankets stood near the sofa. “It’s so nice and cozy in here.”

He brought the beer into the kitchen, which was visible from where I sat. After pulling out two pint glasses from the cabinet, he picked up an orange from a fruit bowl on the counter. “Want a slice of orange in your beer?”

“Sure.”

He pulled out a knife and cutting board and then chopped up a couple of slices. After placing one onto the rim of my glass, he said, “It adds to the flavor.” He then poured beer into each and walked over to hand me a glass.

I took a sip. “It’s good.” Although I wasn’t typically a beer drinker and more often chose a cocktail or wine, the citrus tang and the ice-cold beer were refreshing.

Valen headed back into the kitchen and returned with plates and napkins. After placing them on the coffee table next to the beer, he said, “I’ll get the fire started. Feel free to grab a slice and start eating.”

“I’ll wait for you.”

While Valen bent down to the fireplace, I stole the opportunity to watch him unobserved. His profile was defined with a strong nose and jawline, noticeable even with his beard. As he moved logs and lit the kindling, my gaze was drawn to his hands. They were large and capable. I pictured them touching me later.

My gaze traveled to a semi-open door that I guessed might be his bedroom. After all, I knew why I came here tonight, and it wasn’t only for pizza—but it did smell delicious. I’d spent last night fantasizing about Valen, and while we spent the day together, the attraction grew. Not only did I want him, but I liked him. Although I knew this would only be a weekend fling, a part of me lamented it. The rides up the chairlift were enjoyable with not one iota of the awkward moments from chairlift dating.

Soon, the sound of crackling fire filled the room. Valen stood and walked over to sit beside me on the sofa.

I pulled out a slice of pizza, put it on the plate, and handed it to him. “This was a great idea.”

“Better than dealing with crowds to get a table at a restaurant?” he asked.

“Much better,” I agreed. “Especially after a long day of skiing.” I took another slice and took a bite. The warm cheese stretched from my mouth, a burst of flavor. The sauce complemented it, and the pizza was still warm. “Mmm, so good.”

Valen swallowed a huge bite before replying. “Can’t go wrong with good pizza and beer.” We ate in comfortable silence while we savored the comfort of food and drink. He finished a

slice in a few more bites and offered me another, which I held off on, before he helped himself to one more. With his size and shifter metabolism, he must have a massive appetite.

I stole another glance at Valen's profile, admiring the play of the firelight on his chiseled features.

He turned and caught me staring. A grin curled at the corners of his lips. "What's on your mind?"

I shrugged as heat rose in my face. "Just enjoying the moment."

He kept his gaze on me for a few heartbeats before replying, "Me too."

My heart beat faster in response. The intense heat in his eyes sparked warmth dancing over my forearms.

When I finally glanced away, I asked him about his cabin and living here in the mountains. He pointed out some pieces of furniture he'd created either himself or with the help of others while we finished our pizza and beer. The sky darkened outside the windows.

After we cleaned up from dinner, Valen played music at a low volume. I recognized the Cars' "Drive," a song I'd always liked.

He gazed down at me. "I'm glad you're here." He nudged his head toward a glass door that appeared to lead out to a deck. "Come outside for a sec."

He offered his hand, and I took it as he led me outside. The crisp, cool mountain air bit at my skin, and I shivered, regretting not grabbing my coat first. He stepped behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist, sharing his warmth.

"Look up," he bent down and whispered into my ear.

When I did, my breath caught in my throat. The stars were so bright and clear out here, it was like I was on a different planet. There were too many to even count.

“What a view. So crystal clear.”

I turned and faced him, instantly drawn back to his intense eyes. His breath was visible in the cool mountain night. My heart pounded as the very air between us seemed to sparkle with heat.

He rubbed his thumb over my cheek. “I don’t want you to leave tonight, Cassandra.”

My heart galloped all the way up my throat. “I don’t want to go.”

He trailed his fingers down my face, over my neck, and then onto my shoulder. Heat ignited low in my core, making me forget the coolness of the night. He bent down, lowering his face close to mine. “Then stay.”

I placed a hand on his chest, and his heart beat steady beneath my fingers. My gaze locked on his, and my breath came out with visible wisps. “Yes.”

He lowered his face closer to mine, and anticipation flared like a brushfire. When his lips finally touched mine, I melted against him. He threaded his fingers over the nape of my neck and deepened the kiss.

I lost sense of time until he broke away. He stared down at me with pure hunger in his eyes, which now glowed with an amber hue. “Let’s go inside.”

I didn’t think I could form words, so I simply nodded.

Once we returned to the warmth of his cabin, Valen turned down a lamp, leaving the cabin lit by firelight. He lifted my

hand and kissed the palm. “Forget everything else tonight.” He released my arm and then pinned me with a smoldering gaze. “Just be with me.”

Forget everything? All my problems and responsibilities? All the things I had to worry about in my life? Forget all that for one hot night with this hot shifter?

I exhaled with a shudder of anticipation. “Yes.”

Valen smiled with satisfaction and led me into his bedroom. The bed was covered with a plush white comforter and flanked by two matching dark wood nightstands.

He stepped behind me and pushed my hair aside. Then he bent down and nuzzled my neck. Damn, that felt good. I tipped my head, allowing him greater access.

He moved me to the bed and led me backward onto it. As I slid up onto his pillow, he crawled over me and gazed down with a feral glint in his eyes. His body was huge. Excitement flared deep within. I’d never been with a shifter before, and the way he looked at me promised a night to remember.

But I was out of practice. And maybe in over my depth—especially if what Aurora said was true, and he had many partners.

“Valen, I should warn you. It’s been a while. I might be rusty.”

“Don’t you worry about a thing,” he murmured. “Let me please you. And if you ever want me to stop, just say so.”

That was something I could handle. “Okay.”

Once his lips moved from mine down the front of my body, my body ignited with potent desire. Damn this felt so good. Parts of me that I’d forgotten about lighted with fire beneath his touch.

Stop him from making me feel this way? Never. I wasn't a fool.

It would take a damn avalanche to stop this.

VALEN

Mate. My wolf chanted multiple times tonight, despite my insistence otherwise. Sure, something about Cassandra captivated me and I didn't want her to leave, but that didn't mean anything more.

I tuned him out as I focused on more important matters: Cassandra was here in my bed and wanted to stay the night. I'd fantasized about this all day—when we were together on the slopes, when we sat near each other at dinner, when she almost leveled me simply with her beautiful stare—my thoughts ventured to this intense yearning for her.

And yet, there was something deeper. The more time we spent together, I sensed us growing closer, as if we were forging a deeper connection.

What a lucky wolf I was to have this stunning witch interested in me. As I removed each article of her clothing, I kissed her skin. An energized warmth spread through my veins. My senses were almost overloaded by her presence. Her feminine fragrance perfumed my room. The heat that emanated from her body felt charged, since each touch of her skin seemed electric.

After I removed her bra, I paused to drink in the view of her—from the blonde curls framing her heart-shaped face, to her hooded gaze, down to her full, luscious breasts, and then to all the gorgeous, soft curves that I longed to explore. Only a tiny pair of black panties remained.

“You're beautiful,” I murmured, almost breathless with anticipation.

She stared up at me with her rich brown eyes, now darkened with lust.

“I want to see you too.” She tugged at the bottom of my shirt.

I pulled it off and removed my pants so I only remained in black boxer briefs. Her eyes widened with appreciation. She ran her hands over my chest, trailing her fingers down lower. Her barest touch left fire blazing on my skin.

I bent over her and continued exploring her body. When I caressed and kissed her breasts, she writhed beneath me. So sensitive to my touch. I couldn't wait to explore every inch of her body and discover what else she liked.

Sliding down her soft belly, I licked along the top edge of her panties and then the bottom, closer to her thighs.

She squirmed and let out a breathless sigh. “You're teasing me.”

“Not yet.” I slid her panties down. The scent of her arousal almost made me whimper. The hunger to claim her grew fierce. “But soon.”

I kissed her knee and slowly moved up one inner thigh. As I moved higher, she tensed, as if breathless with anticipation. Although I desperately wanted to taste her, I moved to her other leg and kissed down it. While I slowly drove her wild, she arched her body.

She moaned. “Now you're definitely tormenting me.”

“And me too.” I inhaled her intoxicating scent, one that could drug me. “But no more.” I moved between her legs and tasted her the way I'd been longing to do. A low, feral-sounding moan escaped me, and she released a soft sigh.

I continued to explore her, using both my hands and mouth to see what she liked. Her increasing moans encouraged me to continue. When her body coiled, limbs taut with the building pressure, she shattered with a ragged cry and her body quivered.

I was now as hard as stone and desperate to be inside her. Pulling away, I gave her a moment to recover while I rolled a condom onto my shaft. When I moved back over her, she gazed up at me with a rapturous expression that almost leveled me.

“I need you, Valen,” she said, her voice low.

I moved between her legs, rubbing the head against her wet folds. “You want this,” I murmured.

“Valen.” She pulled me closer, encouraging me to slide inside her. “Now.”

I pushed in slowly, giving her time to adjust. I edged in deeper. When I was fully buried inside her sweet body, I paused.

“Yes,” she cried and wrapped her legs around my waist.

My wolf ran on pure instinct. *Claim her.*

No. She doesn't want that. I didn't want that. But I was no longer sure why. All I knew was that I wanted this woman, and the urge to mark her as mine was almost overwhelming.

I lowered my forehead to hers for a moment to regain some composure. Cassandra arched her body beneath me, encouraging me to move. As I rocked in and out of her, primal instincts roared louder. I wanted her and didn't want anyone else to touch her. She was mine.

Was it possible that what my wolf claimed was true?

It couldn't be. Besides, now wasn't the time for any coherent thought, not when she felt so damn good. Although we'd only met a short time ago, somehow it felt that we were revealing our souls little by little to each other.

Crazy. I knew it was. I dismissed that insane thought.

With each thrust, I sensed myself losing control over the rational side of me. Turning more feral like when my wolf ran without restraint beneath the full moon. Something was going on here, something fierce and primitive that I couldn't understand or explain.

It stripped away my excuses to dismiss Cassandra as simply a woman I was interested in. She was more—so much more.

She was my—

Need throbbed and desire rose. I bucked harder, lifting her lower body off the bed. She grinded against me, chasing her pleasure, as she found the right friction that drove her wild. It was so fuckin' hot.

Our pace quickened. As she grew close, she clung to me. Then she released a low cry, and her body shuddered.

As her walls pulsed around me, the pressure inside me grew more explosive. I couldn't hold back any longer. A climax roared through my body, exploding with a force that made me tremble. A deep growl emanated from within my chest as I pumped every last bit of my release inside her.

After I lowered myself, careful not to crush her with my weight, our hearts pounded together. Our bodies were slick and hot. Her rapid breaths fanned my cheek. She traced a lazy trail down my back with light fingers and then settled her hand near my waist. That simple touch soothed me while the rest of my body recovered from that explosive encounter.

“Wow,” she murmured. “That was—wow.”

“Exactly.” I couldn’t add anything else coherent.

“Incredible,” she added.

“Incredible,” I agreed.

After I rolled off her, I disposed of the condom. Then I climbed back into bed and spooned her from behind. While I held her, my brain fried with information I thought impossible until now. What my wolf had insisted, I realized was true. This beautiful witch who had stepped into my world for a magical weekend was my—*mate*. How to process that information was as easy as trying to solve a riddle in a language I didn’t speak.

A bigger question I had to deal with—what the hell did I do now?

CHAPTER 8



VALEN

*M*y eyes popped open at the first signs of wakefulness, and then I squinted at the early morning light drifting in through the shades.

What happened last night?

As my body remained pressed against Cassandra's, my wolf rested, content. That same bliss eluded me. Instead, confusion collided with chaos.

How could this bond announce itself now, out of nowhere—and with a witch who was leaving today to return home in a different state? She had a daughter and a life there. The only reason she was here in the mountains was for a short getaway, no different from any other visitor to the resort.

Why would the fates keep me from my mate for so long, leading me to think it would never happen? Why would we meet now, during a brief weekend together, only to get a glimpse of what could never be?

Although I yearned to stay in bed holding Cassandra, the questions burning in my brain forced me awake. I needed clarity. With her scent enticing me, I wouldn't find it remaining here. Instead, I'd press my erection against her and start the morning right...

Focus!

Right. I had to get my head off my dick and onto this new, earth-shaking predicament.

I held my breath as I slid away from her warm body; otherwise, it would be too tempting to stay. Then I climbed out of bed, pulled on a pair of gray drawstring sweats, and yanked

a black, fitted underlayer shirt over my head. After pulling on some socks and slippers, I stepped outside my bedroom, turning to get another glimpse of Cassandra first. She lay so peaceful in sleep, blonde curls tousled across the pillow. The urge to return to bed and hold her rose.

No, I needed to understand what the hell was happening to me.

I forced myself to step out of the bedroom. The morning sun gleamed into the cabin. Yes, that was what I needed—to get outside and breathe in the fresh air to clear my head of Cassandra's intoxicating scent.

I put on my coat and stepped outside the glass door onto the deck. The brightness glowed over the glistening snow on the treetops. I searched over the vast mountainous landscape before me as I tried to figure out why this unexpected situation would happen here and now.

My wolf stirred and woke. *Mate?*

She's inside sleeping.

Go to her.

Not yet.

My wolf added to the conundrum in my head as he insisted I return to Cassandra. There went the clarity I sought out here.

Caffeine might help. I returned inside and turned my attention to brewing coffee instead. My fingers drummed with restlessness on the counter as I waited for the liquid to drip, drip, drip.

Minutes later, the scent of the fragrant brew filled the cabin, and the machine finished up its task with gurgling sounds. I poured a mug half full as I liked to drink coffee hot and black.

Then I sipped the soothing liquid while I stared out at the vast mountain range.

What was I going to do about this bewildering connection?

A couple of minutes later, I sensed Cassandra enter the space behind me before she spoke. “Good morning.”

My wolf basked in her presence. I inhaled her scent and turned to her. She stood barefoot and barelegged, wearing nothing but one of my button-down flannels. Her hair was tousled. I pictured how it was spread across my pillow last night, and my shaft twitched.

“Good morning.” Although I’d tried to sound casual, my voice came out strangled. I cleared my throat and repeated the greeting.

“Mornings are tough,” she said in a playful tone. “Hope you don’t mind me wearing your shirt.” She motioned down the front of her body. “It looked comfy.”

“It looks better on you than me. Sexy.”

She grinned. “Thanks.” Ruffling her fingers through her hair, she added, “Although I’m sure you’re just being polite. I could use a shower.”

“Be my guest.” I motioned toward the bathroom. The vision of her in my shower did nothing to dampen the urge to take her back to my bedroom and savor every inch of her lush body.

“I’ll wait until I get to my hotel. All my stuff is there.”

I nodded and attempted to mask any disappointment from showing through my expression. Was she eager to get out of here?

“Coffee?” I offered and pointed to the machine. Why did my voice sound so off this morning and unlike my own?

“Sure.”

After I poured her a cup, adding a splash of milk as she requested, I asked, “How about breakfast?”

She tipped her head. “Do you have time? You mentioned you had to work today.”

I had indeed told her that as we chatted last night.

“I do, but we both need to eat. I still have an hour or so until I start my shift.”

“Okay.”

“Great. Enjoy your coffee.”

“And the view.” She stepped over to the picture window. “It’s breathtaking.”

So was the vision of her before it. I drew in a deep breath, turned, and tried to focus on what to make.

But as I stood in the kitchen gaping at the fridge like I’d never seen it before, my mind raced. She was my mate, and she was leaving my cabin after breakfast.

I tried to shake off the nerves and focus on making scrambled eggs and toast. Sweat formed on my forehead. Should I ask her to stay here in the mountains longer?

Of course not. We barely knew each other. She had a daughter and a job awaiting her and couldn’t drop everything because my world had been turned upside-down by a discovery she wouldn’t even comprehend. She was a witch, not a shifter. She wouldn’t feel the mate bond the way I did. I fumbled with the spatula, trying to act like I knew what I was doing. Instead, I ended up burning both eggs and toast, and smoke filled the cabin.

Great. As I aired out the cabin, swishing a dish towel to escort the smoke outside faster, she grabbed another towel and aided in the process. Talk about killing the mood.

Once the kitchen was cleared of smoke, Cassandra tilted her head and stared at me. “Is everything okay, Valen?”

“Everything’s fine,” I replied, trying to sound unfettered but heard the strange, higher lilt in my tone that signaled everything was far from fine.

I attempted to salvage breakfast with a new round of eggs, but the stench of burned toast was not appetizing. I grabbed a dish towel and tried to brush out the lingering smoke.

Cassandra gasped. “It caught fire!”

The sudden sight of flames bursting from the end shocked me. I let out a shrill sound of surprise.

Damn, this morning grew worse by the minute. How capable would Cassandra find a man was who almost burned down his cabin while trying to cook a simple breakfast?

Humiliation grew like gnawing hunger. What the ever-loving twin peaks was wrong with me? I threw the dish towel outside into the snow to douse the flames. When I returned inside, my cheeks were as hot as the flames.

“Did you get burned?” Cassandra asked with concern in her eyes.

“No.” I avoided eye contact, feeling as clumsy as a newbie on a bunny hill who crossed his skis and fell on his ass.

How could I even think about a potential future with this woman when I couldn’t even get us through breakfast without looking incompetent?

CASSANDRA

What the magical stardust happened between last night and this morning? Valen was nothing like the charismatic shifter I'd spent time with this weekend. Why was he acting so strange? The smell of burned food lingered in the cabin, and it was cold after he'd opened the doors to let out the smoke.

He set a plate of unburned eggs and toast, which he managed after the disastrous first attempt. "I don't usually set things on fire when I cook." He gave me a sheepish look.

"Don't worry about it." I grinned. "We all have kitchen mishaps."

"Did you sleep okay?" he asked as he sat at the table.

We'd both angled our chairs to view out the picture window. Who wouldn't want to see a spectacular view of the snow-covered mountains?

"Yes, I slept great," I replied and took a bite of the scrambled eggs. "These are delicious."

He cocked his head. "Not burned to a crisp?"

"No." I smiled. "Cooked to perfection."

"Good." He nodded.

"How about you?" I asked and then ate some toast.

"How about me what?" His brows drew together.

"How did you sleep?" I asked.

"Oh." He adjusted in his chair. Then he ran his hand over his beard and avoided eye contact. "Fine, fine."

He didn't *sound* fine. He wasn't acting fine. In fact, he seemed like a different person from the one I'd spent so much time with this weekend.

An awkward silence fell between us. Aurora's words about Valen and women returned. Was this the way he acted? Flirty and charming until he slept with a woman and then weird? He might be trying to be polite by offering me breakfast, but he wanted me out of his space.

That had to be it. What a jerk.

I rushed through my meal, leaving half of it on the plate. "I need to get going."

Valen blinked, appearing surprised. "What? Why? You don't have to leave so soon." He stared at my plate. "It was the eggs, wasn't it? They taste horrible." He squared his jaw. "I swear I'm not so awful in the kitchen. In fact, I've taught myself to cook pretty well. I can grill a steak a perfect medium rare and —"

I cut him off by motioning with my hand and saying, "It's okay, Valen. You don't have to explain. I get it—we had a great night together, but it's done." With a circular wave, I added, "I'll skedaddle on out of here."

He took a long, deep inhale, and the movement lifted his chest. "It's not like that at all."

I didn't need to hear any excuses. "You need to go to work. I need to pack." I stood and carried my plate and mug to the sink. "Thanks for breakfast. And dinner last night."

He stood. "I'll drive you back to the hotel."

And prolong this discomfort? "No, thanks. I'd rather walk."

"I'll walk with you."

I shook my head. “That’s okay.”

“Look, Cassandra...” He paused and rubbed the back of his neck. “I know I’ve been acting like a total ass this morning. Let me start over.” He gave me an imploring look. “Can we meet up at lunch? I’m only working the morning shift today as I’ll be on patrol tonight.”

At least he owned up to his strange behavior. Still, there was likely a reason behind it. “I should get going. I need to drive to my parents and pick up Paige and then drive back to Salem. Might as well get started on the road trip.”

He appeared hurt, and that didn’t fit the perception I’d been reshaping of him this morning. Wouldn’t he be relieved to get me out of his space? I walked over and cupped his cheek.

“Thanks for a great weekend.” Despite this morning, it had been wonderful—from the shared meals to the skiing and the *sex*. No more dry spell. Mama most definitely got her groove back. For that, I was grateful.

Valen’s mouth opened as if he was about to say something but then closed it. What a handsome but peculiar shifter.

“Goodbye, Valen.”

“Goodbye.” His voice was so low, it was barely audible.

After I gathered my things and left the cabin, the cool, clean air hit me. As I descended the mountain, I laughed at myself. What was this—a walk of shame down a mountain? That was new and unexpected.

Scratch that; I didn’t feel ashamed. I wanted to go to Valen’s cabin last night and had zero regrets.

AN HOUR LATER, I checked out of the hotel, packed up my car, and drove across the state line into Maine.

Once I arrived, my mother said, “You’re earlier than we expected. Thought we wouldn’t see you until after you skied today.”

“My legs had enough this weekend, so I thought I’d come spend more time with you and Dad.”

“Mommy, you’re back!” Paige exclaimed from the top of the stairs. She ran down and gave me a hug.

I wrapped my arms around my sweet girl, the brightest part of my life. Sure, it was fun to have a little break from responsibilities for the weekend and have some me time, but Paige was who I valued most in the world.

We all sat in the living room and chatted about the weekend. Paige showed off her drawings of her exploring the zoo nearby with my parents.

“It sounds like you had a great time with Grandma and Grandpa.” I smiled at her.

She nodded with eagerness. “We also went sledding and made cookies and did puzzles. We went to the bookstore.” She showed me a new book.

My parents smiled at Paige.

“How was the skiing?” my mother asked.

My mind fast-forwarded from the chairlift dating to the tumble to being rescued by ski patrol to it leading to a date with him to a wonderful day skiing with him yesterday—and an even better night. “It was great,” I said. “The conditions were good.”

My father glanced outside the window. “Today would be an even better day than yesterday.” He pointed. “Look at those clear blue skies. I’m surprised you’re not taking advantage of it. Yesterday morning was gray.”

“My legs are still sore from yesterday.” I tapped my thighs. “So, I decided to give them a break today.”

My mother glanced at me. “Did you enjoy your weekend?”

I pictured Valen’s intense eyes and the way he looked at me last night like I was the most beautiful woman in the world.

“Yes, very much so.”

Paige looked up at me from her big hazel eyes that reminded me of her father’s. Although I couldn’t stand to look into his now, they’d been one of the reasons I fell for him so hard when we were young. On Paige, they reminded me of all things wonderful and good.

“Can I go skiing with you next time?” she asked.

I smiled at her. “Of course, honey.”

The four of us spent the day together and had an early dinner—a roast and potatoes. After we ate, Paige and I hugged my parents and said our goodbyes. Then we climbed into my car and headed south. As I drove, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was leaving something behind—not an item. It was more like a sense of loss for what could have been. I thought Valen and I had connected. Was all that chemistry in my head?

It had to have been. I must have misinterpreted our connection. This morning, he’d been as easy to read as a tarot card turned facedown. Except for one thing—he wasn’t comfortable with me in his space.

That was fine. He could have his cabin all to himself. Our fun was over, and I doubted I’d ever see Valen again.

CHAPTER 9



VALEN

J blew it. Cassandra was gone, and my wolf was not happy about it.

As I pulled on my gear and yanked on my boots, I kicked myself. Why had I acted like a buffoon who'd never cooked breakfast before? Eggs and toast were hardly a challenge—even kids could handle something that basic. And when had I ever let a dish towel catch flames? Never. The one time had to be when I was making breakfast for a beautiful woman, hoping we could spend more time together before she left. Only my flailing burning dish towel incident coupled with the unmanly shriek sent her running for the hills—or down the mountain. Same difference.

No wonder she hurried to get the hell out of my cabin. Staying here could be risky since I could burn the entire damn cabin down next. I groaned. She didn't even want me to drive or walk her home—that was clear by the way she insisted she wanted to be alone. She considered herself safer away from me.

I grimaced as I headed outside. The chill in the morning air was brisk, and a gust of wind bit at the exposed skin on my face. It would warm up as the sun rose, but the single-digit temperatures would keep the crowds sparse until then.

After popping on my skis, I cut through the woods to start my shift, attempting to focus my attention on my responsibilities. I scoured trails for obstacles or bare patches that could pose a danger. A trail through the glades had a thin coverage with plenty of spots of rock or tree roots poking through. It didn't appear safe to ski or snowboard on. I'd have to close the trail

with a sign. Hopefully, no one would be foolish enough to chance it.

After I checked in at the ski patrol hut, I shared the info about the trail, and then grabbed a sign and poles to close it off. As I rode up the chairlift, Cassandra popped back into my mind. That was the trouble with being out here on these lifts—it gave you time to think. That was also the benefit of them as well. With nothing else to do but admire the mountain scenery, you could either kill time chatting with whomever was next to you or get lost in your thoughts. Since I was alone, the latter happened, and regrets returned.

Cassandra had even turned down my offer for lunch today, eager to get away from me. I groaned. What a way to react to accepting that the woman I'd been fallen for was actually my mate, the way my wolf had insisted.

He'd howled in protest after I'd scared her away. He insisted I should have claimed her last night.

Enough. I'd been hearing his complaints since Cassandra all but bolted out of my cabin. *I'll let you run it off tonight.*

He scoffed at the invitation. Running on the mountain wouldn't do a damn thing to bring Cassandra back.

She never would have stayed, I communicated. She was returning home today, anyway.

She was a witch who lived in Massachusetts. I was a shifter who lived in the mountains. She had a daughter; I had my pack. We each had our careers where we lived. Our worlds didn't mesh.

My wolf and I argued some more.

It's better this way, I insisted. I was too set in my ways to share my life with anyone else.

The morning ticked by slowly. As the temperature warmed up to double digits, more people arrived and the lines for the lifts grew longer. At least I had my work to distract me. We had a few wipeouts but no major injuries. Each one reminded me of when I helped a pretty blond who'd lost her skis, which then turned into so much more.

When I finally finished my shift, I returned to my cabin. As I walked through the door, Cassandra's scent lingering there hit me with a wave of longing. Worse, the cabin seemed empty without her.

Fuck. What could I do about this? She'd gotten under my skin. Why couldn't I shake her off?

Because she wasn't just some woman—she was my mate.

My wolf pressed, *Go find her.*

Was he crazy? Did he miss how the morning had played out with her rushing to get away from me?

I inhaled deeply and tried to ignore the instinct to hunt for her. She was a witch, not a wolf. Having some shifter appear in her space with a declaration that she was his mate would not go over well. She'd flee from me quicker than she'd left my cabin this morning.

What I needed was time and space, and maybe in a day or two, the urge to find her would subside. I sat on the couch and rubbed my temples. My head pounded with conflicting emotions.

I attempted to distract myself by focusing on tasks, starting with building a fire to warm the cabin. Once it was lit, I shoved away thoughts of how nice it had been to sit before it with Cassandra. I scowled and scurried around my kitchen, searching for something else to do. I could cook a stew. The

hearty warmth would be welcome to heat me up after spending hours in the cold, especially since I'd head back out tonight.

Hours passed and I couldn't shake her out of my head. It was time to let my wolf burn up some steam as we went out on patrol.

I removed my clothing before heading outside and shifted to wolf form. He ran relentlessly through the snow up the mountain, not pausing to sniff at every damn scent the way he often did. And although it wasn't yet a full moon, he tipped his head up and howled in anguish. We'd found our mate and then lost her. The mournful sound vibrated deep into my soul.

CASSANDRA

On Monday morning, I sifted through emails in my office, surrounded by jars of herbs and spell books at the Salem Supernatural Network. This was the part about my job that I liked least—any sort of admin duties. I'd rather work on a spell or potion or talk to people.

After catching up on updates of what happened in our area and in other networks around the world, I stepped out to make myself tea with guarana for an extra caffeine kick. I'd tried to catch up on household stuff and laundry when I returned last night but after the drive home, I was exhausted. That meant I had an exciting Monday night with a date of laundry to look forward to—far different one from the times I'd met up with Valen in the mountains.

Don't think of him anymore. What's the point? You'll never see him again.

That was true. What reason would I have to see Valen? I'd promised Paige I'd take her skiing, but I doubted that he'd want anything to do with a family activity. And why would I even entertain the idea of seeing him again? The way that he'd acted yesterday morning corroborated Aurora's warning about how he was with women. He got what he wanted and couldn't seem to get me out of there fast enough.

The front door opened, and someone entered. I peeked out into the hall to see Pandora walking in.

“Hey, Cassandra, how was the mountains?”

My mouth twitched. How to sum up that story? “Good.”

“Good?” She arched one of her dark brows. “Just good? I want to hear the rest of the story about your date.”

As she headed into her office and hung her coat on a hook, I followed her in.

Ah, that’s right. I’d texted her before my date with Valen. When she’d followed up the next day to see how it went, I’d kept it brief with a note that all went well, and I’d tell her when I got back to Salem.

“Well, I mentioned that chairlift dating was a bust.” I gave her a brief description of that disaster. Then I told her about my fall in more detail, which led to the dinner invitation from Valen.

“And?” She pushed her dark hair over her shoulders and leaned back against her desk. Her eyes sparkled. “How did that go?”

My gaze drifted off when I pictured some of the delicious moments with Valen. “Oh, that part was nice. *Very* nice,” I added with a wide grin. “This witch’s garden is back in bloom.”

Pandora chuckled and I joined in. The front door opened again, followed by the sound of Zoe and Lucas talking.

Lucas was a tall, blond dragon shifter with a charismatic smile. He was skilled at growing plants and herbs, which was something we went through often in potion making, so we dubbed him a green witch. Aside from his green thumb, he aided Zoe on investigations. She was a detective here in our group and was the opposite of her husband and mate Lucas in almost every way. She was petite, reserved, and serious, whereas he had shifter hulk and was outgoing.

“Hey, ladies.” Lucas flashed a grin as he approached us from down the hall and stopped outside Pandora’s office.

“Good morning,” Zoe said.

“We went to see a band up in Hampton Beach this weekend. Great show,” he added. “What did you two do?”

Pandora replied, “Not much. Austin and I had a quiet weekend taking care of stuff around the house.” She tipped her head toward me. “Cassandra was telling me about hers, which was far more interesting.”

Lucas turned to me with an excited glint in his eyes. “Oh, and what did you do?”

I shrugged one shoulder. “I went skiing in the White Mountains.”

“Isn’t that where Sebastian is from?” Zoe drew her brows together in question.

“Yes, indeed,” I replied.

“Interesting.” Lucas tapped his fingers together. “Did you meet any hotties on the slopes? Or warming up by the fire in the lodge?”

I pursed my lips in an attempt to keep mum about Valen, but my mouth rebelled against my half-hearted wish. “Both,” I admitted. “Well, the same guy.”

“*Cass-an-dra*,” Lucas said my name with emphasis. “This is news. You never talk about guys.” He rubbed his hands together. “Tell us more.”

“Easy,” Zoe said with a chuckle, touching Lucas’s forearm.

There was no way I was going to tell Lucas about my sex life, but he loved a good story, so I told them about the chairlift

dating and the tumble. “He was a wolf shifter, and he asked me out to dinner. We went out that night and then went skiing together the next day.” When I pictured the steaming night that followed, a low burn worked its way up to my cheeks. I summarized it with a simple, “We then ate pizza in his cabin that night.”

“Pizza, eh?” Lucas nodded with a knowing look as if he knew *exactly* what that meant.

“Yes, pizza,” I repeated.

He waved both hands to the side. “I won’t ask for the details on *toppings*.”

Zoe groaned at his apparent innuendo and placed her hand on her forehead.

“Are you going to see him again?” Lucas asked.

“No,” I dismissed.

“Why not?” Pandora asked.

“Because...” I pursed my lips, searching for the reasons. “It was only a weekend fling. On top of that, he acted so weird yesterday morning—like he couldn’t wait for me to get out of there.”

Zoe huffed. “Sounds like a jerk.”

“Not exactly,” I defended Valen for some unknown reason.

“He wasn’t a jerk—but he was definitely acting strange.”

“Men,” Lucas commiserated with an amused smile and shake of his head. “Such morons.”

“Sometimes,” I agreed with a chuckle.

AFTER FINISHING up at the Network, I picked up Paige from the academy for supernaturals she attended. As we drove back home, I asked her about her day, and she told me the highlights.

When we arrived home, we settled into the kitchen to make dinner together. We chopped vegetables and boiled pasta. I loved cooking dinners with Paige. But even so, I knew moments like this wouldn't last forever. She'd be a teenager soon enough and probably want nothing to do with me. I'd told myself that I didn't want to get involved with a man while she was little as I had to focus on being a mom to Paige, but that brief encounter with Valen this weekend reminded me of what I could be missing.

It was just a fling, I reminded myself. A fun little escape from reality.

When I went to bed that night, my brain wouldn't quiet down. Why couldn't I forget him?

I had to put him behind me and move on.

THE NEXT DAY, as I was settling into work in my office, my phone buzzed. It was Thorne. Great. I braced myself for the inevitable tension and answered the call.

"I'm going to pick up Paige for dinner tonight," he said in his usual brusque manner.

I tried to hide my disappointment; I had plans for a quiet night at home with Paige. But I couldn't deny Thorne his time with his daughter.

"What time?" I asked.

"Six. Make sure she's ready," he added before hanging up.

I scowled and put down the phone. My relationship with Thorne had been tense since our breakup. He'd gone through many girlfriends since then, and I considered him a womanizing jerk.

That was why I wouldn't ever get involved with someone like him again and perhaps not anyone at all. The divorce had been devastating, but I had to keep it together for Paige. And while Thorne hadn't been a part of our lives for years, he was making an effort to be a better father to Paige. Despite my feelings about him, I had to be civil for her sake.

I had to keep my emotions in check, but it wasn't easy. No matter how much I despised him, I reminded myself that Paige deserved to build a relationship with her father.

He better not hurt her.

When it was time to leave the Network, I picked up Paige from school.

"Your father is taking you to dinner tonight."

"Yay!" Paige exclaimed. "Will we get ice cream?"

"I don't know. It's winter. Too cold for ice cream."

"Not for me," she insisted.

She told me about her day. Once I pulled into the driveway, a sense of loneliness crept in. Paige would be gone this evening, which meant I'd be home alone with laundry. How exciting.

Maybe I should start dating again. At least that was one good thing that came out of the weekend.

Twenty minutes after we'd settled in at home, the doorbell rang. Thorne was here to pick up Paige. I took a deep breath, braced myself, and opened the door. Facing the icy expression

on my ex's face was all I needed to wake me up with a reality slap about relationships. They could break you.

I was better off keeping my life simple and heart protected.

VALEN

I looped back to my cabin in wolf form after a night shift on patrol. Nothing seemed amiss, but my wolf often whined, lamenting the loss of Cassandra. Almost two weeks had passed since she'd left, but I, too, couldn't shake her from my mind.

After I shifted back to human form, I entered the cabin where her scent still lingered. How long would it remain, tormenting me? Then again, I didn't want it to vanish; even a hint of it suffused me with comfort.

And desperate longing.

I exhaled with a mournful whoosh. What could I do about this agony?

Later that morning, I walked across the brick sidewalks of the mountain village to Aurora's store. Chimes tinkled as I entered, and the scents of incense and herbs filled my nostrils.

She looked up from a counter where she was packing up a plastic baggie with herbs and some crystals into a black velvet pouch. "Valen."

"Hi, Aurora." I glanced around. I'd only been in here once before during the grand opening when she invited the pack to visit her new store and savor refreshments. The shelves and displays were packed with more contents now, from books on magic to tarot cards to silver jewelry. Seashells contained various types of gems. Candles, herbs, and trinkets lined more surfaces. "It looks like you've done a lot in this space."

She smiled. "Business has been good."

After some small talk, she tipped her head. “Is there something I can help you with, Valen?”

I exhaled. Might as well not push off the reason I was there any longer. “Yes, do you know Cassandra Capwell from Salem?”

Aurora’s eyes lit up. “Yes. She stopped by when she visited last weekend.”

I knew that since Cassandra had told me. I picked up an amethyst and examined it to have something to do with my hands.

“We spent some time together.” Ugh, why was I pussyfooting around? After putting the crystal down back on a display covered with a rich purple velvet covering, I raised my gaze to meet Aurora’s. “Did she mention me at all?”

“She said you were going out to dinner.”

Was that it? Coming here might have been a waste of time. After all, what exactly was I doing here? Coming to ask if she knew if Cassandra liked me, like we were in middle school? Foolish. It was better to get straight to the point. “I want to see her again.”

Aurora blinked twice. “Oh.” She examined me more closely. “She returned to Salem.”

After I adjusted my weight from one leg to another, I rubbed my temple. “I know. I’m thinking of going there.”

“To Salem?” Aurora repeated, a note of incredulity in her tone.

“Yes.” I pressed my lips together before asking, “Do you think that’s a bad idea?”

Her gaze drifted off as if considering my question before she glanced at me once more. “It depends.” In a lower voice, she

asked, “Is this a wolf thing?”

As a witch mated to a wolf—our pack’s beta Grayson—she knew exactly what that meant. That was one of the half-baked reasons why I was here—trying to gauge whether she had any insight that might help me. One big worry was how Cassandra would react to me showing up in Salem. If she thought of our weekend as a vacation fling, which was the most likely scenario, she might think I was a crazy stalker and tell me to leave her alone. My wolf winced as I pictured it.

When I replied with a solemn nod, Aurora said, “Oh,” and then placed her hand over her heart. “I don’t know, Valen.” She gave me a sympathetic smile and shrugged. “Worth a shot. If there’s anything I can do to help...”

“Actually, yes. Can you tell me where the Salem Supernatural Network is. Cassandra told me she worked there.”

“Yes.” She gave me the location and then arched her brows. “Don’t make me regret this.”

“Of course not. If she doesn’t want to see me, I’ll leave.”

The sound of chimes rang as a trio of teenage girls entered the store.

“Please don’t say anything to Cassandra. I haven’t decided for sure if I’m going to go.”

She nodded. “Got it.”

“Thanks.” I smiled and left her store.

But by the time I walked back across the street, I’d made my decision. I entered the lodge where Rafe and Grayson ran business operations for the resort. I climbed the stairs and entered Grayson’s office. His dark brows were pinched as he

studied something on his computer monitor but then glanced up at me. “Valen.” He leaned back in his desk chair.

After initial greetings, I sat down in the chair across from his desk. “I’m going to need some time off.”

“How long?” he asked.

“I’m not sure yet,” I replied and rubbed my beard. “I need to take care of something.”

“Anything I can help with?”

A part of me wondered if I should confide in Grayson. After all, he was mated to a witch from Salem. With it all being so new, I wasn’t sure what to make of all this.

Since I didn’t get far with all my internal conflict, I blurted it out to see if he could in fact help me with my predicament. “I met my mate.”

Grayson’s eyes gleamed. He stood from behind his desk and walked over to pat me on the shoulder. “Congratulations. That’s wonderful.” After a beat, he asked, “Who is she?”

I snorted and then released a mirthless chuckle. “A witch. She visited from Salem, Mass, last weekend.”

Grayson tipped his chin forward. “And that’s where you’re going?”

“I think so.” I exhaled. “No, I *am* going. I have to see her again.”

Over the next several minutes, I condensed the story, including how I’d acted like a total buffoon that morning in my cabin when she couldn’t wait to get out of there. “I was so confused about what was happening,” I explained. “After all these decades, I never thought it would happen to me. Look.” I motioned to the gray in my beard. “I’m a grumpy, old shifter.”

Grayson chuckled. “You’re not old or grumpy.” Then his expression turned serious once more. “But I agree. You have to go find her and take a chance. Otherwise...”

He didn’t have to finish the thought. I knew. All shifters knew. I’d long for my mate. It could be agonizing. The pain of being apart from Cassandra already grew more acute with each passing day.

The other option might be worse—rejection. It could break me.

After letting him know I’d keep him posted, I walked out of his office, feeling his concerned gaze on my back.

I returned to my cabin and packed a few things for the road trip south to Massachusetts. The roads were slick with icy spots as I navigated out of the mountains, listening to a rock station. The Rolling Stones reminded me “You Can’t Always Get What You Want.”

My wolf was vigilant, eager to be reunited with Cassandra. Once we passed the border into Massachusetts, he stirred with restlessness.

Mate.

Soon, I promised.

We headed over to the coast and then I spotted the sign: Entering Salem. Established 1626. We’d arrived. As I drove downtown, my gaze roamed over the vibrant city with its many witch references. It was a stark contrast to the rugged wilderness I was used to, but I liked their openness to embrace witchcraft.

I parked my car and paid a meter, something I didn’t have to do in the mountains. As I walked the brick sidewalks with a red line painted down the middle to indicate a history trail, I

passed several shops like Aurora's that sold herbs, crystals, and other magical items.

I found the location of the buildings where the Salem Supernatural Network was housed and searched for the green Victorian house Aurora had mentioned. As I approached, my heartbeat sped up and my wolf stood alert.

Ready? I asked him.

Hurry, he urged.

Easy for him. I was the one facing the possible sting of rejection. I took a deep breath before entering.

Stay calm, I warned. The last thing I needed was an overzealous wolf making me act like a fool—again.

As I opened the front door, chimes indicated my arrival. I entered and the fragrance from a number of plants greeted me. Then I scented *her*. Cassandra passed through this entryway not long before as her fragrance was still fresh. My heart thundered in my ears and my hands turned clammy. Inside, my systems shot up a level, as if going haywire at the nearness after so many days had passed. The near frantic impulse to find her throbbed with greater intensity. My wolf stirred inside, urging me to seek her out.

“Can I help you?”

I heard her melodious voice before she stepped out of an office wearing a soft burgundy sweater and black jeans. Her hair was pinned up but a few blond curls framed her face. My heart galloped in my chest, and my wolf rose. *Mate.*

“Cassandra,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

Surprise registered on her face. “Valen?” Her big brown eyes widened. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you.” I gulped, bracing myself for her reaction.
“Can we talk?”

CHAPTER 10



CASSANDRA

I gaped at Valen. I couldn't believe he was at the Network here in Salem. His broad-shouldered frame and impressive height made him appear even larger surrounded by all the plants in the reception area. And he said he came to talk to me?

"Come into my office," I said quickly, ushering him in and closing the door before my coworkers peered out and prodded us with questions.

As soon as we were alone in my workspace, my pulse raced. It was so strange to have him where I worked and met with clients. When we'd been at the mountain, it was an escape from my day-to-day world, but now he was in it, proving how real this was. Valen stared at me with a questioning expression, and his nostrils flared as he inhaled. Tension swirled around us as the silence grew more pronounced.

I crossed my arms and leaned against my desk. "Why are you looking at me like that?" I asked.

"Like what?"

"Like you're sniffing me." I cocked my head. "You're not the first shifter I've met."

He shook his head. "Sorry." He continued to watch me as if perplexed.

"You still haven't told me why you're in Salem." Technically, he had since he said he wanted to talk, but thus far, he stared more than spoke.

He ran his hand through his hair. "I came to apologize about the awkward morning in my cabin." He grimaced as if

embarrassed by the memory.

“It’s fine,” I somehow said in a neutral tone while my heart fluttered with a quickened beat. “It was just a fling.”

Valen winced as if I’d lanced him with a poisoned dagger. His expression turned grave. “Not to me.”

I jerked my head. What the trembling toadstools was going on? Aurora had told me about Valen, but his behavior with him coming here didn’t fit her assessment of him.

“What does that mean?”

“I came to Salem because I wanted to see you again, Cassandra. Can I take you out to dinner tonight?”

Was this real? My body gravitated toward his screaming yes, but that wasn’t an option. “I’d love to, but I can’t. I need to pick up my daughter after work and don’t have a sitter.”

“I’ll watch her!” Lucas’s voice piped up from the other side of the door.

I marched over to the door and opened it. Two witches and an elf scattered like mice, Nova tripping over Zoe’s feet and stumbling but avoiding a fall. Lucas remained standing before me with a grin, unabashed at being caught listening.

“I see all of you!” I called out to the scattering women.

Pandora, Nova, and Zoe turned back, their expressions ranging from crimson to faux innocent.

Zoe raised her chin. “Lucas and I can watch Paige,” she volunteered, giving up the I-wasn’t-eavesdropping act.

I laughed at their antics. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t played a role as the other party when we’d teamed up to get Pandora and Austin together.

“I’m Lucas,” he chimed. His eyes brightened with undisguised curiosity as he assessed Valen and then extended his hand.

“Valen.” He shook Lucas’s hand.

“Nosy coworkers, this is Valen,” I announced before turning to him. “Valen, these are my other nosy coworkers.” I chuckled.

“Pandora, Zoe, and Nova.”

Valen nodded in greeting, looking slightly uncomfortable with the sudden attention.

Pandora asked, “What brings you to Salem, Valen?”

He adjusted his stance and didn’t reply right away. “I came to see Cassandra.”

All eyes turned onto me with speculation, and I fired eye daggers back at them.

Lucas wrapped his arm around Zoe’s shoulder, who stood much shorter than him. “We can watch Paige.”

I hesitated for a moment. They’d never watched Paige while I went out on a date, which was because I didn’t date. Yet, I didn’t want to pass up the chance to spend more time with Valen.

“Okay,” I said with slight reluctance. “Don’t get her hyped up on sugar.” Lucas had a sweet tooth, most notably with his addiction to sugary cereal.

Lucas chuckled, his eyes glinting with mischief.

“We’ll take good care of her,” Zoe added.

Pandora gestured toward the front door. “Cassandra, why don’t you take off now. It will give you more time to—um—chat.” She flashed a Cheshire cat type of smile.

“I have work to do,” I replied.

“If there’s anything I can cover, I’ll take care of it,” Nova volunteered.

Lucas hummed “Matchmaker, Matchmaker” from *Fiddler on the Roof* under his breath, and I shot him a look. This was far too similar to our matchmaking attempt with Pandora and Austin. In other words, I was getting a taste of my own medicine—or was it my own meddling?

“Okay,” I said and then turned to Valen. “Let me get my coat.”

He beamed with a smile so bright, it was more suited for me declaring I’d give him a private striptease. That vision popped into my head, followed by a memory of Nova’s disastrous tale of when she’d tried to do one for Diego.

No, I definitely wouldn’t be attempting anything like that, but the idea of being semi-naked and alone with Valen again ignited a heady temptation.

VALEN

Cassandra's scent affected me even more than before, drawing me ever closer. It seemed different, more potent, captivating me. Primal urges grew stronger. I wanted to claim her. Protect her. Make her mine.

Was this the mate bond or something else? I exhaled from my nostrils, trying to regain some sense of self-control and then took a sip of white wine.

We were sitting in a restaurant where Sebastian worked as a chef. When I'd told Cassandra I wanted to take her to a nice place—not a pub or pizza joint, she knew just the one—Louisa's. Sebastian was a wolf shifter from the Franconia pack in the White Mountains, and Cassandra thought we might want to meet. I agreed; it would be good to meet a shifter from home.

Then again, I'd agree to do anything or go anywhere tonight as long as it meant spending time with her.

The restaurant was the perfect setting for a romantic dinner. The ambiance was cozy and intimate, with dim lighting and soft music playing in the background. The tables were covered with white linen cloths and a single candle in a glass vase served as a centerpiece. The scent of freshly baked bread wafted through the air, mixed with the aroma of simmering sauces and grilled seafood. We'd already ordered a bottle of pinot grigio and sipped from our wine glasses as we perused the menu.

“So many options to choose from,” Cassandra said.

It was true. The menu had so many locally sourced items that made my mouth water just by reading them.

Sebastian came out in a white chef apron and introduced himself. I scanned the face of this shifter but didn't recognize him from the Sacco pack.

"I left as soon as I was able to take care of myself. And I didn't have this back then." He motioned to his beard.

"And I probably didn't have all this gray in mine." I pointed to my chin.

"I like that," Cassandra said, her voice rich with appreciation.

Turning to her, a grin spread on my face. I stopped before I gaped too long and returned to the conversation.

"I didn't join the Franconia pack until my late twenties," I noted.

"Where were you before then?" Sebastian asked.

"A pack in Maine." The reason why I left flashed in my brain, and I swallowed the bitterness.

He must have sensed my reluctance to discuss that as he didn't pry, but Cassandra studied me with a curious look. We chatted more about pack life in the mountains compared to the city, and Sebastian suggested a couple of places nearby if I wanted to go for a run at night. My wolf took note at that.

"Maybe I can show you one night. How long are you here for?" he asked.

Good question. "I'm not sure." However long Cassandra would let me.

Sebastian made some suggestions of what to order. I decided on the steak while she chose the coconut-crusted seafood.

After he left, Cassandra and I enjoyed conversation with our wine. The server brought over stuffed mushrooms, courtesy of Sebastian. I took a bite. It was delicious with a hint of lemon and spices. More so, I found myself getting lost in Cassandra's deep brown eyes.

"So, Valen," she said after taking a sip of her wine. "What drew you to join a different pack?"

Ah, so she did pick up on that there was something. She was astute.

I debated what to tell her, then opted for the truth. "A woman."

She appeared surprised and leaned back in her chair. "Oh?"

"Meaning I left because of a woman—not for one."

Cassandra squinted as she tried to follow. "If it's okay that I ask, what happened?"

I shrugged. "We were young and in love—or so I thought. Then she met her true mate, and it was all over." I fidgeted with the napkin on my lap. "She didn't mean to hurt me, but everything changed for her."

Cassandra blinked. "Just like that?"

I gripped the stem of my wine glass. "Guess so." I took a big sip.

"Many of my friends are shifters or are mated to one," Cassandra said. "It still seems like such a mystery to me."

Me too, until now. I yearned to tell her more but knew it was too much, too soon. "Anyway, I couldn't stay in the pack, seeing her with someone else." The memory of that difficult time tumbled from whatever recess I'd shoved it into the forefront of my mind. "It was painful for me and awkward for her." I exhaled. "So, I left."

Cassandra gave me a sympathetic look. “And your family?”

“They’re still there.”

“Do you ever see them?”

I rolled one shoulder. “Sure, I go back to visit them and my sister. She mated with a wolf in the pack.”

Cassandra studied me for a few seconds. “Is your ex there?”

“Yup,” I answered quickly. “Happy with her mate and three kids.”

She searched my eyes. “Does it still—hurt?”

“Seeing them?” My brows arched.

“Yes.”

I thought about it, bracing myself for tension, which didn’t come. It wasn’t something I thought about for a long time.

“No. Not like it did back then. I got over it. I’m glad that she’s happy.” I popped another stuffed mushroom into my mouth, and the flavors of lemon and herbs and breadcrumbs exploded on my tongue.

Cassandra pressed her lips together and then took a sip of her wine. After she put down her glass, she asked, “Do you still have feelings for her?”

“Oh no, definitely not.” I shook my head. “It was a long, long time ago.” I exhaled from my nostrils. “I haven’t been serious with anyone since.”

Cassandra gave me a look of understanding. “Because it hurt too much?”

Our eyes locked. I nodded. “Exactly.” After a pause, I asked, “You’ve experienced something like that?”

She stared at me from those soul-searching eyes before she replied. “I have.”

“With who?”

She glanced away. “Paige’s father. A fae.”

“Oh.” I adjusted in my chair. The back of my neck prickled at the idea of her being with someone else.

“I haven’t dated much since him. When I did, it was usually dreadful, and I swore never again.” Her gaze returned to me. “Not with you, of course.” Her lips spread into a teasing smile. “Except perhaps for some dish towels on fire.”

I chuckled and then groaned. “Oh yes, I was a mountain troll that morning. Sorry.”

When the server brought our food out, our conversation turned to our meals. The steak was tender and juicy, and Cassandra moaned in pleasure after she took the first bite of her seafood dish.

“I take it that’s a good sign,” I said.

“Yes. Have a bite.” She gave me a forkful of her coconut-crusted seafood, and I had to agree. “Delicious.” Then I gave her a bite of my steak, only it was much too large for her, so I cut it into a smaller piece. “Sorry, shifter appetite.”

She laughed. “I see.”

We kept the conversation light as we enjoyed our dinner. After it ended, I drove us from the restaurant. I turned to her at a stoplight. “Where do you want to go next?”

She stared at me, and her lips parted. “I have to go home. Paige is there, and I should get back for her.”

I understood her concerns. “Can I see you tomorrow?”

Her brows drew together in question. “I’m still not quite sure why you came all this way, but it’s hard for me to date.”

“I’m here because I like you, Cassandra,” I admitted. “After you left, I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I want to spend more time getting to know you.”

“But...” she began. “I’m sure you have many women who you can spend time with at the resort. Why come all this way to see me?”

Because you’re the one. I couldn’t scare her away, so instead I took her hand. “Didn’t you notice something between us in the mountains?”

“Yes, but...”

“But what?”

She shrugged. “You acted so strange that morning, and I figured I misread the signs.”

I groaned at the mortifying memory. “That morning, I was—confused.”

“Okay,” she said in a tone laced skepticism.

“What can I do to see you again? Hire a babysitter? Or you can bring Paige out with us?”

“Let’s take it slow, Valen, especially when it comes to Paige.”

“Okay.” I needed to calm down and not push her.

“She’ll be with her father this weekend, so I’ll have some free time then if you’re still in Salem.”

I grinned with relief. “Perfect.” When I dropped her off outside her house, I turned to her and searched her eyes.

“Good night, Cassandra.”

“Goodnight.”

The instinct to move toward her propelled me in what felt like slow motion. Then I cupped her face and pressed my lips to hers.

The sparks that traveled through my body ignited a powerful magic I hadn't experienced until now—one I sensed was awakened because I'd finally found my mate.

CHAPTER 11



CASSANDRA

*O*n Friday evening, the doorbell rang. It was Thorne.

I opened the door and stared into the piercing hazel eyes and sharp features of someone I liked least in the world. “Thorne.”

“Is Paige ready?”

He didn’t even acknowledge me. I released a slow exhale from my nostrils. How was I ever smitten by this guy? Was it simply his looks? He had dirty blond, wavy hair that fell below pointy ears that humans wouldn’t notice. I chalked my attraction up to being young and foolish, but now I knew better.

“She should be.” I called Paige, and she ran out of her room.

“Daddy!” She ran to him and gave him a hug.

I counted to seven, reminding myself that even if I couldn’t stand Thorne, Paige loved him. She wanted a relationship with him.

Unfortunately, that also meant more interactions with me.

“Make sure you have her back by seven on Sunday. It’s a school night,” I reminded him.

He shot me a scathing look. “I’m aware of the days of the week.”

Sigh. I forced myself to remain civil for Paige’s sake. After they left, a sudden wave of nausea hit me. I rushed to the bathroom, gagging, and dry heaved over the toilet. Jeez, that was a harsh reaction to dealing with my ex. Could it have been something I ate? I couldn’t pinpoint anything that would do it so brushed it out of my mind. At least I hadn’t had orange

juice. I'd once thrown it up when I was a kid. That was the worst coming back up. I shuddered at the memory.

I brushed my teeth thoroughly and gargled with mouthwash. Tonight, I'd be going out with Valen, and I didn't want anything to spoil it—especially Thorne.

During the last couple of days, Valen had stopped by the Network during my lunch break. We'd gotten a bite to eat and wandered downtown. I'd pointed out some landmarks and noted some of the incidents that happened during the Salem Witch Trials. Tonight, our time wouldn't be so rushed as I wouldn't have to get back to work or pick up Paige and make her dinner afterwards.

I'd been looking forward to my date with Valen, and he'd waited patiently until I was comfortable in doing so. Although I could have gotten a sitter for Paige, I didn't want to so soon after she'd been with my parents and with Lucas and Zoe. The mom guilt would hit hard. Tonight would be guilt-free as Paige was with her dad—which meant I'd be free to do whatever—and with whomever I wanted.

The doorbell rang. While I'd dreaded opening the door when Thorne arrived, I rushed over when I expected Valen. Flutters of excitement grew inside me. When I opened the door, Valen stared at me with a twinkle in his bright eyes, which crinkled at the edges as his mouth spread into a smile.

“You look beautiful, Cassandra.” His gaze roamed down and back up to my face.

I was glad I picked this soft green cashmere sweater that fit me well. “You're looking pretty good yourself,” I noted. That was an understatement. He wore black pants and a blue button-down shirt that accentuated the blue of his eyes. His beard was freshly trimmed, showing more of the salt-and-pepper in it,

giving him a sexy appeal. I remembered how the soft bristles tickled my face when we'd kissed, and I had an urge to stroke his beard.

Keeping my hands to myself, I said, "I'm ready."

"Great." He cocked his head. "I heard good things about a seafood restaurant on the harbor. Would you like seafood?"

"Who wouldn't?"

He chuckled. "Plenty of people."

"What do they know?" I dismissed with a playful wave.

He drove us to the harbor, and we found parking without a problem. Visitors didn't rush to Salem in the offseason.

"Too bad it's winter," I noted. "It's a great place to sit outside and eat with the sea breeze rolling in."

"I guess I'll have to return in the summer," Valen suggested with a one-sided smile.

That was several months from now. Would we really see each other again then? With him in the mountains and me here, I thought we'd never stand a chance, but maybe we could find a way to make it work.

We entered the restaurant, and the aroma of fresh baked bread and sizzling seafood stirred my appetite. Several minutes later, we each had a glass of white wine and placed our order. I chose salmon with asparagus, and Valen chose a seafood platter with scallops, shrimp, and more.

When our meals arrived, the stench of the asparagus turned my stomach. I rushed to the restroom and gagged. What the hell? That was the second time that day.

As I returned to the table, Valen stared at me with concern.
“Are you feeling okay, Cassandra?”

“Yes.” I nodded, although I still felt queasy. I stared at the offending asparagus. “It doesn’t smell right.” When the server walked nearby, I asked him to take it away.

With it gone, I nibbled at a bread roll instead and my stomach settled. Valen and I ate our dinner without further interruption of off-putting vegetables.

After dinner, we put on our coats and gloves to walk along the waterfront. It was already dark out, the gloom of winter casting its spell with the lack of sunlight. A breeze rolled in from the ocean, and I bristled, my teeth chattering. Valen didn’t react.

“Shifter heat,” I remarked with envy.

Valen turned to me with a brilliant smile. “I always run hot. Happy to share.”

He opened his arms and pulled me against him. I pressed against his broad chest, eagerly accepting his warmth. The way he held me felt so protective, as if he’d never let anything happen to me.

“You feel so good,” he said.

“And you’re so warm,” I murmured. I couldn’t stay pressed against his muscular torso all night, though. When I pulled away, it was with reluctance—until I glanced up at him.

His eyes gleamed with a brighter glow. Or perhaps that was a play with the moonlight above, which twinkled in reflections on the water.

“Feeling better?” he asked.

I thought of replying with something snarky, such as how his body could be used to heal any number of conditions, but my mouth didn't cooperate. That was for the best since I didn't want my mouth to break whatever spell drew me to him. Instead, I simply nodded and finally replied, "much."

"Good." He reached up and pushed a blond curl off my cheek and then trailed his fingers along it.

His gaze lowered to my lips, and I froze. Although we'd stolen some time together the last few days, we hadn't kissed since we were in the mountains. Each night when I went to bed, I thought of him and how things could be different if he were with me. A fantasy that wasn't likely to come true.

But maybe tonight...

"Can I kiss you?" he asked in a low, almost pained tone.

"Ye-yes," I stammered. Then I took a deep breath, exhaled, and tried again. "Kiss me, Valen."

I moved up to my tiptoes, and when he bent toward me, it felt like slow motion.

Finally, our lips touched. We explored each other languidly at first, but then desire took over. Our mouths crashed together hard as we grasped for each other. His hands roamed over my back and down to my butt.

When we broke apart, gasping for breath, I paused to sort through my scrambled mind. I wanted him. I didn't want the night to end. And he appeared to want the same thing.

"Do you want to go to my place with me?" The words sounded strange coming out of my mouth because that wasn't an invitation I'd extended to any man since I'd moved into the house with Paige. I'd had a couple of short-term lovers, few

and far between, that had fizzled out quickly, but not in my place.

“More than anything.” Valen’s voice came out in a strangled tone.

“Let’s go.”

During the drive back to my place, we stole heated glances at each other. At a red light, he leaned over to kiss me. The car behind us beeped, breaking us apart.

I laughed. “We’re making out like teenagers.”

He grinned. “I’ll try to keep my hands to myself for the rest of the way.” Then he flashed me a smoldering glance. “But you don’t make it easy looking so hot and tempting like that.”

Heat unfurled deep inside my core. *Hot and tempting?* That wasn’t something I heard often. Coming from Valen, it sounded damn good.

A few minutes later, we pulled into my driveway and then walked up to the front door of my weathered bungalow. After I opened it, I turned on the lights. A wave of self-consciousness washed over me.

Paige’s toys were strewn across the living room, and the contents of her school backpack were spread haphazardly across the floor. I should have taken more time to tidy up but rushed to get myself ready as well before Valen picked me up. After seeing how tidy his cabin had been, he must have thought I was a slob.

“Sorry about the mess.” I gestured around us. “Paige can be quite a tornado with her belongings sometimes.” I twisted a ringlet and released a nervous laugh.

“Don’t worry about it.” Valen stepped inside and looked around. “It looks like a home well-lived in. Like a happy family lives here.”

His words warmed me and put me at ease. “She was an extra force of nature tonight as she was looking for some things she wanted to bring to her father’s.”

Valen nodded. “Are they close?”

I grimaced. “Hard to say. Thorne hadn’t been much of a father to Paige until he moved into the area last fall. I don’t know why he had a change of heart because he certainly won’t confide in me, but I think it had something to do with his father passing away. Maybe it woke something up in him.”

Valen studied me. “You two aren’t on good terms?”

I snorted. “Not at all. We more tolerate each other since our divorce.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, what happened?”

Bumbling broomsticks, why did I bring up this topic? The last thing I wanted to do was have my worst memories ruin an otherwise promising night with Valen. I sighed. If I got it off my chest, perhaps we could move on.

I moved Paige’s books and a sweater off the sofa so Valen and I could sit down. “We dated on and off at the academy and then married in our early twenties. I found out he was cheating on me when I was pregnant with Paige, and that it hadn’t been the only time.” I pursed my lips as the bitter memory soured my demeanor.

“He sounds like an ass,” Valen said. “Why would he throw away his family for something so casual and meaningless?”

Aurora's words returned to me. That seemed to be how Valen rolled in the mountains, but he wasn't with anyone serious. Then again, she didn't know him well. Maybe there was more to him than being a sexy shifter.

I shrugged. "Who knows? I guess I wasn't the right woman for him."

Valen stared at me with yearning in his eyes. "I can't say I'm sorry that it didn't work out between you because it gives me a chance." He exhaled. "I hope."

One palpable heartbeat rolled into the next as the heat rose. Then, we launched for each other, mouths crashing in a frantic kiss. I shoved any thoughts of Thorne from my mind. How could I think of that jackass when Valen's hands roamed over my body? He led me backward onto the sofa and as his hands moved down, a thousand flames of need ignited inside me.

His mouth moved to my neck. As his tongue traced my collarbone, I released a breathless sigh. When his lips lowered to the swell of my breast, I arched my back and moaned. As he began to unbutton my shirt, my body burned like it was on fire.

"I want to make you feel good," he whispered.

"Yes," I rasped with a needy whimper. "Let's go to my room."

As soon as we headed in there, we began to tear off each other's clothes. Valen without a shirt was a work of art, so sculpted and massive. I couldn't resist running my hands over each hard plane with appreciation.

He removed my blouse and bra, then guided me onto my bed. He slid over me, slowly caressing my breasts before he moved his head down. When his tongue flicked over my nipple, I shuddered at the delicious sensation.

Then he moved over and took my other nipple into his mouth, and I moaned.

By the time he slid my pants and panties off me, I was panting with need. When his mouth moved lower, my body arched as I waited, breathless with anticipation.

He spread my legs apart and teased me with a warm breath along my thighs. When he finally licked me, I grasped the sheets. “Oh, Valen.”

As he worked me with his talented tongue, I whimpered. He slipped a finger inside me and then another, making my systems go haywire.

Oh, sweet violets, I was completely under his spell. Whatever he was doing to me was addictive, waking me up from that slumber that had lasted for far too long. But it was worth it if this was the reward.

Valen increased the intensity, sending me higher as if he knew exactly how to read my body’s desire. I climbed and climbed, my body burning, and then exploded, gasping out his name.

VALEN

Cassandra tasted so good, the addictive honey of my mate. I smiled with satisfaction as I let her recover from her climax. As much as I wanted to give her another one, I was desperate to be inside of her.

As I pulled myself up her body, she ran her fingers through my hair.

“That was incredible.”

I kissed her shoulder and slid my hand in between her legs.

“I can make you feel even better.”

As I stroked her, she moaned. I loved the sound of it, and it made my already aching cock throb harder.

“I want to be inside you.” I rubbed my erection in between her wet folds, teasing us both.

She reached down and stroked my hardness. “Do it.” She slid my boxers, the last bit of clothing I wore, down my hips.

I slid them off me and tossed them to the floor where the rest of our clothing lay discarded. Unfortunately, a condom was that far away as well, buried in one of my pockets. It took immense willpower to drag myself from her arms, but I did so with a promise that I’d be right back.

Once I rolled the condom on me, I rushed back to her. I kissed her lips, puffy from our frantic kisses, and buried myself inside her welcoming body.

I groaned. “You’re so wet.”

“I need you,” she rasped and wrapped her legs around my waist.

When I thrust deeper, she lifted her hips. As I rocked into her over and over, she moaned louder. Her body bucked against mine. She was close. I rammed into her harder, and she dug her nails into my back. She shattered with a cry and pulsed around me.

It felt amazing, lurching me to the brink with her. As I pounded harder, chasing her release with my own, my canines extended, itching with a desperation to mark her.

The instinct to claim her as mine soared to a mountainous peak. I lowered my head, intoxicated with the need to pierce her flesh—a warning to all others she was taken.

She was mine.

Do it, my wolf urged.

I opened my mouth as my fangs emerged, hovering just inches from her tantalizing skin.

Yes, I wanted to with all my being.

But I couldn't. Not yet. She wasn't mine.

I had to win her heart before I claimed her as my mate.

It took all my self-control not to bite her as her inner walls contracted around me. I forced myself to pull my fangs away from her flesh just before a climax ripped through me—one so powerful with the intensity of the mating call. But I'd be forced to ignore that urge until she was ready.

If she was ever ready to accept me as her mate.

CHAPTER 12



VALEN

I woke first and held Cassandra in my arms while she breathed deeply at my side. My wolf rested, content. He was funny around her—either clamoring with excitement and eager to get closer or soothed by her presence.

While the sun rose, more details in her room came into view. The walls were painted a pale blue, and the white furniture was covered with belongings—from books to plants to oils. A framed picture of what looked like Paige’s crayon drawing of the ocean hung on the wall. Cassandra had apologized for her house being messy, but it didn’t look that way to me. It seemed lived in, comfortable, and by extension, comforting.

Being here with Cassandra again, being welcomed into her home and then into her bed, made the risk coming here more than worth it. I didn’t know if she’d even want to see me after how strange I’d behaved during that awkward morning in my cabin. And maybe I’d pegged her wrong, too, by first thinking she was just like any other woman who only wanted to have a little fun while they were away for the weekend. The more I got to know her, the more I liked her.

Then there was the biggest mystery of all—the mystic connection of her being my fated mate. I may have accepted it as true, but that didn’t mean I had a clue about what to do about it.

Cassandra’s alarm sounded. She stirred before she stretched her arms and then her eyes fluttered open. “Good morning, Valen.” She squinted as she smiled at me, her eyes heavy with sleep.

“Good morning, beautiful.”

“How long have you been awake?” she asked.

“Not long. Twenty minutes or so.”

“Are you hungry?”

“I’m a shifter.” I grinned. “I could always eat.”

She chuckled. “Let’s make some breakfast then.”

When she climbed out of bed, my gaze lowered to her naked ass, and I moaned.

“Everything okay?” she said and gave me a coquettish look over her shoulder before she stood.

“Everything’s great.” I reached for her, but she was out of reach. “Just thinking I shouldn’t have let you out of bed yet.”

“Why? Did you have something else in mind?” she asked in a saucy manner before slowly pulling her robe on.

“Come here and I’ll show you.” I pulled the covers off and reached for her wrist.

She let me grab her and then slid out of my grasp. “Maybe you should catch me.”

I arched a brow. “Are you provoking a predator to hunt?”

She giggled. “Ooh, I’d like to see you in action, wolf.”

When I leaped out of bed and pounced on her, she squealed. I carried her back to the bed, without her protesting—much.

“Caught you,” I said and climbed over her.

“Impressive.” She stared up at me with a flirtatious challenge in her eyes. “Now that you have me, what are you going to do with me?”

I kissed down from her jawline down, over the front of her body. “You mentioned breakfast. And come to think of it, I’m

very hungry,” I drawled in a low tone as I moved lower along her torso.

Her breath hitched. “Breakfast in bed sounds goood...”



WHEN WE CRAWLED out of bed an hour later for some real food, she pulled out a carton of eggs and bacon from the fridge. I cooked them both while she brewed coffee.

“See?” I declared with a broad grin. “I *can* cook eggs without burning them or setting things on fire.”

She giggled. “You’ve redeemed yourself.” After she grabbed a couple of bananas from a hanging stand, she froze and turned pale.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

Cassandra covered her mouth. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

She dashed into the bathroom and closed the door. The sound of heaving followed.

I turned off the burners and listened to see if she sounded okay. It was quiet. I knocked on the door. “Cassandra, are you okay?”

There was no answer, so I slowly pushed the door open to find her hunched over the toilet.

“Go away, Valen,” she begged without looking at me.

I rubbed her back and held her hair back as she continued to retch but nothing came out. A few minutes later, she stopped. I helped her stand.

“I can’t believe you saw me like that. I’m horrified.” She avoided my gaze.

“Don’t be.” I filled a glass with water and offered it to her.

She took a sip and then rinsed her mouth.

“Are you feeling better?” I asked.

“Yeah.” She nudged her head toward the door. “I’ll be right out.”

I took the hint and gave her some privacy, returning to the kitchen. The scent of the eggs, bacon, and coffee still permeated the kitchen. Breakfast was still salvageable, but I doubted she wanted to eat yet.

When she stepped into the kitchen, she scrunched her nose.

“The coffee smells off.”

I turned to the coffee pot. It smelled like regular coffee to me.

“It smells fine to me.”

“Are you kidding? It smells like burned almonds or something. It’s so bad, it set me off.”

Slowly, the realization dawned on me—why her scent was different. I stared at her and took a deep breath before continuing. “Cassandra—is it—is it possible that you’re—” I heaved a deep breath. “Pregnant?”

My wolf clamored forward inside, rapt with attention. *Pups?*

Of course he’d be all over that. *We don’t know that.*

Her face contorted with confusion. “No, of course not. We used a condom—Her voice trailed off. “No, it can’t be...”

“Are you sure? Condoms aren’t always one-hundred percent effective.”

“I’m not pregnant,” she said with a forced smile. “It must be food poisoning or something like that. It was probably

something I ate last night.” She motioned to the coffee pot.
“Or it’s the scent of that bitter coffee making me sick.”

“If you think so,” I replied, unconvinced.

She tipped her head. “Valen, I have the day off, you’re here, and Paige won’t be back until tomorrow. Let’s not jump to conclusions just because that coffee turned my stomach.” She inhaled and tipped her head. “I’m feeling much better now.”

“Okay.” My voice edged higher with skepticism. She’d also had issues with the asparagus last night. If she wasn’t pregnant, what else could it be? Was she ill?

As if reading my mind, she fixed a steady gaze on me. “I’m fine, Valen. All I need is a shower. Then we can go out and do something fun. Sound good?”

My gaze raked over her with longing. “Absolutely.”

CASSANDRA

Valen and I walked around Salem, bundled in coats, boots, and gloves. The winter morning was cool, with a light breeze blowing in from the harbor, which brought the smell of salt and seaweed. Although he'd been exploring the area as well as nearby towns during the past couple of days, I showed him around some landmarks, noting their relevance to the witch trials.

“Although some would prefer we put the past behind us, we can't forget those dark times when a hysteria led to many innocent people losing their lives.”

He nodded, a somber expression on his face.

We stopped for lunch at a cafe that also served sandwiches. The scent of roasted coffee beans didn't turn me off the way it had in my kitchen this morning. What was that about? I thought about the asparagus and coffee turning my stomach. I couldn't be pregnant.

Could I?

No. It wasn't morning sickness because the asparagus was at dinner. When I'd been pregnant with Paige, I'd had morning sickness the first trimester, but that was the only time of day—morning. I must have had a bug or something.

I ordered a sandwich with brie and grilled vegetables, and Valen ordered one loaded with meat. We sat at a small table by the window, and Valen asked me about my life growing up.

“I grew up near Northampton and attended a magical academy not far from there.” I exhaled. “That's where I met my ex,

Thorne. We were together on and off for many years, both there and after graduation, before we decided to get married.”

Valen listened intently, his eyes locked on mine.

I shook my head. “Talk about ignoring the red flags. I practically had several matadors waving them in my face, but I was young and foolish.”

He nodded sympathetically. “Aren’t we all when we’re young?”

I shrugged. “Anyway, I knew I wanted to work with magic. My parents are both witches, and I grew up embracing my gifts. So, I was thrilled when I eventually got hired at the Network and moved here to Salem. It’s been a whirlwind since then.”

We finished our meals at a leisurely pace. After we left the cafe, snow started to fall.

“Any interest in art?” I pointed to the Peabody Essex Museum.

“I’m interested in doing anything with you,” he said with a smile that sent tingles all the way to my toes.

We then spent the afternoon staying warm as we explored the museum. Since Paige was with Thorne until tomorrow, I took advantage of the free time and invited Valen back to my place for dinner. We ordered takeout and then watched a movie while eating popcorn. It was so nice to spend such carefree time like this.

I didn’t want him to leave, and neither did he. So, he didn’t.



THE NEXT MORNING, we lingered in bed. I felt fine, which reassured me that what I'd felt the morning before was not morning sickness. Still, I chose tea instead.

We spent the day together down in Boston, walking the Freedom Trail and exploring the tourist attractions.

After we ate a late lunch, Valen asked, "Is there anything you'd like to do here tonight?"

A night in the city would be fun, but reality was returning. "I need to get back for Paige. Thorne is dropping her off at seven."

"I understand," Valen replied. "I'd love to meet her one day."

"Maybe." I exhaled. "She's not used to me dating. *I'm* not used to me dating." I scrunched my nose. "Wait, are we dating?"

He laughed. "I guess so."

I arched my brows. "You *guess* so?"

"Yes." He leaned forward and kissed me. "Officially dating—if you'd like that."

Warmth spread to my toes. "I'd like that a lot." I blinked, the logistics creeping in. "Wait, how can we date? We live in different states."

"Cassandra," he said, his voice low and intense. "I know we've only known each other a short time, but there's something here." He motioned between us. "I don't know what to call it, but I do know I want to see you again. However we manage that works for me. Are you going back to work tomorrow morning?"

"Yes."

“How about we start with the next step? Can I take you to dinner tomorrow?”

I smiled and warmth spread through me. “Yes.” I furrowed my brows. “Wait, I’d need to get a babysitter.” I rubbed my forehead. “No, I can’t do that. I haven’t seen Paige all weekend.”

“If you’re comfortable with the idea, bring Paige.”

I bit my lower lip. “I’ll think about it.”



WHEN THORNE ARRIVED with Paige that evening, I greeted her with a warm hug. “Have you taken a bath yet?”

“No. I will now.” She dashed into the bathroom, closed the door, and the sound of running water followed.

I tried to keep the conversation short, so Thorne would go, but he stepped inside my living room. His nostrils flared as his gaze roamed around.

“Who was here?” he asked, his voice cold.

He must have scented Valen’s presence. Thorne hated shifters.

Thorne hated most anyone who wasn’t fae like him. I’m not sure why he ever was with a witch and had a child with me. Maybe his hatred of others rose as he grew older. I certainly don’t think I would have been with him back when we were young had I known how much darkness poisoned his mind.

“It’s none of your concern,” I said, trying to keep my tone even.

“It is most definitely my concern if it involves the house where my daughter lives,” he snapped. He cocked his head and his

gaze narrowed before he fixed a hard stare back at me. “A wolf shifter?”

Instead, I tried counting to five before I let him rile me up and this situation escalated into an argument.

Thorne only paused long enough for me to get to three. “You can’t trust shifters,” he emphasized, his voice full of disgust.

My anger rose. “You can’t judge someone you haven’t met.”

“I know what they’re like. They’re animals, Cassandra.”

I pursed my lips, biting back a retort about how Valen was indeed an animal in bed. Raising my chin, I said, “You’ve never met him.”

“Oh, it’s a *him*?” Thorne echoed, his eyes narrowing to slits. “I don’t want *him* around my daughter.”

Clenching my jaw, I struggled to keep my temper in check. “I don’t want my daughter around someone with such prejudices against other.” I kept my voice low so Paige wouldn’t hear her parents fighting. That was one thing that worried me about her spending time with her father. Who knew what poison he spewed about others into her young mind?

Thorne snorted. “Prejudices? You know damn well what kind of creatures they are. Dangerous and unpredictable.”

I took a deep breath and exhaled from my nostrils as I fought to stay calm. “That isn’t at all true. I’ve known plenty of shifters.”

“I don’t care who he is. He’s not welcome in my daughter’s home.”

I crossed my arms. “Last time I checked, I pay the mortgage.”

“That doesn’t mean you get to bring whatever stray dog you meet into our daughter’s life.”

I pointed at Thorne’s chest, finger trembling, and seethed. “Don’t insult someone I care about. While you’ve been screwing around doing goddess-knows-what all these years, I’ve been raising our daughter, almost entirely without your help. If I want to start dating again, that’s my business. And who I date is my choice.”

“I can’t believe you’d go with a shifter,” he muttered. “An animal, Cassandra? That’s low. Even for a witch.”

My mouth widened. How dare he insult me like this? “Your daughter is part witch. I better not hear you talking about her or to her like that.” I pointed to the door. “Get out.”

He glared at me for a moment longer before marching out the door, leaving the door open rather than slamming it. I closed it and then slumped against the door, drained by the confrontation. Although I told myself that trying to have a civil relationship was what was best for Paige, it took a toll on me.

Did all relationships deteriorate this way in the end?



MONDAY MORNING STARTED with more of a drag than usual, especially since I was poised over my toilet with another ungraceful chorus of dry heaves.

I couldn’t blame the coffee going off this time since I’d bought a new bag. The possibility of what this meant started to become more tangible.

“Don’t get your broomsticks in a twist,” I told my reflection in the mirror. Since I didn’t know for sure, there was no need to jump five steps ahead.

After driving Paige to school, I wished her a great day before I headed into work at the Network. I had so much to do on a Monday morning but would face the inevitable during my lunch break. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t be a leisurely lunch like I’d enjoyed with Valen last week, but it would involve peeing onto a stick. Fortunately, Valen wouldn’t be around for that. It could change the status of our relationship in one huge moment.

When I headed to the pharmacy at lunch, my gaze traveled over all the options and my breath raced. There were so many to choose from, way more than I remembered when I was pregnant with Paige. When was my last period? I couldn’t remember. Which to choose? Indecision paralyzed me.

When I went to reach for one, my hands trembled. A kid ran down the aisle behind me, and I lurched forward, knocking down a half dozen pregnancy tests.

Cheeks burning, I picked them up and said, “Sorry, sorry,” to nobody in particular. Who was I apologizing to?

A woman headed down the aisle and called, “Joey?”

I guessed she was the mother of the kid who’d ran past.

Pointing down the aisle, I said, “He went that way.”

“Thanks.” She smiled. When her gaze dropped to the stack of boxes I was fumbling to return to the shelf, it faltered as if she was trying to find something suitable to say. Instead, she gave a sheepish smile as if to say good luck.

I’d need it.

After I picked up a test that could detect the earliest signs of pregnancy, I returned to the Network and headed into the restroom. While I waited for the test results, my leg began to twitch. I couldn't sit still. I stared at the time on my phone as I impatiently waited for the results. Then I glanced at the test. The stick announced its news with a positive symbol.

CHAPTER 13



CASSANDRA

*P*regnant. I was pregnant.

Oh, black cats and purple hats...

My heart pounded against my ribs. I wasn't ready for this. My hand fluttered to my temple. What was I going to do?

The experience of being the mother of an infant rushed back to me. I was almost a decade younger then. How could I go through this again on my own? It was difficult enough the first time.

Valen lived in the mountains. He wouldn't be around, the same as Thorne wasn't around. But even so, Thorne and I had been married. We had a relationship. Valen and I barely knew each other.

This was too much, too soon. And entirely overwhelming.

Focus. I took deep breaths and tried to focus on something else. Make some tea. No, a glass of wine would help soothe the rough edges. Wait, wine—I couldn't have wine! But I'd had wine at dinner with Valen before I knew I was pregnant. I raised my hands to my temples. Oh no.

Tea—soothing tea it was. When I made my way into the kitchen to brew tea, I barely noticed my feet on the ground. While I waited for the water to boil, I tried to focus on the present. Sunlight coming through the window illuminated the area in a warm glow. The only sound in here came from the gentle hum of the refrigerator.

The kettle screeched, announcing it was ready for me to take over. When I poured the water from the kettle into a mug, my hands trembled and the mug slipped from my hand. As the

ceramic pieces shattered on the tile floor, I jumped back to avoid being scalded by the boiling water or cut by a piece of the broken mug.

Although some water splashed on my lower legs, I was wearing pants, so the hot water didn't reach my skin. I looked down at the mess I'd made with scattered ceramic shards and spilled herbs, which perfumed the air.

Pandora rushed into the kitchen. "I heard a crash."

I stared at her, and tears welled in my eyes. "I dropped a mug." My fingers moved in slow motion down to the floor.

"Are you okay?" she asked with concern.

I shook my head. "I took a pregnancy test." My voice caught in my throat. "It was positive."

Pandora's eyes widened in surprise. "Wow." Her hand fluttered to her mouth. "I take it this was unexpected."

The kitchen swirled around me, a rainbow of colors. I braced my hands on the counter and leaned against it. The spinning stopped. "Very unexpected. I'm shocked."

Lucas slid into the kitchen, his expression bright with excitement. "Did I hear what I think I heard?"

Oh, trembling toadstools! "What did you hear?"

He cocked his head and whispered, "You're pregnant?" but it was far from a dulcet tone. His grin spread from one end of the kitchen to another. "Congrats, Cassandra! Paige is going to be so excited. She's going to be a big sister!"

As I pictured Paige responding to the news, I smiled. Lucas's joy was contagious, breaking through my daze. Zoe and Nova entered the kitchen seconds later. Lucas turned to them and

exclaimed. “Did you hear the exciting news? Cassandra’s pregnant!”

“That’s fantastic!” Nova exclaimed.

“Congratulations!” Zoe added.

Their enthusiasm reminded me that this was joyous news despite my bewilderment.

Nova’s smile vanished as she studied my face and likely saw the worry etched there. “Is this good news?” she asked in a gentle tone.

Pandora held my shoulders and steered me to sit in a chair in the conference room where we gathered for meetings. “It’s a lot to take in. Let me make you that tea.”

“We’ll clean up here,” Zoe added.

Lucas was the first to sit with me.

“I knew it,” he declared. “Well, not exactly.” He tipped his head. “I sensed something different about you lately.”

My nose wrinkled. Shifter senses. They were so much more attuned to scents. With my child being half wolf shifter, would he or she inherit that ability? Would they shift? I bit my lower lip. Paige had witch and fae blood, which gave her some extraordinary abilities in being in touch with the magical world, but shapeshifting was on another level. I mean, shifters transformed into an animal form. That was mind-blowing. Although I’d known many shifters, I never considered the idea of raising one.

“How could this happen?” I rubbed my forehead. “We used protection.”

“Condoms?” Lucas’s brows arched. “They’re not one-hundred percent effective.”

I groaned and dropped my head into my hands.

“It’s like that scene in *Anchorman*—sixty percent of the time, it works every time,” Lucas said.

Lifting my head, I chuckled, remembering the scene with Paul Rudd’s nasty cologne. Leave it to Lucas to make me laugh when my life has changed as quickly as a cat twitched its whiskers.

“Does Valen know?” he asked. “He must,” Lucas answered his own question. Then he stared at me with a sheepish expression. “Assuming he’s the father.”

Zoe entered and admonished Lucas with a light swat on his shoulder. “Lucas, that’s an intrusive question.”

Pandora carried a new mug with tea and placed it before me on the table. The reality of the situation left me gobsmacked, and tears threatened to spill into the tea. “I don’t know...” I said in a tone that was barely audible.

When they exchanged a glance, I added, “Not meaning the identity of the father. What I mean is I don’t know if I can do this again on my own.”

“You won’t be on your own,” Pandora declared.

“You have us,” Nova added.

“I’d be a great uncle.” Lucas motioned to himself. “No, that makes me sound like some old fuddy duddy. I’d be a *fun* uncle. A *fun*cle.” He motioned to his chest and cocked his head. “I mean, really—who’s better to take on that role?”

The mock serious expression on his face dislodged some of the worry that had been expanding inside my chest. My near hysteric sobs turned to laughter. Pretty soon, I was cackling like a—witch. “I don’t know why I’m laughing,” I said in

between peals of laughter, wiping the tears from my eyes.

“This isn’t funny.”

“It’s natural,” Pandora assured me. “This is big news, and it will bring big emotions.”

I nodded and sniffed. “You’re right.” I took a few sips of the soothing hot beverage.

“You look pale,” Nova added. “Do you want something to eat?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I’m fine.” With a wan smile, I added, “Or I will be—eventually.”

While I sipped my tea, surrounded by their presence that assured me that perhaps I wouldn’t have to go through raising another child alone again, some of the worst of my fears dissipated.

“So...” Lucas adjusted in his chair. “Should I congratulate Valen when I see him?”

Zoe nudged him with her elbow. “Lucas,” she warned.

“What?” he asked in an innocent tone. “It would be impolite if I didn’t.”

I raised my gaze to meet Lucas’s. “Of course Valen is the father. It’s not like I go on many dates, rather or *any* dates.

“I didn’t want to *assume*,” Lucas replied. “You know what they say...”

I groaned. “Yes. It makes an ASS out of U and ME.”

“Exactly.” He grinned, showing plenty of his straight, white teeth. “How did he react?”

I winced. “He doesn’t know because I found out minutes ago myself.”

“Oh, I know before the baby’s daddy.” Lucas patted his chest.
“Now that’s an honor indeed!”

I bit my lower lip. “And I don’t know if I should tell him.”

A chorus of “what” and “why not” followed.

“Because he doesn’t want this.” I motioned in a vague direction outward. “He’s a single guy living a single life in the mountains. He doesn’t want to be saddled with a family here in Salem.”

“You can’t *not* tell him,” Pandora said.

“He should know,” Nova added.

“Give him a chance before you assume.” Lucas pointed to the side of his head. “Because we just went over what happens when we do that.”

I exhaled. They were right.

I took another sip of my tea. “Okay, I’ll tell him.” But that was it. He would be the father of my child, but I wouldn’t be foolish enough to think that we could have anything more between us—not if I wanted to avoid repeating past mistakes.

“It’s the right thing to do.” Pandora confirmed. “When?”

Since I didn’t know how long he would be around, the sooner the better. “We’re going out to dinner later. It will be the first time he’s meeting Paige.” I took a shaky inhale and blew out a breath. “So, I guess I should tell him tonight.”

VALEN

Cassandra thought it would be better to meet at the restaurant. My palms heated as I entered the family-style pub, which smelled of fried food and played pop hits. Her blonde ringlets drew my attention right away. Although her back faced me, I knew it was her.

She sat in a booth across from a school-aged girl coloring a kid's menu. The similarities between mother and daughter were clear with the hair alone, although Paige's was darker.

Paige glanced up as I approached the booth. Her gaze met mine, and for a moment, I felt like I was staring into a young Cassandra but with hazel eyes.

"Are you Valen?"

I smiled back. "Yes. And you're Paige?"

She grinned, revealing a missing tooth. "Yes."

Cassandra turned and glanced at me. "Looks like you both took care of introductions, but I'll do my part." She faced her daughter once more. "Paige, this is my friend, Valen."

"Friend?" Paige repeated in a higher lilt.

"Err, umm—well, we are dating?" Cassandra's brows furrowed as she tilted her head at me with confusion.

"That makes me the lucky one." I grinned and slid in the booth beside her.

I turned to Paige. "Would it be okay with you if I dated your mother?"

"Hmm." Paige studied me. "Only if you're nice to her."

I glanced at Cassandra. Her expression changed into a peculiar mix from joy to tension, and I tried to read the subtext. Did Paige sense the animosity between her parents? Was Thorne horrible to Cassandra? Protective rage shook me, but I forced myself to remain calm.

“I promise,” I told Paige.

Cassandra turned from me to Paige. “Valen is very nice to me. That’s why I wanted you to meet him.”

We chatted about the restaurant and menu. “What do you like to eat here?” I asked Paige.

“Chicken tenders and fries are the best,” she declared without hesitation.

Cassandra chuckled. “The usual.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Is this a regular spot?”

Cassandra nodded. “Paige loves it here.”

Paige ordered her regular chicken finger kid’s meal, Cassandra picked a Reuben sandwich, and I chose a burger. After we placed our order, I asked Paige about herself. “I heard you like to draw.”

She held up the menu and showed me the back, where she’d doodled designs. She was happy to chat, sharing about her school, friends, and her favorite things while she continued to draw switching between four different crayons.

Cassandra watched us with a small smile on her face, and a warmth spread through me. They were a family. Cassandra was my mate. I wanted to be part of their lives. Would she let me?

“Mommy said you live in the mountains,” Paige said.

“Yes, I do,” I replied. “I work at a ski resort in the White Mountains in New Hampshire.”

Paige said, “Mommy promised she’d take me skiing next time.”

“You could come visit me,” I suggested. Was this odd to invite her? It seemed natural.

“Can we?” Paige turned to her mother.

Cassandra bit her lower lip before replying. “Perhaps.”

What was with her hesitation? Was I taking this dinner too far by suggesting a ski trip? Conversation flowed. But then there were moments of silence when Cassandra’s smile faded, and she appeared troubled.

The food arrived, and we dug in, but the tension lingered, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong. Paige finished her meal and went to the bathroom, leaving Cassandra and me alone.

I took her hand, tracing circles on her palm with my thumb. “Is everything okay?”

She met my gaze, her eyes clouded with worry. “I’m just... nervous.”

“About tonight?” I knew it might be somewhat awkward to meet Paige considering Cassandra said she didn’t often date, but I thought it went well so far. “I think Paige is great. And she doesn’t seem to hate me,” I added with a grin.

“No, it’s not that, it’s...” Cassandra pursed her lips. “Never mind. Now isn’t the right time.”

Something was bothering her, but I didn’t want to push and ruin the evening. Paige returned, eager to have her ice cream cup for dessert.

“What’s your favorite kind of ice cream?” I asked her.

“Cookie dough,” she declared without hesitation. “Here they give us cups with chocolate and vanilla. It’s pretty good.” She tipped her head and asked, “Are you getting dessert?”

“Sure.” I nodded. “Let me see what they have.” I picked up a menu that the server had left for us. No kiddie ice cream cups, but they had apple pie with vanilla ice cream, which sounded good to me. I asked Cassandra if she wanted to share.

At first, she declined but then said, “Sure, why not?”

The three of us enjoyed our desserts. When it was time to leave, they both thanked me. After Paige was in the car, Cassandra asked, “Can you stop by in a couple of hours, after Paige goes to bed?”

A sense of unease washed over me. Judging by the worry on her face, it wasn’t because she wanted me to sleep over. “Of course.”

She forced a smile and said, “Thanks again.” Then she climbed into her car and drove out of the lot.

Now what? I had a couple of hours to kill. I didn’t want to return to my hotel. What was on Cassandra’s mind? Had I said something stupid or inappropriate at dinner? I didn’t remember doing so, but what did I know about being a good parent or role model? Nothing.

It was a good time to check out one of the locations that Sebastian had told me about. I drove to a forest he’d mentioned that wasn’t far from Salem. After heading deep into the woods, I removed my clothes and stashed them in an empty space at the base of a tree trunk. Then I shifted to wolf form and let him explore the scents of this new location.

After an hour or so, I shifted back to human form, dressed, and drove to Cassandra's house.

She welcomed me into the living room and sat on the sofa.

"Paige is in bed."

"Okay." I sat beside her.

She adjusted her position a few times. "I don't know how to tell you this—so I guess I should blurt it out." She took a deep breath and exhaled with a low whoosh. "Valen, I'm—" She grabbed a lock of hair and twisted it. "I'm pregnant."

CHAPTER 14



VALEN

My brain slowed to sludge as I tried to process the words. “Pregnant?”

She nodded, glancing down at the sofa cushion. “Yes.”

When I blinked, even that moved in slow motion. “How do you know?”

She raised her gaze to meet mine. “I took a pregnancy test at lunch today, and it was positive.”

“But...” I sputtered. “But we used protection.”

She shrugged. “I know.” She motioned to me. “Like you said, they’re not one-hundred percent effective.”

My wolf caught on to the announcement before I did. He bounded around with giddiness.

I ran my hand over my beard. “How is this possible?”

She tilted her head. “Are you really so surprised? I mean, you asked me if it was a possibility the other day.”

That was true. She was right—I shouldn’t be so shocked. That was why her scent was different; she was pregnant. She was carrying my child. *Our* child. When I’d asked her if it was possible, she’d brushed it off.

After the initial surprise settled, a small beam of light seemed to spread inside me. I grinned at her; my mate would soon be the mother of my child.

Wait, she didn’t even know that secret. I had to tell her—but not now. She appeared overwhelmed as it was. “This is wonderful news.” I reached out and took her hand, squeezing

it gently. “How are you feeling about this?” Then I assessed her, noting her eyes creased with worry. “How are you feeling in general?”

Her eyes gleamed with tears, and she blinked them away. “I don’t know; I’m scared. I’m not ready to do this again—alone.”

I pulled her into an embrace. “You won’t be alone. I’m here for you and our child.”

Cassandra pulled away. “How? You’ll be in another state.” Her mouth curled downwards. “With other women.”

I snapped back. Where did that come from? “Why would you say that?”

She pushed her bouncy curls back over her shoulders. “Come on, Valen. I know how we met. I’m sure I’m not the only single woman who visited the resort who found you attractive.”

I winced at the harsh assessment. Although she wasn’t completely off-base, it bothered me that she thought so little of me. “I came to Salem to see you, Cassandra. I wanted to see where this goes.”

She bit her lower lip. “I bet you weren’t expecting this,” she grumbled.

“No, not exactly,” I admitted. “But I’m thrilled. It’s a sign we’re meant to be. We’re going to start a family.”

Cassandra stared at me, appearing conflicted. “I don’t know how we’re going to manage it.”

I squeezed her knee. “We’ll figure it out.” Then I leaned over and kissed her. “Together.”

CASSANDRA

On the drive back from helping a family find a magical heirloom in their house north of Boston, I thought of the conversation with Valen last night. He'd taken news of the pregnancy better than I'd expected. Actually, I hadn't known what to expect. We didn't know each other well and were now having a child together. It was a lot to adjust to.

I picked up Paige from school and drove us home. "What do you think of Valen?" I asked here.

"He's nice." Then she told me about her day.

I smiled to myself at her sign of approval. After we returned to the house, Paige read in her room while I prepared homemade mac and cheese and baked carrots for dinner.

An urgent knock on my front door startled me.

"I know you're home, Cassandra," Thorne said. "We need to talk."

The unexpected sound of his voice crawled under my skin. I tried to remain calm as I opened the door. "What do you want, Thorne?"

"Where's Paige?"

"In her room. Why?"

"Good, she doesn't need to hear this. Come outside."

I huffed. "Saying please wouldn't hurt." I stepped outside and made sure the doorknob wasn't locked before I closed the door. "I hope this is quick."

“I heard you took Paige to meet your new shifter boyfriend.” His mouth curled as if the words left a bad taste in his mouth.

I rolled a shoulder. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“We talked about this,” Thorne retorted, his lip puckering in disgust. “I don’t want him around her.”

I gritted my teeth, trying to hold back the anger bubbling up inside me. “Well, that’s too bad. Because he’s a part of my life so naturally that means he will be around Paige.”

“You can’t be so neglectful.” Thorne scowled. “Shifters are wild, unpredictable creatures.”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “Once again, you are wrong about that. He’s good and kind. He cares about me—and that’s more than I can say for some people.” I fixed a hard stare on Thorne.

He glared back, his jaw clenched. “She’s my daughter too. I have a say in this.”

“To a point. And that point stops when it comes to who I spend time with.”

He sneered and his eyes turned frigid. “You’re making a mistake, Cassandra. You have no idea what these shifters are capable of. They’re animals and can’t be trusted.”

An instinct to cover my stomach and protect my child from Thorne’s poisonous words rose, but then he might suspect something. He didn’t need to know I was pregnant yet, and that Paige would have a sibling with shifter blood.

Instead, I jutted my chin up. “It sounds like you’re being ignorant and closed-minded about others—again.”

“One day, you’ll wake up and regret it,” Thorne warned while wagging his index finger. “And when you do, don’t come

crying to me.”

I took a step forward, my face inches from his. “When it comes to looking for a shoulder to cry on, you’d be the *last* person I’d go to.” My voice trembled with fury. “Especially since you were the cause of many tears.”

He opened his mouth to retort, but then snapped it shut, turned, and walked back to his car.



REFUSING to let Thorne get to me, I took Paige and met up with Valen at the park. He’d be a part of Paige’s life, so they should get to know each other better. It was a sunny day, unusually warm for winter, so we took advantage of getting outside while we could.

As we walked through the park, I watched Valen and Paige interact. He made her laugh with corny jokes. The three of us ran around, chasing each other in a game of tag. This is what I thought family would be like when I was pregnant with Paige. Could it be better this time around?

Or would I be repeating the same mistake by trusting the wrong man?

As I watched Valen, I pictured what our child might look like. Would he or she have his dark hair and blue eyes or my lighter hair and brown eyes? Our child would have both witch and shifter blood, which could be a great advantage in the magical world. Would our child be able to shift into a wolf form like Valen? Wait, I didn’t even know what Valen looked like as a wolf. That was something I had to see for myself.

Another possibility was that our child could be targeted for being different. There were too many prejudices in the world. When I recalled how Thorne considered shifters, I frowned.

No, I wouldn't let him affect another pregnancy. I focused on my baby.

Valen glanced over at me, catching my eye. My heart fluttered and my lips responded with a small smile.

"I'm hungry," Paige said a few minutes later.

"Time to go," I declared. Turning to Valen, I said, "Would you like to join us for dinner at the house? Nothing special." I shrugged. "Baked chicken, rice, and salad."

He grinned. "Sounds delicious. Count me in. What can I pick up? Dessert?"

"Paige and her sweet tooth would love that."

"I'll get her favorite ice cream." He winked. "What about yours?"

Since I wouldn't be enjoying wine for a while, I'd indulge in more ice cream. "Chocolate almond."

He nodded. "You got it."

"See you at the house." I smiled and then left the park with Paige.

AS I APPROACHED MY HOUSE, I SWORE under my breath. Thorne was parked out front. What in the hell was he doing there?

I pulled into the driveway and texted Valen:

Heads up: My ex is here. And he doesn't like shifters.

When I climbed out of the car, Thorne was already out of his, leaning against his car with his arms crossed.

Paige ran over and hugged him. He gave her a quick embrace in return and then pulled back.

They chatted for a minute before he said, "I need to talk to your mother. Why don't you go on inside?" I handed her the keys.

"Okay." She walked to the front door, unlocked it, and entered.

He tracked her with his gaze until she closed the door behind her.

I raised my chin. "Why are you here, Thorne? It's not one of your nights with Paige."

He turned to me, eyes that were warm for our daughter a moment ago now cold and hard. "I'm here to protect my daughter."

CHAPTER 15



VALEN

After I picked up ice cream, I drove to Cassandra's house. She was talking to a man on the sidewalk near a car. Warning antenna rose and my wolf perked up, assessing if he was a threat.

With their tense body language and strained expressions, they appeared to be arguing. He shot a pointed glare at Cassandra, and my wolf growled low inside. My muscles tensed as my protective instincts rose, but I forced myself to take a deep breath and keep calm. This was Paige's father. A delicate situation. I needed to handle it carefully.

But when I heard the harsh way he spoke to her, I bristled. No one talked to my mate that way.

The instinct to protect her and our child skyrocketed so suddenly, I shot out of the car before I realized what I was doing. My wolf itched to lash at this man, who he perceived as a threat.

As I approached with hastened steps, the man turned to me with a hard stare. "What the hell do you want?" He sniffed. "Shifter." He spat out the last word with disgust.

His scent was one I hadn't encountered before, but Cassandra had told me he was fae. It generated a harsh reaction, one I didn't like. Or maybe it was his hostile manner.

In a measured tone, I said, "I want you to back away from Cassandra."

"Valen, it's okay." She stepped in between us. "Thorne was just leaving. Weren't you?" She stared at him.

He ignored her and pointed a finger at me. “I don’t want you near my daughter, do you hear?”

Although Cassandra had warned me he didn’t like shifters, she didn’t mention why. His hostility was palpable, and my wolf stood vigilant, ready to strike.

We have to keep cool, I told him, although I struggled to do the same in the face of this rising threat. Fighting Paige’s father would exacerbate the situation. Although the idea repulsed me, I had to take the high road and try to be civil for both Cassandra and Paige’s sake.

“I don’t know what your issue with shifters is, but I’m going to be around here often.” I turned my hand up in a placating gesture. “It’s better that we try to get along. Why don’t we go to a pub and have a beer?”

His eyes narrowed to a piercing glare as if I’d suggested the most repulsive idea he’d ever heard. “You don’t understand,” he spat. “I don’t want my daughter around an animal. An untamed beast.”

“Thorne!” Cassandra cried. “What is wrong with you?”

My wolf bared his teeth while my anger simmered beneath my skin. My fingers itched to shift into claws so I could slice the words out of this asshole’s mouth. I curled my hands at my sides.

“Untamed beast?” I repeated, forcing myself to keep my voice steady. “Why do you think that?”

With the way my wolf coiled, yearning to strike, it was a struggle to stay in control.

“Look at you.” He sneered at me. “You can barely keep it together. Shifters are nothing but monsters hiding behind their human masks.”

“That’s enough.” I stepped closer to him, and Cassandra moved to the side to avoid being squashed. “I’m with Cassandra. That means I’ll be a part of Paige’s life.”

He snorted. “Not if I have anything to do with it.” He took a step backward from me.

“Dammit, Thorne,” Cassandra spat in an exasperated tone. “I’ve had enough with your prejudices. You step into our lives after all these years and suddenly want to be a father to Paige. I let you, as I thought it was good for her, but if you’re going to act like this, that’s going to change. Because I don’t want her to be around someone who’s going to poison her mind against others.”

“Like shifters,” he muttered in distaste.

“I’m with Valen now,” she added.

“And I don’t like the way you talk to her,” I declared, my heart pounding against my ribs. “So, if you want to be around her and our child, you better treat her with respect.”

“Our child?” Thorne’s eyes burned with fury. “How dare you call *my* daughter *your* child?”

Oh shit, I realized my mistake in what I blurted out. He didn’t know about the baby. Maybe Cassandra didn’t want him to know.

“No, Thorne. I’m pregnant,” Cassandra admitted with sagging shoulders.

He stared at her in disbelief before he blinked slowly. “You got knocked up by an animal?”

“Easy,” I warned through gritted teeth.

“I can’t believe this,” he muttered. Then he cast a disdainful glance at us both before he turned and stalked back to his car.

I didn't take my attention off him until he climbed in and drove away. With the threat gone, I turned to check on Cassandra. "Are you okay?" I asked her in a gentle tone.

She nodded, but her expression remained tense. "I'm sorry you had to see that. He has a way of bringing out the worst in me."

"I can see why." I huffed. "I'm sorry I spilled the news before you were ready. You did much better than me in keeping it together around that ass. It was a challenge not to tear him apart."

She released a low groan in acknowledgment. "Trust me, I know that feeling." She pushed her hair off her face. "I thought you kept your composure well." She grimaced. "He's infuriating."

I took her shoulders and stared into her eyes. "Cassandra, I'd never let him hurt you. I will do whatever it takes to protect you and our family."

She searched my eyes as if struggling to believe me. What could I do to convince her that I meant it? The instinct to keep her safe and care for her grew stronger every day.

Although she still didn't know it, she was my mate. I couldn't keep that from her much longer. I'd have to tell her soon.

CASSANDRA

After I returned from an appointment during lunch, I stopped by Pandora's office but saw she had the phone to her ear. She raised her index finger, motioning for me to wait as she appeared to be finishing up a call, probably communicating with one of the many supernatural networks around the world. Her black hair was piled up into a bun on the top of her head except for her bangs. I couldn't imagine having those with my curls. My hair would not cooperate, and curls would spring in all directions from my forehead.

The scent of cinnamon and sage perfumed the area, and I inhaled to breathe more in.

She ended the call. "How was your appointment?"

"The midwife confirmed it." I patted my tummy and then sat in the chair across from her. "I'm going to have a baby."

She clasped her hands together and smiled. "Oh, that's wonderful." She tipped her head. "Isn't it?"

A twinge of excitement unfurled inside. I couldn't believe it—a baby was growing inside me. "Yes." I rubbed the worry line between my brows. "And terrifying." I squeezed my eyes shut, remembering the altercation with Thorne last night. "And unfortunately, Thorne knows."

She drew her brows closer. "You told him?"

"It wasn't intentional." I then described the incident last night.

She groaned. "Maybe I should have agreed to put a hex on your ex when you first suggested it."

“Ha, yes.” I gave a rueful laugh. “So much is happening so quickly, and I don’t know how to deal with it.”

“Yes, it’s a lot, but you’ll adjust to everything with time.”

Pandora gave me a reassuring nod.

I hoped so. Dealing with Thorne had triggered a new wave of doubts about what was best for the baby and me. I chewed my bottom lip.

“Yes, that’s what I need more of. Time.”

AS THE AFTERNOON WENT ON, the reality of my situation spiraled out of control. There were so many things I had to consider when bringing a new baby into my home. Did I even remember how to childproof? Likely advice had changed a lot over the last decade. Then there was the situation with Thorne to add to the stress.

On top of all that, I had my relationship with Valen to consider. With this baby, we’d taken a giant leap from a fun encounter in the mountains to navigating parenthood together. Would he soon tire of being here with me and want to return to his carefree life as a single shifter in his cabin? Would he cheat on me like Thorne had done, breaking my already fragile and scarred-over heart?

This new co-parenting relationship with Thorne was already so draining. And with his animosity, it was even more difficult. Would I be adding another level of stress to my life with another baby daddy to deal with?

By the time I finished work, I knew what I needed to do—what was best for the baby. And what that meant was calming the environment however I could. If I was an anxious wreck,

I'd be sending negative energy to my child. I asked Valen to meet me for a walk along the shore.

He went to take my hand, but I avoided doing so by pushing my hair back from the sea breeze.

"I went to the midwife today," I began. "She confirmed that I'm pregnant."

He grinned. "That's great."

Was he sincere? "Is it, though? I mean, becoming a father is going to alter your lifestyle. When you return to the mountains, we're going to have to figure out how we're going to coordinate parenting this child together—assuming you want to be a part of the process."

He blinked twice. "Of course I do."

I took a deep breath. When I exhaled, I sagged. "Valen, I don't mean to compare you to Thorne, but I've gone through this before. He acted so excited when we found out I was pregnant, but that didn't stop him from cheating on me—and then abandoning us. I can't help but think this might happen again." With a shake of my head, I added, "And I can't go through that emotional turmoil another time."

Valen recoiled, looking hurt but then pushing on a smile. "I understand. But give me a chance. I'm not him. I can't imagine leaving my child the way he did."

I wanted to believe him, but could I? Grabbing a lock of hair, I twisted it around my fingers. There was so much to consider. "I'm having a child with shifter blood and don't even know what you look like in your wolf form. Could you show me?"

"Sure." He glanced around the seashore, which was barren since it was winter. "Is it safe to shift here?"

“We should probably go somewhere less exposed. There’s a park with plenty of woodland not far from here.”

Several minutes later, we’d driven over to a park and walked a snow-covered trail into the woods. The air was crisp with the scent of pine. Many other types of trees within had lost their foliage, but we still had enough cover to avoid being seen.

We stepped into a clearing that was bathed in dappled sunlight.

Valen searched around and sniffed. “I think we’re alone.”

Once he removed his shirt, my gaze locked onto his muscular chest.

“You’re not going to get undressed out here, are you? It’s cold.”

“It doesn’t bother me.” He removed his boots and pants.

I gaped as he exposed more skin. Then he stood stark naked before me.

“Ready?” he asked.

I bit my lower lip and nodded. Curiosity sparked within me, and my pulse quickened with anticipation.

Energy pulsed in the air between us. A sparkling iridescence surrounded Valen’s body as he began to shift. Muscles contorted and bones cracked. Limbs elongated and fur sprouted from his skin. Within another blink, a massive gray wolf stood before me, staring at me from amber eyes that were so human and familiar.

I couldn’t tear my gaze away; I was captivated by Valen in this form. As I took a cautious step forward, I stretched out my hand, which trembled with a strange excitement. This wolf was Valen, the man I’d fallen for and the father of my child. Our child might also be able to take on this magnificent form.

My fingers brushed along the fur on the top of Valen's head. It was softer than it looked. Valen turned his head toward me, and I touched his cheek. "Amazing," I whispered in awe.

He let out a low rumble that sounded like he liked it. I continued to stroke his fur, fascinated by this experience.

And terrified.

When Valen shifted back a minute or two later, I could barely speak.

"Are you okay, Cassandra?" he asked as he dressed. "You look pale."

"I'm—I'm—" After blinking, I tried again. "What you can do is incredible."

He cocked his head as we walked out of the woods. "Surely, I'm not the first shifter you've seen."

"No," I agreed. "But you're the first one I've been intimate with." After taking a deep breath, I added, "And now I'll be raising one."

He attempted to take my hand. "Your hands are trembling." After releasing it, he said, "You don't need to fear me." His mouth turned into a grim line. "Ever."

"I'm not afraid of you, Valen." My shaky hand rose to my temple. "I just need...time."

We walked in silence out to the car as I tried to process what I saw with what it meant for our future. My thoughts fired like crazy, speculating about all the unknowns with us having a child together.

Valen drove to my house and didn't push me to speak. Once we parked out front, he walked with me to the door. I didn't invite him in.

I turned to him and said, “What I think we both need is time.”

He squinted at me. “For what?”

“To figure out what we want. Not just with this baby coming into our lives, but with each other.” I motioned in between us. “It’s probably best that you go home so we have some space to give us clarity.”

Valen stared at me, his face a mix of hurt and disbelief. “You want me to go back to the mountains?” Although his voice lowered, the pain was still evident.

I exhaled and wrapped my arms around myself. What I had to think of most was what was best for our child. “This might be a novelty for you, Valen. You’ve enjoyed your life up north. Living with your pack. Running free in the mountains. You’ll get bored with us here and the responsibilities of being a parent. You’ll want to leave us, eventually.”

He appeared stunned. “That’s completely untrue, Cassandra. I can understand why you might think that way because of what you went through, but it’s not going to happen with me.”

“You can’t promise that.”

“I don’t want to be with anyone else, and I don’t want to go anywhere else. I want to be with you and raise our child.” He blew out a rough breath. “You’re the only one for me—my mate.”

My eyes bulged wide open. “Your *what?*” Then I blinked so quickly, it was like my eyelids were twitching.

“My mate,” he repeated like it was a sacred vow. “The one I’m destined to be with. Not for a few weeks or until the novelty wears off, as you described it. The one I’m fated to be with for the rest of my life.”

“Whoa.” My hand trembled as I raised it to my brow and rubbed while my mind wrestled with what he’d revealed. I knew about mates. Bumbling broomsticks, even Lucas had been a stripper until he met his mate and was now totally smitten and committed to Zoe. But me? With Valen? We barely knew each other.

I searched his eyes as if I’d find deceit but only found sincerity.

“Cassandra, I know it’s a lot to take in,” he said in a gentle tone. “But it’s the truth.”

I swallowed hard as the weight of his words settled over me. “How long have you known this?”

Valen adjusted his weight from one leg to another on my front stoop and rubbed the back of his neck. “My wolf knew right away. It took me a little longer. But once we spent the night together in my cabin, I knew.”

I gaped at him. “You knew since then?” So much had happened since then, the biggest of which was finding out I was pregnant. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

He adjusted his weight from one foot to the other. “Because it’s a lot to process. Trust me, I never thought it would happen to me. I’m in my mid-forties and had given up on the idea that I’d ever find my mate.” His eyes softened. “But then I met you.”

This was—intensity on overload. My mind raced with thoughts I couldn’t pinpoint. I didn’t know if it was from what he revealed or my pregnancy hormones going haywire or something else. Tears welled up in my eyes as I wrestled with emotions that flitted from one to another. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Just give it time to settle in.”

I nodded and raised my chin. “Yes, that’s exactly what I need, Valen. Time.”

“Okay.”

“And space. This doesn’t change the fact that I think we need some time apart. In fact, it convinces me that it’s even more necessary. I need to adjust to my life changing so quickly before it veers out of control. And I think you should have some time away from me.” I motioned between us. “I know the mate bond is strong, but maybe if you have space, you’ll be able to think more clearly about what you want.”

His eyes darkened a shade, the pain evident. “I’ll do as you wish.” His mouth clenched. He turned and walked up the walkway but then stopped and looked back. “But I already know what I want.” His gaze locked onto mine. “You.”

He walked away from me, but this time, he didn’t look back.

CHAPTER 16



VALEN

Three long days and even longer nights passed. I stood atop the mountain while the morning sun glistened on the new snowfall and gazed down. This used to be my favorite part of the day—being the first to carve fresh tracks through the snow, but now it lacked the same gusto. Still, I had to do my job and survey the trails for safety before we opened for guests.

My coworkers called out to each other as we discussed trail conditions and potential hazards. Their voices sounded distant, muffled by a storm brewing within me. These mountains, once my sanctuary, now felt too vast. Too empty. Too void.

“You okay, man?” Damon asked. “You seem glum lately.”

I grunted. “I’m fine.” The hell I was. I was far from it. But I hadn’t told him the reason why.

If I wasn’t tossing and turning at night, trying to ignore the yearning to return to Cassandra, I was prowling the mountain in wolf form, howling for my mate. I thought the ache in my chest would lessen with each passing day, but instead, it grew more intense.

I yearned for something more, something that couldn’t be found on these snow-covered peaks. I longed for my mate.

As I skied down a trail, I navigated over to the black diamond slope where I’d first seen Cassandra. She’d been sliding down the mountain while her skis shot in different directions. She’d been so flustered when I attempted to help her and fled as soon as we managed to get her back in skis. Sure, she didn’t feel that instant connection that my wolf did, but the spark between us had ignited fast soon after. We’d spent as much free time as

we could together that weekend. And then I'd followed her to Salem, forging a new relationship with the start of our family.

But she'd asked to see me in wolf form and then she'd asked me to leave. Rejecting me.

I should have known better. After all, my first love finding her mate had ripped me apart when I was young. Why would I fare any better when meeting my own? Love was hard. Soul-crushing. Tragic. It could tear you apart.

Wait—love? Was what I felt for Cassandra beyond this connection between mates? Had I fallen in love with her?

I pointed my skis downhill and navigated down. By the time I approached the bottom, my gaze locked onto the lodge where I'd gone to check on Cassandra after her fall. I pictured her sitting there with her blonde curls tousled and wet from the snow.

Now too many landmarks were imprinted with memories of her. The hotel where she'd stayed stood across the street—where I'd tripped and fallen in the lobby. Kelly's Pub where I often unwound after a shift now seemed to be missing something. Someone.

As my shift drudged on that day, I thought of Cassandra. She was never far from my mind no matter how often I tried to shake her off. When I was finally done for the day, I went to Kelly's Pub with packmates, to unwind the way I often did after a day on the trails. If I forced myself to go through my old routine, maybe it would soften the sharpest pangs of missing her.

It didn't help. While they chattered and enjoyed the beer and meat-covered nachos, I sank deeper into my thoughts. Missing her.

When Grayson entered a short while later, his gaze found me.

He walked over to me. “Valen, can I have a moment?”

“Sure.” We headed down the bar, away from the others.

I didn’t want anyone to overhear what we’d discuss, but the classic rock playing Aerosmith’s “Dream On” should mask our conversation.

“Are you okay?” he asked with a concerned expression.

“No,” I admitted with a heavy exhale. “She wants space.”

“Want to tell me what happened?”

Did I? I’d bottled it up since I returned, choosing to mope rather than deal with anguish I never thought possible. “So much. Not only am I certain she’s my mate, but she’s pregnant with my child.” As soon as I started to talk, the words tumbled out of me, sometimes in an incoherent order.

Grayson let me babble on, only interrupting when my explanation was difficult to follow.

After I finished my anguished tale, he asked, “Where does your heart want to be?”

“With her of course.”

“Then you know where to go.”

I blinked at him. “But she doesn’t want me there.”

He shook his head. “That’s not what you said. You said she wanted time and space. You can still give her that but let her know you’re there for her whenever she needs you.”

I groaned. “Or she’ll think I’m a creepy stalker who won’t leave her alone.”

AFTER I LEFT THE PUB, I trekked through the valley, tormenting myself with more reminders of walks and shared meals with Cassandra. I avoided returning to my cabin since it was the hardest location to face without her. My former sanctuary now mocked me with its coldness.

Eventually, I forced myself to return. The second I opened the door, I instinctively sniffed, searching for a hint of her scent to comfort me. Or torment me. Same difference at this point.

Then I entered my cabin—now marked with memories of a night of passion with Cassandra; the night we'd conceived our child. The four walls of this space echoed with emptiness. It was cold in here with the winds howling outside. I lit a fire to warm the space. Flames crackled in the hearth, casting flickering shadows across the cabin but did little to counter the desolation that settled into my bones.

I sank onto the worn couch, my mind plagued by longing. The weight of loneliness crushed me like an avalanche. To distract myself, I played music—letting the app shuffle through a playlist of songs I liked. When Def Leppard's "Bringin' on the Heartbreak" played, I scowled.

"Are you reading my mind?" I asked aloud. "Finding the right song to fit my inner turmoil? Or are you screwing with me?"

Who was I talking to? Okay, now I was really losing it—questioning the motive of a music playlist was a sure sign of a madman. Voicing those questions out loud confirmed it.

When night finally draped over the mountains, I removed my clothes and shifted to wolf form outside. The wind howled as it rustled the trees, as biting as the emptiness swelling beneath my fur.

My wolf ran up the incline as desperate with longing as me. He pounded on all fours through the forest as if he could burn through this suffering while the full moon seemed to mock us overhead. The solitude in the mountains, once my solace, offered no comfort without my mate.

Grayson was right. I had to go back to Cassandra and offer everything I could give her. And if she didn't want me...

I gulped. That was a life sentence of agony I'd be forced to bear.

CASSANDRA

“Mommy, when are we going to see Valen again?” Paige’s innocent voice pierced the air as I made dinner, catching me off guard.

I turned from the stove where I’d been cooking spaghetti and meatballs. “I’m not sure, sweetheart,” I replied, forcing a smile. “He went home.” Guilt washed over me since I’d been the one to ask him to return to the White Mountains.

She tipped her head. “Can we visit him and go skiing? He said we could.”

A big part of me wanted to do that—see Valen—as I already missed him so much. But I’d asked for time for a reason—I needed the space to process everything going on. Being pregnant was a huge adjustment as it was. Learning I was his mate was another massive revelation. We couldn’t jump from a fling in the mountains to such a huge commitment, on top of trying to figure out how we’d raise our child.

“I’ll ask the next time I talk to him.” When would that be? I chewed my lip as uncertainty gnawed at me. I still hadn’t told Paige about my pregnancy. I’d asked Thorne not to say anything to her yet, and he hadn’t appeared to have told her.

WITH EACH DAY THAT PASSED, I questioned what I’d done. I thought work would distract me, but seeing Lucas and Zoe together struck a painful chord deep inside of me. Although they couldn’t be more opposite, their admiration for each other was clear. Both Pandora and Nova had also made a commitment to their mates, and they also seemed happy.

Was it possible that I'd made a mistake by asking Valen to leave? Had I let the fear from my past heartbreak with Thorne affect my chances of finding happiness in my future?

That night, after Paige went to bed, the emptiness of my living room engulfed me. I missed Valen. Although we hadn't known each other long, it seemed clear that the fates wanted us together. Why was I being a fool to push away something that could be so right?

A long night stretched before me. I'd go to bed alone, again. The implications of my decisions gnawed at me, adding to the ever-increasing doubts, questions, and regrets.

I sank onto the couch and placed my hand on my stomach. What did the future hold for our child? Valen had said we'd figure it out together, but I'd put a halt to that with this insistence that we spend some time apart. I'd thought it would help me find clarity, but it also made me realize how much I missed him. Although I'd been shocked when the shifter I'd spent the night with on a ski trip showed up in Salem, now I remembered the times we'd spent here sharing meals, walks, and conversations as among the happiest in years.

Rather than being swamped by the fear of parenting a child alone again, I pictured Valen in the park with Paige and me. I heard our laughter in my mind. We could have more moments like that—Paige with a younger sibling. The four of us would be a family.

Yes, it was reckless to fall for someone so quickly and start a family with him when we barely knew each other. But I knew his character and that he had a good, kind heart. He wasn't anything like Thorne, who was calculating and manipulative. All the little things about Valen I'd learn in time, like his favorite color or book. Did that even matter? He woke a part

of me that I thought had been destroyed for good after Thorne. Valen touched my soul and won my heart. I wanted to embrace the possibilities of a future with him rather than succumb to the fear of what could go wrong.

Maybe I should consider what Paige asked about visiting Valen in the White Mountains. I'd figure out the next step tomorrow. Decisions were easier to make after a night of sleep rather than looping through doubts alone in the darkness.

VALEN

The snow-covered peaks of the mountains stretched before me. This had been my home for many years, but the hollowness that grew inside me couldn't be ignored. The quiet solitude of my cabin in the woods no longer provided a comfortable haven; it was too empty and too cold. It was time to say goodbye to my life here and move on. It was time to go to Cassandra in Salem.

I attempted to keep the goodbyes brief. After all, I had no idea what would happen with Cassandra. She might not want me there and then what? Would I return here brokenhearted and rejected? I gulped. That wasn't something I could contemplate yet.

I finally told Damon about Cassandra being my mate.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" he asked. "Finding your mate is a big deal."

I shrugged. "It's been a whirlwind." As if those four words could explain anything? "She's pregnant with my child," I added.

His eyes widened. "That's amazing. Congrats, man! You're going to be a father!"

After I told Damon, I visited Grayson in his office. I gave him a quick update with my plan to go to Salem and then admitted, "I don't know if I'll be back." After a heavy exhale, I added, "But I can't be this far from my mate."

"I understand," Grayson replied with a nod. "You always have a place here with the pack."

A lump welled in my throat. I'd be leaving my pack and my home, facing an unknown future. Trepidation for what lay ahead crept up my spine.

I couldn't let fear of the unknown stop me. My future lay with Cassandra and our family, of that I was sure.

If she'd accept me.



AS I PACKED some belongings in my cabin, I circled around it. It was odd to leave after spending so many years with this as my home. Funny how much had changed after one night there with Cassandra and discovering she was my mate. It changed everything. I'd never be the same.

When it came down to it, this cabin was only a shelter—four walls and a roof. It took more than that to make a home, and it was time for me to seek that out.

My resolve fortified, I threw some bags in my trunk and bid farewell to the mountains. Then I set out on the journey back to Salem—back to my mate.

As I navigated the winding roads through the mountains, I shuffled through a playlist. When Billy Idol's "Catch My Fall" played, a smile spread across my face. Meeting my fated mate had all started with Cassandra's tumble on the mountain. After I'd tripped over the kids in the hotel and joked for her to catch my fall next time, she'd teased asking if I tried to match her fall.

Oh, Cassandra. The ache to be near her grew. Damn, I missed her.

How could I feel so much so soon for someone I hadn't known for that long?

Because she's our mate, my wolf declared without hesitation.

Yes. For once, I didn't argue with him.

AS I NEARED SALEM, anticipation pulsed through my veins. The prospect of seeing Cassandra again ignited a fire of yearning within. My leg twitched. The possibility of her not being happy about my return stirred increasing anxiety that churned in my gut.

I wouldn't leave. I *couldn't* leave. Sure, she could stomp on my heart and reject me, but there was something bigger at stake than my feelings—our child. Even if Cassandra didn't want me as her mate, I'd be there for our child.

My phone buzzed. It was Cassandra calling. My heart beat with a long thump. I stared at the screen in wonder. Was I imagining this from thinking about her so much? After gaping for another two seconds, I assured myself I wasn't delusional.

"Hello." I hoped I sounded calm.

"Valen." Her voice sounded slightly breathless. I hadn't heard that sweet sound since I left Salem, and it brought a surprising sense of comfort to my restless soul.

"I was wondering if... Paige was asking about you. You'd mentioned skiing there, and I was thinking..." Her voice trailed off once more. She sighed and then asked, "Could we come up this weekend?"

My heart jolted. "No!" I barked before I had a moment to censor myself.

"No?" She questioned with surprise.

I ran my hand through my hair. Damn, I couldn't screw this up. After a deep breath, I exhaled. "I mean, I'd rather you not come up this weekend because I'm not there."

"Oh." After a pause, she asked, "Where are you?"

I turned onto her street and approached her house. "Look outside your front window in about three seconds."

CHAPTER 17



CASSANDRA

My heart thudded as tingles of anticipation danced inside my body. I rushed to my living room and looked outside the window. Sure enough, Valen pulled up in his car.

“You’re here,” I uttered with a sigh.

“I’m here,” he said. “Can I come in?”

“Yes.” I ended the call and set my phone on the end table. When I raised my hand to unlock the door, my fingers trembled. I couldn’t believe he was here. Had I manifested this after thinking about him so much?

After I opened the door, my eyes locked with his. He approached on my front walkway, and my breath came quicker.

“Valen.” I pushed the door open wider to give him room to enter.

“Hi, Cassandra.”

After I closed the door, he turned to me. “I know you asked for space, but I couldn’t stay away any longer.” His blue eyes fixed on mine with sincerity. “I want to be with you, Cassandra. I want to be here for you and Paige and our baby.” He placed his hand on his chest. “And if you don’t want me that way...” He gulped, his expression turning pained. “I’ll respect your decision.” Then he raised his chin and continued, “But I’m not Thorne. I’d never abandon my family. Please let me be a part of our child’s life.”

Tears brimmed in my eyes. Emotions rushed through me with such force, I couldn’t even keep up with the quick pace of

them seizing a brief hold—excitement, relief, and pure and utter joy.

“Oh, Valen.” I rushed over and threw my arms around him. In my enthusiasm, I knocked us off balance. He tumbled backward onto the sofa with me landing on top of him.

Valen laughed in a low rumble. “I’ve fallen for you once again.”

I chuckled. “It looks like we’ve fallen for each other.”

As we lay there, limbs tangled and my body still pressed onto his, we stared into each other’s eyes.

Then his widened. “The baby! Did you get hurt?”

“No, Valen,” I assured him with a gentle smile. “That wasn’t even a fall. More like me using you as a cushion.”

“Oh.” He exhaled with relief. “Good.” In a lower voice, he said, “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you too,” I admitted. “And I’m sorry for pushing you away. If it’s any consolation, it made me realize how much I wanted to be with you again.”

He reached up and pushed one of my curls behind my ear, but it tumbled onto my cheek again.

“They can’t be tamed,” I joked.

“I love them.” His fingers moved to my face and then traveled with a slow caress downward. “And I hope this isn’t too much too soon, but I love you too, Cassandra.”

Warmth spread through my body. “It’s exactly what I wanted to hear,” I said. “Because I’ve fallen in love with you.”

His eyes widened. “You have?”

I nodded. “Although it may take me some time to adjust, I want to be more than the mother of your child. I want to be your mate.”

His eyes sparkled and lips twitched before spreading into a luminous smile. “You don’t know how excited my wolf is to hear that. Almost as much as me.”

As he moved up to kiss me, I leaned down, eager to feel his lips on mine. In my haste, our noses collided.

When I pulled back, I covered my nose. “Whoops. Sorry.”

He chuckled. “Let’s try that again.” His eyes gleamed with amusement.

I nodded with a grin. “Take two.”

This time, we moved more slowly, and I savored that anticipation. When our lips met, the connection was tender. I lost myself in the moment, relieved to have Valen back in my arms. No way would I push him away again.

“Mom?”

Paige’s voice startled me, and I yanked myself away from Valen’s body. As I attempted to rise, he rushed to sit up. We tangled worse around each other, stumbling over each other’s bodies like a human pretzel in a sofa version of the game Twister. Several mortifying seconds later, I managed to untangle my limbs and stand upright.

“Paige.” I smoothed my clothing, a lame attempt at seeking composure after being caught making out on the couch. “We were...um...well, Valen and I were just...”

“Kissing,” she finished with a giggle.

“Yes, erm—we were—kissing,” I began, not knowing where I was going to go from there while my cheeks burned.

She glanced from me to Valen, who now stood beside me. He turned to me with a look that questioned *What should I do?*

Like I had a clue.

Paige tilted her head. “Does this mean you’re officially boyfriend and girlfriend?” she asked in a sing-song tone.

I glanced at Paige and then Valen and it all became clear. It was time not only to admit what was going on to myself but to my daughter.

“We’re more than that, sweetheart,” I told her. “We’re starting a family.” Placing my hand on my stomach, I said, “I’m going to have a baby, which means you’re going to be a big sister!”

Paige gasped and then ran over to hug us both. “I’ve always wanted a little brother or sister. Which is it?”

I wrapped my arms around her, savoring the affection. “I don’t know yet. We’ll find out when the baby’s born. It will be a wonderful surprise.”

“Absolutely,” Valen said, enclosing us both in his massive embrace. Then he whispered, “Family.”



“Do you think the baby will be a boy or a girl, Mommy?” Paige asked when I picked her up from school. That was her number one question since I’d told her about my pregnancy.

“I don’t know, sweetie. I’m happy with either.” After a few seconds, I asked, “How do you feel about having a baby brother or sister?”

“I can’t wait,” she declared.

When I glanced into the rearview mirror, she was smiling. That was a relief; not that I thought she wouldn't be happy about our growing family. But since it had been the two of us for so long, I couldn't help but worry how she'd react.

As we drove home, I mentally went through whether I'd forgotten anything that I needed for dinner. Valen was coming over tonight, and I was going to make lasagna.

"Valen is going to bring your favorite ice cream for dessert tonight," I told her.

"Yay!"

"Make sure you do your homework while I make dinner."

"Okay, Mommy."

After taking a deep breath, I asked her something that had been on my mind. With all the changes to our family, I was worried about how it might affect Paige. "Do you like Valen?"

"Yes," she replied right away.

"What do you like about him?"

"He plays with me at the park, and he's bringing me ice cream."

I chuckled. Perhaps my worry was needless. "Yes, those are two big pluses." I liked him for far different reasons.

Once we got home, I started on dinner while Paige did her homework at the dining room table. Valen texted to see if I needed anything else from the store besides ice cream.

Just you, I texted back. Then I sent a heart emoji.

I bent my head back and rolled my eyes at myself. Bumbling broomsticks, how sappy—I made myself sick.

When he texted back, *You already have my heart*, I chuckled. My cheesiness was worth it.

I returned to preparing dinner. As I popped the pan of lasagna into the oven to cook, the doorbell rang. Valen was quick.

“I’ll get it!” Paige called out and pushed away from the table.

“Thanks, honey.” As she headed to the front door, I opened the fridge and pulled out lettuce, tomato, and cucumber for a salad. I pulled the vegetables out of the bag and then rinsed them off under cold water.

What was taking them so long? I pictured Paige at the front door with Valen, asking him about the ice cream. When I turned the water off, I still didn’t hear them. I heard the door open but then nothing. No voices, no movement as he entered the house. Nothing.

A cold shiver ran through me.

Don’t overreact, I told myself. They’re probably playing a quick game of tag or something like that.

I wiped my hands on a dishtowel and walked into the living room. “Paige?” I called out.

Silence.

The front door was closed. Panic thumped in my rib cage. I opened the door and scanned the front yard and street before me. No sign of Paige or Valen. His car wasn’t parked in front of the house or in the driveway.

Terror pulsed at my temples. “Paige?” I called louder this time, trying to keep the fear from my tone.

Stay calm. Think. What could have happened?

My mind raced with possible scenarios, mostly veering to the darkest ones.

Where was Paige? I had to find her.

I grabbed my phone and ran outside, searching for her.

“Paige!” As each second passed, my anxiety spiked.

The worst—and most likely—scenario leaped to the forefront of my mind. Someone kidnapped my daughter.

CHAPTER 18



VALEN

*O*n the way from my hotel to Cassandra's house, I stopped by the ice cream store. It was already dark out as evening fell so early in the winter here, and the streetlights came on. I picked up Paige's favorite ice cream, cookie dough. When I pictured how serious her expression turned when she told me about her favorite ice cream being cookie dough, I smiled. She was a good kid and would be a great older sister.

While walking back to my car, my phone rang. It was Cassandra. Ah, she probably needed something from the store. I'd texted her before I left my hotel to ask her if she wanted me to pick up anything on the way. I stopped walking, ready to turn back, and answered the call.

"Hey, babe. Just leaving the store. Need something?" I asked.

"Valen, it's Paige."

The strain in her voice tightened my shoulders. "What is it?"

"She's gone." Her voice trembled.

"What do you mean, gone?" I asked, my heartbeat kicking up a level.

"I'll explain when you get here. Please hurry."

"I'm on my way."

I bolted to my car and sped over to Cassandra's house, my mind racing with scenarios as to what could have happened. I white-knuckled the steering wheel and pressed on the gas pedal.

WHEN I PULLED up to the house, Cassandra was pacing outside on the front walkway while talking to someone on the phone. Her face was drawn with worry, and her pain gnawed at me. My wolf whimpered inside.

I parked the car and rushed over to her as she ended the call.

“What happened?” I asked.

She pushed a golden ringlet from her cheek as if its presence annoyed her. “I was making dinner. The doorbell rang. I thought it was you—” Her breath came quick and hard. “Paige went to answer it. When she didn’t come back and it was quiet, I went to see what was going on.” Her voice trembled. “She was gone.” She winced. “It’s Thorne. He won’t answer his phone. I know it’s him. Who else would take her?” She glanced at me with pained eyes.

What did I know about Thorne except that he was a cheating fae and shitty dad who hated shifters? Nothing. I grimaced and a sour taste coated my tongue. I inhaled. His scent was recent as was Paige’s. My wolf stirred in agitation, ready to hunt him down. I took a deep breath to calm us.

“One second,” I told Cassandra. I tracked the trail up to the sidewalk where it disappeared. “Yes, he was here. His scent is fresh.” After glancing down the road, I added, “He must have gotten her into his car and drove away.”

Cassandra dropped her head into her hands and sobbed. “I never should have let him into her life. I thought I was doing what was best for her, but now...” Her voice trailed off.

“Come on, let’s go inside and figure things out.” I led her into her living room. The aroma of baking lasagna reached me, the promise of a wonderful night marred. My instincts flared to hunt for the fae who took Paige and destroyed Cassandra’s

peace of mind. I had to find Thorne, and when I did, he'd pay. No one hurt my mate.

The doorbell rang. It was Pandora, the witch with black bangs I'd met at the Network, and her mate Austin, a burly, clean-shaven bear shifter. They quickly introduced us, and then Cassandra got them up to speed.

In the minutes that followed, others arrived—the petite detective, Zoe, with the blond dragon shifter, Lucas. Nova, the witch with auburn hair, came soon after. The living room was abuzz with discussion, speculation, and possible courses of action, from technology to magic, from searching on foot to searching from brooms while flying.

“We have to look for her,” Cassandra said, her voice pierced with determination.

“Where do you think he'd take her?” I asked. “To his house?”

Her lips curled. “He knows that's the first place we'd look, but it's worth checking.”

“First, we need to confirm that Thorne took her,” Pandora said.

“It's him,” I declared. “I caught their scents outside. But I lost it there.” I pointed outside to a spot where the sidewalk met the street. “That must be where he parked his car.”

“Why would he take her?” Lucas questioned.

I turned to him. “Probably because of me. He hates shifters.”

“Hating shifters?” Lucas repeated. “What the Hades Crazies?”

“I'll check with neighbors if they have a security camera,” Zoe said. “We may be able to confirm that it was Thorne, what car he's driving, and which direction he headed.”

“I’ll go with you,” Lucas volunteered. “Once we know which way, I’ll shift to dragon form and search from the sky.”

“I’ll help,” Nova volunteered.

“Good idea,” Pandora added. She walked to the front window and glanced outside. “We should split up and start with neighbors. One goes this way.” She pointed to the right. “And another across the street. Same thing on the left.”

Austin nudged his chin higher. “I’m here to help.”

Cassandra remained on the sofa, wrapping her arms around herself as she appeared to withdraw.

I extended my arm behind her and squeezed her shoulder.

“Don’t worry, we’re going to find her.”

“What if we can’t?” she asked in a low voice edged with pain.

“What if he took her somewhere so I’ll never find her?”

That was certainly a possibility, but I wouldn’t let her sink into despair. “We’ll never stop looking.”

Cassandra gritted her teeth and stood. “I need to do a scrying spell.”

Pandora turned back from the window as the others filtered out to start their search. “Yes. I’ll help you.” She turned to Austin. “Can you go with the others to check with neighbors?”

“Of course.” He gave her a long glance before he departed, one that expressed the affection he felt for his mate—also a witch and shifter bonding.

Torn, I didn’t know what to do. One part of me yearned to stay and protect my mate and our child. The other itched to hunt the fae and destroy him for hurting Cassandra. And if he hurt Paige...

No, that wasn't likely. The more likely scenario was that he wanted to get her away from me.

"I'll go look with the others," I said to Cassandra. "Unless you want me to stay."

She fixed her gaze on me and pleaded, "Find Paige, Valen. Please find my girl."

I nodded and then swallowed, determined to do whatever it took to bring her home to Cassandra. Then I forced myself to walk out to track the fae responsible for hurting my family.

CASSANDRA

I shook off the despair that threatened to consume me and forced myself to think clearly. If this situation wasn't happening to me and it was a client coming to me at the Network, what would I do? That's when my brain started to function again. Instead of panicking and fearing the worst, I focused.

While Valen joined the others in the search outside for Paige, Pandora joined me in the small room I used to practice magic. We headed over to my altar. Pandora opened the circle.

After we lit candles, I added herbs to my scrying bowl.

Since I had such a strong bond with Paige, it would be easier for me to lead the spell to find her. Holding hands over the bowl, we closed our eyes. I began to chant to shift into the proper mindset. It was difficult to clear my mind of worry.

Nothing happened. My mind was still too cluttered with fear. "I'm too distracted."

"Let me help you clear your mind," Pandora advised in a gentle tone. She then guided me in a meditation to clear my muddled thoughts.

Once I wasn't so distraught, it was easier to tap into the magical energy surrounding us. I visualized Paige and attempted to connect with her.

A milky white mist rose from the bowl and swirled around us.

Pandora's grip tightened on my hand. "It's working."

The mist cleared, revealing a blurry image of a dark room. A figure moving in the shadows. "It's Thorne," I whispered.

He approached a smaller figure. My heart pounded as the visual sharpened, and I saw Paige. “He has her.” I searched the location for clues as to where they are. The bland walls could be anywhere. I zoomed out, noting the matching beds with dated bedspreads side by side. “I think they’re in a motel room.”

That didn’t narrow it down much since there were countless of them in the area. After searching for more clues to indicate which particular one they were in and finding none, my energy was zapped. We lowered our hands.

When I opened my eyes, I was woozy. I had to blink to adjust to the room. It took a few seconds to steady my balance and reorient myself while we closed the circle.

Pandora assessed a keen gaze on me. “You look pale. Why don’t you sit down while I share the news with the others.”

“Okay.” I let her lead me to my living room sofa.

“I’ll get you a glass of water,” she said.

“Don’t worry about me,” I protested. “Finding Paige is more important.”

“And the baby,” Pandora insisted. “Lie back and rest. That took a lot out of you. I’ll be right back.”

“Maybe for a couple of minutes,” I agreed. Scrying did take a lot of energy, and since the baby also took up a good share, I was feeling more depleted than usual after a session.

She returned a few minutes later with a glass of water. After I sat up, she handed it to me, and I took a sip.

“Everyone is out looking. Volunteers are mobilized and the local police are all searching as well.

“Thanks.” I nodded with gratitude and then took another sip of water as I was parched. Although our group was small, we had resources to tap in emergency situations like this.

When our phones buzzed, we pulled them out. It was a video from Zoe. The text read *Security footage from a neighbor*. She noted the address and the direction the car was headed. When I viewed the clip, it was Thorne’s silver sedan.

My fingers curled toward my palms. If I found him, I’d curse him into tiny shreds of himself.

She squeezed my shoulder. “We’re going to find her, Cassandra.”

A lump formed in my throat, and I swallowed it. We had to.

CHAPTER 19



VALEN

Pandora added me to a group chat with others from the Network so we could communicate updates quickly. This was one of the times that I missed communicating with others in my wolf pack. We didn't need human technology with our mind connection, but I was far from my pack and dealing with different species, namely witches, shifters, and an elf.

After Pandora let us know about what they found scrying and Zoe shared the video of Thorne's sedan, we were certain he'd taken Paige and which direction they'd headed. That bastard. I wouldn't let him get away with this.

Cassandra had to be frantic with worry. I called to check on her. "How are you doing?"

"The scrying took some of my energy, but I'll be fine. I'll come help you look soon."

Her voice sounded drained. "You should stay home and rest. We're all out looking."

"I can't," she said in a pained tone. "My daughter is missing."

"I understand." After a pause, I added, "But you don't want to overexert yourself. You'll be able to function better after you rest."

She was quiet for several seconds before she agreed. "Okay, but only for a short while longer. I have to find my girl."

OVER THE NEXT HOUR, many supernaturals searched for Paige using our various abilities. I tracked along the shore using my wolf senses, Lucas flew overhead in dragon form, searching

from above, Zoe used technological gadgets, Pandora communicated to local law enforcement and networks, and Nova flew on a broomstick near the water. Other volunteers had joined in or were on the way, including Sebastian the wolf shifter; Gianna the siren; and Nova's mate, a vampire named Diego.

The group chat slowed as we made little progress.

I continued to sniff along the shore, determined to find them and put my mate at ease.

Another hour ticked on.

A message came through on our chat. It was from Cassandra.

I think I found which motel they're in.

How did you figure that out? I texted back.

I tried scrying again. I got a closer look at the rooms with the red in the curtain and bedspreads. Then I looked online for lodging in the area with images of the rooms. I think it's this one.

She sent a location on a map. My chest swelled with pride. Not only was the mate and soon-to-be mother of my child smart and funny, but incredibly resourceful.

I'm not far. Heading over, I texted.

Wait for us, Pandora advised. We'll coordinate how to approach.

I put my phone in my pocket and drove to the motel. It took less than five minutes for me to park at the end of the lot. Then, I approached on foot. Thorne's silver sedan was parked outside one of the rooms. I inhaled and confirmed that Thorne and Paige's scents were fresh.

My wolf grew agitated, ready to tear the fae apart.

Although Pandora asked me to wait, there was no way I could sit outside knowing that he was in there. He'd taken Paige and distressed my mate.

I attempted to peek inside the motel room, but the curtains were drawn. What could I do next? Knock on the door and announce my presence? Yeah, that wasn't very smart. He knew we'd be looking for them and damn well wouldn't answer.

Still, I had nothing else. I knocked on the door and then jumped to my left, moving out of view of the peephole.

After several seconds, he called out, "Who's there?"

The sound of his voice grated on me, but I had to focus.

"Pizza delivery," I called out. *Pizza delivery?* Where the hell was I going with this?

"Wrong room."

"The delivery notes this room."

"I didn't order one."

"It's paid for," I added. Who would turn down a free pizza, right?

"Then you eat it," he snapped.

Inside, Paige said, "Daddy, I'm hungry. Can we have it?"

"It's not for us," he added. "Go to sleep and I'll get you breakfast in the morning."

Did he not feed his child after he kidnapped her? How could he let her go hungry? That shot my pissed off state up another hundred levels. I cared for Paige and wouldn't let her go to bed hungry because of this selfish kidnapper.

Fury coursed through my veins as I stomped before the door. I stepped backward, keeping my gaze fixed on the door, and then slammed into it using all my force.

The door snapped open, its wood frame creaking, and I stumbled into the room.

“Valen!” Paige cried.

“What the—” Thorne asked with eyes wide and surprised.

I didn’t let him finish the sentence before I tackled him to the ground. Stunned, he soon recovered and fought back. He was strong and hit me with magic that slowed me down, but not dead on, and it didn’t stop me.

We tumbled across the narrow space on the dirty motel floor, bumping into beds and dressers.

“Help me, Paige,” Thorne shouted.

“How?” she asked in a confused tone.

“Hit him with a lamp!”

“I can’t hit him, Daddy! It’s Valen.”

Pride rose through me as this sweet little girl stood up to her ass of a father.

We tumbled some more before I rolled on top of him. His face was bruised and swollen with a cut near his temple. I was sure I didn’t look much better.

“Using your daughter to fight your battles?” I spat. “That’s almost as bad as kidnapping her.”

“She’s my daughter, you filthy shifter.” He stared up at me with pure hatred. “I won’t have her tainted by you or your mutt child.”

My wolf rumbled with rage. I raised my fist, punched Thorne in the face, and knocked him out.

As the adrenaline lingered in my veins, I realized what I'd done. Paige saw me knock her dad unconscious. Shame burned through the remaining fury. Would she hate me forever?

When I turned to meet her gaze, she stared back wide-eyed. "Are you alright?" I asked her in what I hoped was a gentle tone.

"Yes." She nodded quickly, and tears sprang from her eyes.

"Can I take you back home to your mom?" I gulped, bracing for her reaction. Maybe I should offer that someone else could take her in case she was now afraid of me.

Paige rushed over to me and wrapped her arms around me. She didn't say anything but sobbed.

Surprised, I stood statue still for a few seconds. Then my addled brain caught up. She was scared but not of me.

I hugged her back. "It's going to be okay," I promised her. In that moment, I vowed that it would be. I'd do whatever it took to protect her, Cassandra, and our child.

Our family.

I pulled out my phone and called Cassandra. "I have Paige. She's fine. I'm bringing her home."

CHAPTER 20



CASSANDRA

I'm bringing her home.

Valen's words echoed in my head as I paced before the front window, waiting for him to return with Paige. Although exhausted by scrying and the pregnancy, I was too anxious to sit. Whenever the sound of a car approached, I glanced out the window, my heart beating faster.

Finally, what felt like a hundred-year long sleeping spell later, a car approached. It was Valen. My hand fluttered to my heart. By the time I opened the front door, he'd parked. Both he and Paige climbed out of the car. As she bounded up the walkway, I ran toward her.

"Paige!" I spread my arms wide and hugged her tightly. The scent of her apple shampoo filled my nostrils. She was back. She clung to me, trembling. Tears spilled from my eyes. A part of me feared I'd never see her again.

When we broke apart, I asked her, "Are you okay?"

"Yes." She blinked through her tears.

"You're home now, sweetheart." My voice cracked with emotion as I pressed a loving kiss to her forehead.

"I was scared," Paige whispered, her voice filled with vulnerability. "Daddy said bad things about you and Valen, but I know they aren't true. He said he was taking me someplace safe."

Rage roared through my veins. If Thorne was before me right now, I'd claw his eyes out. Paige was smart, though, and she didn't believe his lies. I exhaled slowly, trying to stay calm. He was impotent to hurt anyone right now. Pandora and the others

had restrained him. They had taken him to a prison at the Network where he'd be unable to use magic and guarded by a gargoyle while awaiting the next steps.

"You're safe, Paige," I assured her. "You're home."

"Yes." Paige wiped her eyes. "Valen found me." She turned to him and smiled. "He brought me home."

The smile he gave her in return melted my heart.

"If you ever need anything, I'm here for you, Paige," he promised.

My lower lip trembled. This was what I always thought a relationship between a father and child would be; not the distorted version Thorne followed. Valen would be an amazing dad.

"Your mother is the one who figured it out," he added. "She's incredibly smart and resourceful."

Paige nodded and hugged me once more. "Thanks, Mommy."

Valen's blue eyes locked on me. So many emotions collided in my brain that I didn't even have words to identify them. Hints of strong feelings flickered across his features, and even his blue eyes glistened.

Through my chaotic emotions, I finally mustered two words. "Thank you." Those were minuscule to convey my immense relief.

"I'd do anything for you both," he declared. Then he glanced down. "And our baby."

In that moment, I knew. What I'd guessed before now rang clear in my mind. Our connection went beyond attraction. Yes, I'd fallen in love with a gorgeous shifter, but what I felt was more than that. There was no doubt that he was *the one*.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and nodded in my gratitude. Sure, our relationship might not be easy. A witch and a wolf shifter from two different worlds starting a family together would take plenty of learning and adjustment. But I was more positive this time around. Valen wasn't Thorne; he'd never hurt me and abandon our family the way Thorne did. And I was older, hopefully wiser, this time around.

We had this.

"Let's go inside and have some hot cocoa," I suggested.

As we walked in, I stole a glance at Valen's profile. He caught my stare and grinned. I'd forever be grateful for the time I tumbled in front of him down the mountain. It led to a second chance at love and a growing family.

CHAPTER 21



CASSANDRA

“*Y*ou sure you’re okay with this?” I asked Lucas and Zoe once more as Valen and I dropped Paige off at their house. It had been a couple of weeks since the night Thorne had kidnapped her, and I was still wary about leaving her, but he was imprisoned and couldn’t get to her. Fortunately, they’d moved him to a different location. If he’d been near me at work, I couldn’t promise I wouldn’t go down to the dungeon with every badass spell in my arsenal and go Mama Witch on him.

Lucas and Zoe had offered to watch Paige so Valen and I could meet up with the others at the Danger Zone, noting it would be good for him to meet more supernaturals in Salem. He’d finished moving most of his belongings down to Salem but kept the cabin in the mountains.

“Go,” Lucas insisted with a wave. “I’ll show Paige the band room in the basement.”

“And show off your record collection,” Zoe quipped.

Lucas loved to collect albums and talked about his new finds at work.

“Mommy, we’ll be fine,” Paige insisted, practically pushing me out the door.

“Okay, okay, I’m leaving,” I said with a chuckle. She’d been excited to go to Lucas and Zoe’s all week.

“Thanks,” Valen said.

“No problem. It’s good to meet the gang here in Salem,” Lucas replied. “Your new home.” He cocked a grin. “And one day,

we'll all go to the White Mountains for a group trip. That would be fun."

"Anytime," Valen agreed with a nod.

Lucas turned to Zoe. "We should have a Welcome to Salem party here for Valen," he suggested with an animated expression. "After all, Pandora made me the unofficial welcome wagon." He patted his chest. "A proud honor." He raised his finger. "I know just the thing—a potluck and game night."

"Let's plan one," Zoe agreed and then cocked her head. "If Sebastian will let anyone else do the cooking."

"Ah, right," Lucas replied with a lopsided grin. "We'll figure it out." He nodded with an assured look. "I'll talk to my foodie wolf buddy."

"Thanks again," I said as Valen and I walked out.

"Have fun," Zoe added.

AN HOUR LATER, Valen and I sat in a booth with our drinks at the Danger Zone with Gianna and Sebastian. Def Leppard's "Rock of Ages" thumped against the walls surrounding us. It was still early in the night so the music didn't drown us out yet. The volume seemed to rise during the night along with the alcohol levels. I doubted I'd last long with my pregnancy fatigue, but it was nice to get out with Valen for a couple of hours before I crashed.

"Now this is something we don't have in the mountains," Valen pointed out, amused by the retro rock vibe and a dungeon theme on a nearby wall. "A club like this."

“I wanted to make it unique.” Gianna motioned to a new piece of décor. “We just added those gothic gates that one of my patrons donated as he’s renovating his house. I thought it would look fitting as cemetery gates in front of painted tombstones with winged skulls.” She beamed at the new addition to her club.

“Looks fantastic,” I pointed out.

“It’s good to have another wolf shifter in Salem,” Sebastian noted. “Let’s go for a run one night.”

“Absolutely,” Valen agreed. “Show me all the good spots for a wolf to hunt.”

Gianna glanced at my Shirley Temple and frowned. “Sorry you can’t have a proper cocktail. I’ll make you a good one once you have the baby.”

“It’s delicious.” I took a sip to back up my statement.

She didn’t appear convinced. “I can’t imagine not being able to have a cocktail for nine months.” She threw her hands up. “No champagne?”

I chuckled. “I don’t have the love affair with champagne the way you do.”

Nova and Diego joined us. “Hey,” Nova greeted us. “Good to see you out.”

“It’s good to be out,” I replied.

“Feeling better?”

I’d had a bout of morning sickness at the Network yesterday morning, but it passed. It came on sporadically, which I could live with. It was better than every day, all day.

“Much.”

“How are you doing, man?” Diego extended his hand and introduced himself to Valen.

“Sorry. I forgot you two haven’t met yet.” I pointed to my temple. “Pregnancy brain.”

Diego was Nova’s dark-haired and sometimes broody, vampire husband.

Valen shook his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“I heard about how you got to Thorne.” Diego nodded with approval. “Nice work.”

We all squeezed into the booth and chatted while the music played familiar rock songs from the 80s and 90s. No longer was I the third wheel, or fifth, or even seventh, surrounded by couples who made googly eyes with their mates. I was one of them and understood now. It had been a long time since I’d been in love and never like this. I reached under the table and squeezed Valen’s leg.

He glanced at me, smiled, and squeezed mine in return.

Sebastian asked, “Do you think you’ll miss the mountains?”

“We’re keeping my cabin there,” Valen replied. “I can work shifts whenever we visit, and it will be good for the kids to have the best of both worlds.”

“Great idea,” Sebastian noted. He turned to Gianna. “We should think about getting a place up there. It would be good if we start a family.”

“If it’s even possible with our genetic mix of wolf shifter, siren, and human genes.” Gianna chuckled. “Regardless, I’m still enjoying our extended honeymoon and don’t want to think about changing anything for a long, long time.” She took a sip of her champagne.

Diego turned to Sebastian. “I never thought I’d ever hear you say you’d want to return to the mountains, man.”

He shrugged. “Things have changed since I left. For the better.”

Gianna turned to me and said, “How did you convince Lucas and Zoe to babysit instead of coming out?”

“They volunteered,” I replied, grateful they had done so. It was fun having a night out with adults before the baby came.

Nova said, “Maybe they’re thinking about starting a family and getting practice.”

“Already?” Gianna’s eyes widened. “They should enjoy their honeymoon phase first.” Her eyes widened and then she gave me a flustered glance, something that was rare on this confident siren. “I mean, I guess every couple is different.”

“Guess so,” I agreed with a smile. Sure, I wouldn’t have planned getting pregnant on my first night with Valen, but maybe it was the universe’s way of telling us we were meant to be together. I placed my hand on my stomach. One day soon I’d feel a kick. “Lucas suggested having a potluck at their house one night.”

Sebastian raised both hands palm-forward as if we’d stunned him with that suggestion. “A *potluck*?” He blinked and then shook his head. “We can’t have a hodge podge of dishes that don’t belong in the same room together cluttering a table.” He lowered his hands. “I can take care of the menu.”

Valen turned to me, and we exchanged an amused look, already sharing in on the quirks of my friends in Salem. Zoe had called that one earlier.

“Food is Sebastian’s love language.” Gianna raised her champagne glass. “Embrace it. I do.” Then she chuckled and

took another sip.

I raised my Shirley Temple in cheers and then took a sip. Pandora and Austin arrived soon after, and we spread into a second booth. During the evening, Valen and I stole glances at each other and secret touches under the table.

“Anyone interested in seeing the *The Cure*?” Diego asked.

“Tickets are going on sale tomorrow for an upcoming concert in Boston. Nova, Lucas, and Zoe are all in.”

“There go my new babysitters,” I said with a chuckle. “So probably not me.” I exhaled.

“You can find someone else,” Nova suggested. “We should all go.”

“Yes, that would be so much fun,” Gianna declared.

Sebastian, Pandora, and Austin agreed.

I shook my head. “With how tired I get after eight, I’d probably want to crawl in bed way too early, anyway.”

“We’ll find another time to hang out,” Pandora said. She turned to Austin and then Valen. “Show our new shifter around the area.”

“Good idea,” Austin said. “I’m still discovering new things as I explore.” He turned to Valen. “Happy to show you around, Valen. As one newbie shifter to another.”

“Thanks, man,” Valen replied. “That would be great.”

“And a double date sounds fun to me,” I added. “As long as it’s not too late.”

“We’ll make it an early night,” she said.

Eventually, the exhaustion of pregnancy wore on me, and I leaned my head on his shoulder.

“Time to get you home so you can rest,” he declared.

I stifled a yawn. “Sorry, everyone.”

After we said our goodbyes, we held hands and walked out of the club.

“You take such good care of me,” I told him.

“I want to, if you’ll let me,” he said with sincerity.

When was the last time I had someone taking care of me? I’d been the caretaker on my own for so long. But now, I had Valen as my partner and mate, and I couldn’t be happier about our future.

“I love you, Valen.”

“I love you too.” Then he bent down and kissed me.

When he pulled away, he scooped me up into his arms and carried me toward the car.

I laughed. “What are you doing?”

“Taking care of you, just like I said,” he declared. “You’re tired so I’m carrying you.”

I thought about insisting I could walk but clamped my mouth shut. This felt nice. I could get used to being pampered.

VALEN

“This is AWESOME!” Paige declared as she entered my cabin on Franconia Mountain. She circled around and ran to the picture window looking out to the pine-dominated forest covered with snow. “I can’t believe you live here on a mountain.”

I chuckled. “Not technically. I live with you and your mom in Salem, but we’ll still have this. We can come up on weekends, school breaks, and in the summer. It might be a tight squeeze with our growing family.”

“We’ll manage,” Cassandra said with a smile.

“Actually, I was thinking I’d build onto it. We could create another bedroom, so Paige can have one and the baby another.”

“I’d have my own room here?” Paige gaped with awe.

“Yes. And you already do this weekend.” I showed her to the second bedroom, which I’d rarely used. Then I told her more about living here in the mountains. “In the mornings, I’d ski that path over to the trails.”

“Nice.” She turned to me. “I love it here already.”

And I loved her. This sweet girl had quickly worked a way into my heart. I loved showing her around the mountain. She was so enthusiastic about discovering new things. We were here for the week during the school break, and I was looking forward to introducing Cassandra and Paige to the rest of my pack during our visit.

While Paige explored her new room, I returned to the main area. Cassandra glanced around with what I interpreted as a

nostalgic smile. Was she remembering the first time she visited here? I stepped up behind her and carefully wrapped my arms around her waist from behind.

“Welcome back, babe.” I placed a hand on the slight swell of her stomach. “And baby.”

I never thought I’d share this cabin with a mate. Now I didn’t just have that but a family, and I’d never been so happy.

Cassandra leaned back against me. “It’s good to be back here with you.”

I nuzzled against her neck and inhaled her scent. “Home.”

WE SET up Paige for her ski lesson, and then Cassandra and I geared up before skiing over to the lift line. She only wanted to take a few easy groomers today, saying she wouldn’t risk any of the more difficult trails. After the initial few weeks of her pregnancy, she was feeling good, and her energy was up. She wanted to enjoy it while she could.

A sign for another upcoming chairlift dating event encouraged people to sign up. I gestured at it and teased, “Want to sign up?”

Cassandra groaned. “No way. It was awful.” With a snort, she added, “Maybe it works for some people, but it didn’t work for me.” Then she turned toward me, her head covered by her helmet and her goggles up on the rim. “Then again, if my friends hadn’t convinced me to sign up, I wouldn’t have felt the need to bail from it. And then I wouldn’t have tumbled down the mountain in front of ski patrol, who happened to be a smokin’ hot shifter.”

I pumped my chest out with pride as we approached the chair. When it was our turn to ride, I did the usual breathing tactics

to brace myself for the ride.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

We sat, pulled down the bar, and ascended. “I don’t want to keep any secrets from you,” I said. “I’m afraid of heights.”

She stared at me and then burst out into a surprised chuckle. “What? But you’ve probably ridden these lifts hundreds of times.”

I grunted. “If not thousands.” I shrugged. “It’s a perfectly natural instinct.” Then I turned to her and gave her a warm smile. “My name’s Valen. I’m a wolf shifter and work here at the resort.”

Cassandra turned to me with a confused expression, but then her eyes sparkled as if catching on. “Nice to meet you, Valen. I’m Cassandra. I’m a witch visiting from Salem, Mass.”

“Salem, eh? What brings you to the White Mountains?”

She tipped her head and stared out to the mountains in the distance. Then she brought her gaze back to mine. “An opportunity for a second chance.”

“Ah.” I nodded. “I hope you find it here in the mountains.” I spread my arm wide, gesturing to the beautiful snow-covered landscape before us.

“I already have.” Her eyes widened with a mischievous sparkle. “And I got a bonus.”

“What’s that?”

“A happily ever after.” When she smiled, her expression turned radiant.

I laughed. “It must be our lucky day because I found mine as well.” Then I bent closer and attempted to kiss her, but our ski

helmets clashed. Slanting my head, I tried again and met her lips this time.

When we pulled apart, Cassandra said, “Valen?”

“Yes?”

“I was thinking of something. This mountain is where we met, where we conceived our child—”

“Where I fell for you,” I added.

“Ha, yes. Likewise.” She laughed. “Anyway, it has a special place for us. I think we should mark another milestone here.”

I furrowed my brows at her.

“The mating bond.”

My wolf stood alert. I blinked at her, not sure I was hearing correctly. Although I’d wanted to mark her with my bite the first night we were together, I didn’t think she’d want to take that step for a while.

“Really? You’re ready?”

She nodded at me, her eyes filled with warmth. “Yes. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

She slanted her head and gave me a sly glance. “Now that you’re living with a child, you know how difficult it is to find some alone time. Paige will be in her program for a few hours. So how about after we get a couple of runs in, we head back to the cabin for some private time?”

My wolf declared, *Yes!*

I stared into the eyes of my mate and mother of my child. My happily ever after. “Absolutely.”

A NOTE from the author

I hope you enjoyed visiting Salem and the White Mountains with Cassandra and Valen! Read more about the romance and shenanigans in Salem with the quirky characters in the [Salem Supernaturals series](#).

And return to the ski resort in the mountains for fated mate and forbidden love wolf shifter romances in the [White Mountain Shifters series](#)!

Happy reading!

Lisa

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author Lisa Carlisle loves stories with misfits or outcasts. Her romances have been named Top Picks at Night Owl Reviews and the Romance Reviews.

When she was younger, she worked in a variety of jobs, moving to various countries. She served in the military in Okinawa, Japan; backpacked alone through Europe; and worked in Paris before returning to the U.S. She owned a bookstore for a few years as she loves to read. She's now married to a fantastic man, and they have two kids and two crazy cats.

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