

MATED TO THE  
GRUMPY  
ALIEN

MY ALIEN CAVEMAN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS  
KAT BAXTER & EMMA LEE JAYNE

**mated to the grumpy  
alien**

my alien caveman

**Kat Baxter**

**Emma Lee Jayne**

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# **mated to the grumpy alien**

A MISTAKEN IDENTITY/CURVY **Girl/Sci-Fi Romance**

Cressida

I never imagined that a trip to the art museums of Amsterdam would result in me being sent back in time. I am not a woman built to survive in a stone age Viking village. Almost as soon as I arrive, they're threatening to burn me at the stake.

Things go from bad to worse when an actual Norse God descends from the heavens to rescue me. Because he's not actually a god, he just looks like one. In truth, he's an alien. And he's convinced I'm destined to be his love slave.

Mated to the Grumpy Alien

Kat Baxter and Emma Lee Jayne

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# chapter

## one

Cressida

*Go to Europe!* they said.

*Spoil yourself!* they said.

*Go see all the art you've been teaching kids about!* they said.

*You've worked so hard taking care of your mom for all these years, they said. Now that she's gone, it's time to take care of yourself!*

*It's perfectly safe for a woman to travel alone in Europe,* they said.

Yeah. Right.

You know what no one mentioned when they were selling me on the idea of a grand European adventure? Getting burned at the stake. And yet here I am, trussed up like a hog, being dragged toward an actual stake which is surrounded by kindling.

Maybe it's perfectly safe for some other women to travel alone. But ... nooooooo. Not me. Not Cressida Jones, walking disaster and possessor of the worst luck in the history of bad luck.

Don't believe me?

Let me lay it out for you, because this shit—literally—could not have happened to anyone else.

Less than one week into my trip to tour the art museums of Europe, there was some kind of ... I don't even know how to describe it ... cosmic event? Cataclysm? Earthquake doesn't sound fancy enough, though the ground beneath my feet definitely shook. There was flashing light and movement and the sound I can't even begin to describe. I must have been knocked unconscious.

One minute I was waiting in line at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. The next I was on the ground in the middle of nowhere. And when I say nowhere, I mean, there was literally nothing but sand and rocks and fields of unfamiliar flowers around me. In the distance I could see some jagged mountains and a glimmer that looked like a lake, so I'd headed in that direction. It took me two days of wandering around to find any sign of civilization.

Trust me when I tell you that I was not made for wandering in the wilderness. I'm a curvy girl from Texas. I teach art history to high school students. I like my creature comforts, my iPad, my Netflix and my Ben & Jerry's. I was not made for hiking or the cold or sleeping on the ground. I tried not to think too much about the total lack of cell service or airplanes flying overhead.

And when I did finally find people, they were *not* friendly.

They did not speak English. They did not take baths. And apparently, they did not take kindly to being pepper sprayed.

In retrospect, now that I've been knocked unconscious for the second time in three days, I wish I hadn't pepper sprayed the brute who grabbed my boob, because now he's got me locked in his arms and he's dragging me toward a fire pit with a big ol' stake in the middle of it.

So, to sum up: Art teacher, orphan, Amsterdam, cataclysm, head injury, pepper spray, impending death. Now you know everything I know.

I've always been the kind of person who makes other people shake their heads and say, "How does this kind of thing keep happening to you?"

I wish I knew.

Because I hate the idea that I'm about to die and I have no idea how I got here. Or where here is. All I know is that I'm pretty sure I'm about to die.



# chapter

## two

Irick

It's lonely being a god among men, but I've gotten used to it.

Don't get me wrong. I don't believe I *am* a god. I was raised in the old ways, taught to believe in the wisdom of the *Sullec* prophets who traversed the heavens and in *Be'lah*, the gods of the great sea.

But I've spent the past decade a long way from home and it's hard to have faith in the Tides of *Be'lah* after the shit I've been through.

Back on my home planet of Perse, I was branded a traitor, tried for treason, and banished to the lunar prison of Graepus. All of which sucked. And that was before I was captured by slave traders who were too fucking stupid not to crash their ship on this backwater, Tides-forsaken planet. I wasn't the only survivor, but I'm not exactly a sociable kind of guy, so I scavenged the tech I could from the crashed ship and set off on my own.

I ended up here, in a mountainous area far enough from the crash site that no one bothers me and cold enough to remind me of the icy fjords where I was raised. There's a village nearby, populated by the native species of humanoids. They're close enough to Persæns that I suspect this planet was once visited by the *Sullec* prophets. But if I'm right, that happened a lot later here than it did on Perse, because the people who live down in the valley below my fortress are ... primitive to say the least. They're still down there trying to keep the village

fire lit. Forget the basics of civilization like metallurgy or electricity. Thus, my statement about being a god among men.

Sure, I'm arrogant, but even I'm not arrogant enough to believe I'm actually a god. But compared to the ignorant beings who live down in the valley below my cave? Compared to those idiots? Yeah. Compared to them, I'm a god.

Even if I'm lonely, at least I have someone to talk to. Even if that someone isn't a living being, but a mere sliver of a once great AI Historian, Cygnus.

There are days, however, when I wish Cyg wasn't quite so smart, quite so observant, or quite so fucking pushy.

Case in point, I'm elbow deep in overhauling my generator when Cyg announces, "There is a matter in the village that may require your attention."

"My attention is pretty focused right now, Cyg. The circuit on this board will be fried if I don't get this solder right. So unless it's a matter of life and death, I suggest you take a viz of it and I'll review it later."

Cyg is always bitching at me about something or another he thinks I need to intervene on down in the village. As if it's on my personal shoulders to drag those idiots out of the stone age.

"It is, in fact, a matter of life and death."

Of course it fucking is. "My life? Yours? Because if we fry too many more circuits, you're going to have to talk me through building a damn steam engine to power your ass."

He ignores my smartassery, as he always does.

"There is a woman in the village who seems to have stumbled into a bit of trouble."

"Isn't there always?" I grumble, flicking off the soldering blade. My concentration is fracked and since he's clearly not letting this go, I might as well stop now before I do more harm than good. I set the blade down on the heat-resistant table and push my goggles up off my eyes. "What is it this time, Cyg?"

Some child fall into the river again? Someone nearly burn down their grain stores?”

“A strange woman wandered into the village and has managed to enrage Torvin.”

Torvin is the local brute and bully. He’s strong enough to keep the other men in line, smart enough to keep the village fed, and just mean enough to control everyone else. Yeah, the guy’s a bit of dick, but I’ve seen worse. Not exactly a great leader, but he’s kept the village functioning since his father died.

“Well, if she pissed off Torvin, then that’s her problem.”

“She is an outsider.”

I dust my hands off on my pants and turn to prop my hip against the workbench. “Still not my problem.”

“You misunderstand me. She is an outsider. Like you.”

I freeze. “She’s Persæn?”

“No. She appears to be a humanoid like those in the village. However, she is like you in that she is out of her time.”

“Out of her time? What the hell do you mean?”

“Her appearance, her language, and her gear all indicate a level of advanced technology we have yet to see on this planet.”

“Kill the double talk. What do you mean?”

“Do you remember the cosmic event, which occurred roughly four days ago?”

“Yeah.” A couple of days ago, something happened that I assumed at first was an earthquake, maybe a volcanic eruption. The ground shook, the sky went dark, sonic boom. Very doomsday stuff.

Cyg assured me it wasn’t an earthquake, but something else. Something he’s been calling a Cosmic Event of Undetermined Origin that “appears to have created a ripple in space/time.”

I have no idea what he's measuring in the ground or the atmosphere that led him from sonic boom to a ripple in space/time. Frankly, I didn't think he had that kind of computing power in this system I've puzzled together. But, he is a self-repairing AI, and I gave him free reign when I uploaded him from the tiny chip in my head to the system in the fortress.

"You're saying you think this mystery woman came through space/time during that cosmic event?" I ask.

"Uncertain."

I pull the goggles fully off and toss them down onto the workbench before leaving the work room. I make sure the door seals fully behind me. This room, the innermost room of my fortress, contains the bulk of tech I scavenged from the crash, as well as everything I've managed to reverse engineer since then: my generator, my computers, my micro reactor. All the tech I *could* live without but wouldn't want to. Everything I possess that keeps my life on this planet from being absolute hell.

In that room, I hear Cyg's voice out loud, since he is stored on the mainframe there. Once I leave it, I hear him as a sub-vocalization in my head, since he's linked to a microchip embedded in my skull, just below my left ear.

Outside of the core room, I make my way to my living quarters. The only piece of tech outside of the core room is a monitor in my living quarters that can play back a visual recording from one of the cameras in the village.

No, the villagers don't know they're being recorded. And no, I don't review the footage very often. But Cyg convinced me it would be wise to keep an eye on them. Sure, it's flattering that they think I'm a god, but if they decided to turn on their god, I would want to know about it beforehand. So I allow Cyg to use a portion of his capabilities to monitor anything that happens in what amounts to the town square.

Now I stop in front of the monitor and say, "Show me what's going on down there."

Cyg doesn't reply, but the monitor flickers to life. The viz rewinds, stops, and then begins playing forward.

The village fire, which is usually little more than some smoldering embers they barely keep alive, has been stoked into a fire. More alarming, there's a pole erected in the center of the fire.

"What the hell?"

"The woman in question appears in the viz in approximately eight seconds."

Sure enough a few seconds later, Torvin appears dragging a woman with him.

She's like no woman I've seen since arriving here. She's nearly as tall as Torvin, but considerably better fed. She's not wearing the normal drab linens and furs but is dressed in dark blue leggings and a colorful multi-layered tunic. The satchel she carries is bright red, the color of spring poppies.

And her hair... Her hair is the color of flame. A copper red I haven't seen since leaving Perse.

Cyg is right. This woman is not from here.

I can't tell from watching the viz if she is from Perse like me or if she's from somewhere else entirely. What I can see is that Torvin is dragging her closer to that flame.

Whoever she is, she's in danger.

"They think she's a witch. They're about to burn her at the stake."

"That is the conclusion I have reached as well," Cyg subvocalizes in my ear.

"And you didn't think to mention this to me before now?"

"You stated that you did not wish to be disturbed while working on the generator."

About a dozen responses flash through my mind, but I don't say any of them out loud. Instead, I head for the entrance to my fortress, sealing each of the doors behind me.

I grab my sword—the one I crafted from scrap metal after arriving on this planet. It's not nearly as nice as the saber I once held on Perse. But when you become a prisoner, you are stripped of your belongings. I leave the cave and head down my mountain to the village. I only hope I make it in time to save the girl.

Like I said, I was raised in the old ways. Tradition says that no matter what happens in your life, the Tides of Be'lah are always bringing you closer to your true destiny. No matter how bad things seem, the Tides have a greater plan for you. Every moment of grief, every failure, every triumph and every loss is designed to bring you closer to your mate. To the one person who will complete you, so that together you can fulfill your life's destiny.

I had believed it as a child, but after the last decade, I had lost faith.

Surely there was no way that the Tides of Be'lah intended for me to be branded a traitor, captured by slave traders, and stranded on this damn planet. Surely there was no way all of this was bringing me closer to my mate. I hadn't believed for a moment that *this* was my destiny.

Until I saw her.

## chapter

# three

Cressida

So this was definitely not on my to-do list for the day. Granted, I don't know that anyone has ever jotted down, *get burned at the stake*, in their day planner. Yet, here we are.

I mean I'm not exactly hanging over the flames as of yet, but I'm ninety-nine percent sure that's where we're heading. I'm trussed up like a proverbial pig, hands and feet tied, mouth sorta bound, though they left my eyes uncovered. Small blessing maybe, if I can figure out a way out of this mess.

I try again to reason with them. I realize that we are definitely at a disadvantage of communicating with one another, me and the steroid-looking brute who's barking orders at everyone. We do not speak the same language. Now I am not a linguist, by trade. I'm an art historian teacher. But I know enough about history and civilizations to know that this dialect is super old.

So yeah, the vocabulary difference is a significant problem. Still, non-verbal communication cues are supposed to be universal.

"I believe there has been a misunderstanding," I say calmly. Which is pretty damn amazing because there is no part of me that feels calm. Nope, I'm pretty much on the verge of all-out panic, but I'm keeping that shit locked down as long as I can so I can try to think my way out of this mess. Also, it's difficult to talk with a bit of cloth across my mouth.

One of the guys holding me and carrying me towards the flames pokes at my soft and squishy belly. That isn't enough to

appease his curiosity, so he grabs at the roll of my belly and squeezes.

I try to squirm away from his pokes and prods.

“Yes, the fat girl will be tasty when she’s barbecued on that flame. Oh for fuck’s sake, how am I here?” I shout to no one. Evidently, I’ve lost the battle to keep my panic locked down. It’s about to roll out, and not only will I be burned at the stake, but I won’t even get to do it with dignity. There will be no cold indifference like Joan of Arc. Nope, I’m gonna scream and cry and blubber over everyone.

“I hope I rot your teeth and give you diarrhea,” I yell. I kick my legs and try to flail about but for all their primitive ways, they clearly know how to tie some knots.

My eyes meet those of a young girl in the crowd of screaming people. I stare at her, willing her to understand me.

“Whatever they think I did, I didn’t do it.” Then I see that one guy in the crowd, the guy who still has the tell-tale red eyes and streaks down his cheeks. Shit. “Okay, yes, I did spray that one guy with the pepper spray, but come on, consent matters.”

The girl is swallowed up in the crowd as the big guy’s chanting grows louder and more insistent. He’s clearly their leader, that one, but I already tried reasoning with him. He just smacked me on the head and I woke up a few hours later. Or what I assume was hours later.

Then there’s a loud, commanding voice, again in a language I do not recognize, shouting above the crowd.

All of the villagers around me seem to shrink in size and all fall to their knees. Even the men carrying me, which means I’m wobbling around their shoulders and trying to figure out what the hell is going on. Because knowing my luck, it won’t be good. It’s not like this is when Henry Cavill is going to ride in on a white horse and save my ass.

The crowd parts and oh my hell... well, it’s not exactly Henry Cavill, but whoever he is, he’s just as pretty. Even from my nearly upside down position I can tell this man is



ridiculously attractive with his sculpted features, and muscles on his muscles. He's massive, at least a head taller than all the people in the village, which means next to him I'd feel downright dainty.

Unlike the people of this village, he's not wrapped in furs and cloaks. No, he's wearing boots and pants with some sort of modern-looking fastenings. And he's bare-chested, despite the frigid temperatures.

Speaking of chests... his is... wait, that can't be right. His is gold? Shimmering and gold, like he just walked down from Mount Olympus. Like a live-action Hercules come to save me.

The big guy in the village comes over and yanks me out of the hands of the guys who've been carrying me.

The giant stranger stops a dozen feet away, a sword hangs casually from his hand. He eyes the man holding me, his gaze heated as he mutters words to the man behind me.

New guy is clearly pissed about something. Maybe he didn't get invited to the party today? Maybe they didn't invite him to the barbecue because they were afraid he'd eat everything. I'm trying to focus on those non-verbal clues to see if I can decipher the conversation, but all I have figured out so far is that Mr. Golden Pecs is furious.

He gestures toward my bindings, barking orders to one of the men standing off to the side. He's an older man from the crowd, not one of the guys with the brute who was previously carrying me. The man slinks forward without looking at the brute and quickly slices through the ropes binding my wrists and ankles.

In response, the brute grabs my upper arm, holding me tightly to his side. He cowers, ducking his head, but he doesn't let go of me. He says something in response, words hissed but full of anger and resentment. It doesn't take a genius to read the context clues here.

Two huge barbarians are fighting over me.

Pretty sure I've read a book like this. In theory being the prize between two strapping men sounds like the stuff of fantasies.

In real life? Not so much.

I can clearly see who genetics or anthropology would want me to pick. Golden boy here is not just pretty to look at. He also is bigger, clearly stronger, and despite the language gap, he seems more intelligent. I don't know. Something in his eyes that reveals he's maybe not as simple thinking as the men in the village. That sounds terrible. I'm not a snob, I promise. But it's like instead of a village idiot, these guys have a village genius.

So yeah, if I get to pick, I'm going with Hercules, because he's hot and his eyes look smart. *Yep, solid plan there, Cressida.*

I think I might have said some of those thoughts out loud because now both men are staring at me. I give a little wave to the new guy. He grunts in response. Yes, obviously a genius. What is wrong with me?

Maybe I hit my head harder than I thought. Is that what's really happening? Like I'm still in line at the museum after the earthquake and maybe I have a concussion. Maybe this is a dream extension from the book I was reading the night before. What was I reading?

The brute's fingers bite into my bicep and I whimper in pain. That doesn't feel like a dream, that feels real. At my sound, Hercules roars at the brute.

That's my queue. I'm not waiting around to see which of these guys wins. I'm not a ninja or anything, but the part of Austin I teach in is a bit rough. It behooves a single woman to know how to defend herself. So, yeah. I've taken some self-defense classes.

The second I feel the brute's grasp loosen, I make my move. He might be huge, but he only has one hand wrapped around my bicep. I jerk my elbow forward and then slam it back into his solar plexus. At the same time, I stomp my heel

down on his foot. His weird leather moccasins are no match for my Doc Martens.

When he releases my arm to howl in pain, I slam the palm of my left hand into his nose.

Then, I turn and run.

# chapter

## **four**

Irick

I'm a simple man with simple needs. I don't ask for much.

But every once in a while it would be nice if things went my way. I mean, yes, my actions brought dishonor down on my family in Perse and I was shunned from my planet and my people. But I rest easy knowing that my work was not in vain. I know that the revolution has the technology they needed to win the war.

So yeah, none of that went the way I intended, but I figure it all worked out. But this right here, today, where I ran all the way down this mountain to save the life of the most beautiful creature I've ever seen? Yeah, this would have been so much easier if she just let me do it.

Instead, she frees herself from Torvin's grasp and makes a break for it.

The people of the village scream and wail in distress while Torvin drops to his knees, howling in pain, hands over his face, cupping the blood that pours from his nose, which she no doubt broke.

For all his size and relative power within the village, the guy is clearly a pussy.

For a moment, I just stand there, surrounded by chaos, watching my soul mate run away.

She sprints across the large open area in the center of the village, before ducking between the huts and disappearing from view.

Frack me.

“I did not anticipate that outcome,” Cyg’s voice says in my head.

I respond subvocally. “Really, Cyg? You didn’t anticipate that? Because that went exactly as I planned.”

“I see.”

He’s an AI. He’s not supposed to understand sarcasm, but sometimes I swear he does.

“Nevertheless, given the ambient temperature, the approaching dusk, and the villagers’ attitude toward the woman, her odds of survival are slim if you don’t go after her.”

I huff out a breath and start jogging after her. “As always, your ability to state the obvious is your best feature.”

“Thank you.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

I scan my surroundings as I jog after her. There’s no way she got too far ahead of me, even with her head start. The impressions of her shoes in the mud are easy enough to track since I haven’t seen anything like them in my time here. Plus, she’s not aiming for stealthy.

There’s a wall around the village made of wooden stakes and that’s where I catch up to her. She’s trying, badly, to climb over it.

She must hear me behind her, because she whirls around, instantly taking a defensive stance. She holds her arms up, braced in front of her body, her hands out straight.

“*Youwantsomeofthistoo?*” She jumps and shifts her arms. “*ThatswhatIthought!*”

I don’t know what she’s saying, but I don’t even have to. I smile at her. Fuck she’s adorable.

I tell her clearly that I’m not going to hurt her and that she can trust me. Persaen culture holds women in the highest of esteem, especially one’s *be’lahshuk*.

I explain that no one will ever harm her again. I will protect her always. Then I nod to confirm she understands.

“Judging from her unchanging facial expression and her fighting stance, she does not seem to understand your words,” Cyg says.

I roll my eyes. He thinks he’s so fucking smart.

“I’ll begin working on a translation module for her,” Cyg says.

From behind me, I hear the villagers regrouping. They’ll be coming back to try to claim her if we stand here much longer. But they won’t climb my mountain, that much is clear. I’ve been here for a decade—if my calculations have been correct—and they’ve never once even tried to do anything but leave sacrifices and gifts at the foot of the mountain that leads to my cavern. I bet Torvin is pissed his father left me my sword about now.

I can either stand here trying to will her to understand me, or I can subdue her, bring her back home and then worry about our communication differences.

Problem solved. I reach forward and wrap my hand around the back of her neck, finding just the right spot to activate her *lynditsh* nerve until she slumps forward and I’m able to lift her into my arms. She is not light like the small deer I hunt. No, she has the weight of a woman. All lush curves and warm skin pressed against my own.

The he’lahzun in my blood stirs, reminding me that this woman has been brought here by the Tides. She is my perfect mate, the other side of my coin, as it were. I will protect her at all costs.

# chapter

## **five**

Cressida

For the third time in my life, I wake up in unfamiliar surroundings.

In college, I wasn't the party girl, so this waking up not knowing where I am is new to me. The first time was after the event that landed me in this strange new world of barbarians and gold-chested demigods. Then barbarian number one literally clubbed me over the head like a stereotypical caveman. Now I'm assuming Hercules did something to me to knock me out while he transported me to wherever the hell we are now.

That first time, waking up in the unfamiliar landscape with no other humans around, well, yeah, I kinda assumed that was going to be the low point of my life. That was before I wandered in the wilderness for days, was attacked by a brute, and nearly burned at the stake before being stalked by Mr. Gold Pecs, cornered, and then...

And then what, exactly?

There I was, back to the proverbial and physical wall, with him talking to me in a language I didn't understand. I was trying to fight him off when he reached out and cupped the back of my neck.

And then I woke up here.

Here is a dark room that smells faintly of smoke. I'm buried under a pile of warm blankets in a bed that is surprisingly comfortable.

Am I back in my bed at the hotel in Amsterdam? Was it all just a dream?

It can't be. And I can't be.

My hotel in Amsterdam was a Best Western. The mattress was lumpy, the blankets thin, and there certainly wasn't a fireplace in the room.

But here there is.

Not exactly a fireplace, but there is a small fire flickering across the room, maybe twenty feet away. It's more coal than fire and produces barely enough light for me to see the stone walls and floor around the alcove it's tucked into. Certainly not enough for me to see the bed I'm in.

The sheets here are roughly textured, but not unpleasant. Somehow they feel more luxurious than the cheap poly-cotton of Best Western.

I stretch my hand out beside the pillow, fumbling for my phone. Despite all of the recommendations by health experts, I always fall asleep with my phone by my head. Either because I'm reading on my Kindle app or because I'm playing a game to help me fall asleep. I don't feel my phone.

I guess I'm not surprised. I push myself up on my elbows, wincing slightly at the pain at the base of my skull, just behind my left ear. I bring my hand up to the spot, but stop just short of touching it, instinct telling me that will make the pain worse. What did Hercules do to me?

"Where am I?"

I don't expect a response, so when one does come, I scramble back away from the voice.

"You are ..." The deep, masculine voice speaks slowly, as if the words are unfamiliar and too large for his mouth. "... here."

Heart pounding, I scramble up onto my knees. Legs tucked beneath me in case I need to run, I'm instantly aware of two things. First, I'm naked. Something I didn't notice when I was



buried under the warmth of the blankets. Second, my heart is pounding, but not with fear.

But as he speaks, I realize his voice isn't unfamiliar. I've heard that raspy rumble before. In the village. It's not the garbled, grunting voice of the brute. No, I'm almost certain this is the voice of that other man. Hercules.

Intellectually, I should be afraid.

Hell, I've been afraid for the past several days, ever since ... whatever it was that happened happened. And God knows I was fucking terrified when it appeared that I was moments away from being burned at the stake and eaten.

So why am I not afraid now? Why am I not freaking out that I'm in some mysterious, dark and smoky place—that's admittedly warm and cozy—but still... I'm completely naked with the big gold guy, yet, I'm not scared.

Before I can answer that myself, the voice speaks again. "You are here."

This time, his voice is more confident, as if the words make more sense to him. I'm still confused though because *here* is not an actual location.

"Where is here?" I clutch the blanket to my chest. The room is too dark for me to see him, but I have no way of knowing whether or not he can see me.

"Here is ..." There's another pause. "...home."

"Right, buddy." Wherever here is, it's definitely not *my* home. "I can't see you. Step into the light."

I don't really expect him to obey my command, but he does.

Except not really. It's not so much that he moves into the light, since the only light in the room has been the faint, flickering embers in the fire alcove all the way across the room. But as soon as I say the word light, the glow of the fire seems to expand, casting light over more of the room.

I scan the room—which is as large as my art room back at my school, with stone walls hung with furs—before my gaze

lands on Mr. Golden Pecs.

He's crouched on the floor a few yards away, in a squat that would make an Instagram fitness guru proud. His feet and chest are bare. Whatever fabric his pants are made of, it molds to his massive thighs. His forearms are propped on his thighs in a way that makes his biceps bulge. His bare skin gleams golden in the firelight. His dark hair hangs around his face in long, tangled locks.

The whole look is very Oscar statue meets animated Tarzan.

Surprisingly, it's a good look. And also, I clearly have some sort of latent fetish for cartoon muscle men.

If this is all a dream and I'm in a coma or something, then I have to give my imagination props, because ... just. Wow.

Yeah, I'm an artist. And I tend to think of myself as having a pretty good imagination, but everything about this is next level. The stuff-of-pure-fantasies next level.

The craziest part—of this admittedly bat-shit-crazy experience—is the way he's looking at me.

I've been studying him, and he's been studying me right back. His intense, hooded gaze roaming over every inch of my exposed skin with a kind of greedy hunger that I'm not sure I could imagine.

Sure, I'm pretty enough, I suppose. My bright copper hair is definitely my best feature. But between my curves and my take-no-bullshit attitude, I'm not the kind of woman men go out of their way to pursue. I'm not exaggerating when I say I have never had a man look at me like this.

Like he can't wait to touch me. Like he wants to lick every inch of my body.

A shiver runs down my spine, making my skin prickle despite the warmth of the room. Heat unfurls in my belly and in the folds of my pussy. Moisture floods me in a way that makes me all the more aware that I'm completely naked.

Oh crap ... If I'm naked, that means someone undressed me. That means *he* undressed me!

I clutch the blanket even tighter. "Where are my clothes?"

He stands in one smooth motion. My gaze drops to his crotch—not on purpose! I swear! That's just where it naturally lands when he stands up—where there's an obvious, sizable bulge in the front of his pants.

And if I thought those pants stretched impressively over his thighs...

I jerk my gaze back to his face to find him smirking.

With the kind of arrogance that probably comes natural to any guy who looks like this, he reaches down and gives his dick a squeeze and a stroke through the fabric of his pants.

A full body shudder courses through me, like I just had a tiny orgasm.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

What is happening to me?

# chapter

## **six**

Irick

As improbable as it seems, I'm sure this woman is my *Be'lahshuk*, my soul mate, the one person in the universe that the Tides have crafted to be my match in every way.

I feel it in my heart, in my blood, and in my dick.

Despite that, I'm determined to go slowly.

After all, when I rescued her down in the village, she was in obvious danger. Torvin is lucky I didn't kill him for daring to even touch her. Hell, the whole village is lucky I didn't burn it to the ground.

The move I'd used to disarm her back in the village, a simple pinch to the right spot at the back of her neck, is one any Persaen warrior would know. I wouldn't have dared to use it on her under other circumstances, but, as Cyg, pointed out, the situation was dire.

I'd spent the entire hike back to my fortress planning my next move.

I had expected her to revive once I'd gotten her into the warmth and safety of my cave. Instead, she'd slept for well over a day. According to the basic readings Cyg was able to take, her core body temperature was dangerously low, she was dehydrated, and she was in shock.

As eager as I was to talk to her, to learn how she had arrived here, to learn who she was, I had to be patient. She needed rest. Sleep. Healing.

I could be patient.

I'd spent the past ten years on this planet assuming I'd never again see a person I could even have an intelligent conversation with.

Moreover, I'd waited my whole life for a mate, ever since sitting at the knee of my elders and hearing tales of how they met and bonded with their own *Be'lahshuk*.

So, yes, I could be patient.

That's what I thought.

Until the moment she woke up, nearly two full days after I'd brought her here. Even once she was awake, huddled on the bed, her arms and neck bare as she clutched the furs to her chest, I believed I could be patient.

The expanse of creamy, pale skin was tempting, yes. Far more tempting now that she was awake. I'd seen every inch of her when I'd undressed her to look for wounds and cleaned her so that she'd warm more quickly.

My patience had held only as long as the darkness.

Once she'd called for the light, inadvertently causing the room's sensors to increase the ambient light, her gaze found me.

It was easy to resist the pull of her when she'd been asleep.

Sure, I'd seen and admired her beauty when she was asleep, but I had no desire for an unconscious woman.

But awake?

That was another matter.

Awake, alert, and looking at me like she couldn't wait to run her hands all over my body?

Resisting that was still doable.

I was playing a long game here.

But then ... frack me ... then her body started to respond to mine. From all the way across the room, I could feel her

body awoken to my presence. The skin at my wrists and along my palms began to prickle with the need to touch her. I could feel her blood begin to pound in time with mine.

The moment her pussy floods with arousal, the sweet scent of her floods my senses. My cock, which has been half hard for days just knowing she's nearby, goes rock hard.

It's a fracking miracle I don't come right then, half way across the room from her, without even touching her in desire, just from the scent of her need. She needs me. I will always meet my mate's needs.

Without another thought I go to her, drop to my knees and fling off the coverings. She makes a squawking kind of noise, but without the layers of fabric between me and the scent of her cunt, I am a man delirious with need. I drop my mouth to the apex of her thighs. The red curls here match the fire on her head and the first lick to her center feels like a flame up the base of my spine.

Never have I felt desire like this. Hot and urgent need pounding through my veins like a drumbeat I swear sounds outside of my flesh.

She tastes like the most decadent of liquors, the richest of desserts, heady and needy and the very embodiment of lust. I spread her folds with my thumbs licking around her pink hole and up to the hidden bundle.

Fingers thread through my hair and she undulates her hips underneath me. My tongue explores her tender flesh and she cries out. I rock myself into the hard floor beneath us, looking for any pressure to dispel the urgency of my need. I can be patient, I remind myself.

This is for her. Because she needs me. Her body called out and I answered because that is my duty.

She moans a word that sounds like "Hercules." Thankfully the cultural background and languages that Cyg uploaded to my translator chip are working. She is calling to her gods.

I slide one finger inside her tight channel and nearly spill in my trousers. She is so small, her body so unyielding to me it

is a wonder how we will fit together when it is the time for us to join. For now though she seems to enjoy the plunging of my digit inside her body and the attention I am giving to her little bundle.

Her body tightens around my finger, then her body bows off the bed as a wave of pleasure pulses through her. Fresh juices coat my tongue as she screams in delight.

The completion of her climax settles something inside of me. I kiss her mound, then crawl up her body, intent on kissing her lips.

But when I look down into her lovely face, I am met with wide, round eyes full of shock.

“What the hell was that?” she whispers.

“I brought you pleasure, my mate.”

“I don’t even know your name. You don’t know my name. I’ve never been naked with anyone.”

She is clearly distressed. I roll off of her, replacing my body with the covers I previously moved. I don’t want her to get cold.

“I don’t know what things are like in your culture, but you can’t just go down on a woman whenever you want.”

“Go down?” This term is not translating beyond the physical directions, going down.

She points to her blanket-covered pussy. “You can’t just put your mouth wherever you want it.”

“You did not enjoy that?” I ask, knowing the truth of the matter because I felt every pulse of her pleasure as if it were my own.

“Whether or not I enjoyed it is not the point. We do not know each other.”

“Our souls know. The Tides of *Be’lah* have brought you to me. It has been decided.”

“Awesome.”

# chapter

## seven

Cressida

My body is still shaking from the aftershocks of my orgasm when he starts kissing his way up my body. At least ... I think that was an orgasm.

Given that it was more powerful than anything I've ever experienced in my entire life, it's hard to say for sure. As a virgin, with little to no experience having orgasms that aren't self-induced, I'd always assumed that the things my friends told me about oral sex were exaggerations.

Apparently, I was wrong.

Or maybe this guy has a magic tongue.

That is the thought that snaps me out of my post-orgasm stupor. *Maybe this guy has a magic tongue.*

*This guy.*

*This guy* whose name I don't even know.

*This guy* who has naturally golden skin, is built like a god, and who rescued me from barbarians.

*This guy* who has me completely at his mercy. This guy who now has his lips clamped on the side of my neck and whose sizable dick is burrowing into my thigh.

Then, before I can worry about just how big his dick is, he raises up, hands on either side of my jaw, and looks down at me.



The moment his hands touch my face and his gaze meets mine, it's like a jolt to my nervous system. His hips are settling between my thighs, the fabric of his pants brushing against the hyper-sensitive flesh of my pussy.

Somehow I know that if he kisses me in this moment, it will all be over for me.

I'll let him fuck me. And my body will explode into a gazillion pieces. Or maybe I'll just have another earth-shattering orgasm. Whatever happens, nothing will ever be the same again.

Maybe it won't be anyway.

Maybe there's no coming back from everything that's happened in the past couple of days. Maybe my life is already irrevocably on some alternate path. Maybe it's far too late for my life to resume anything approaching normality.

I don't know yet. I don't have a firm enough understanding of what's happened to me.

I just know that I need a damn minute to figure it out before I let some guy whose name I don't even know fuck me. I don't care how magical his lips are.

“Wait. Stop.”

My words come out breathless and panting. I sound more like I'm begging him to continue. Nevertheless, the second the word stop passes my lips, he freezes.

My eyes flutter open ... shit! When did they flutter closed? If I'm going to keep my wits about me, I need to fucking keep my eyes open!... I look up to see a pained expression flicker across his face, as if it's costing him everything to stop.

When his eyes meet mine, he arches an eyebrow in question, grinding out, “You wish me to stop?”

“Yes. Please.” Gah! Again with the panting, breathlessness! I clear my throat and do my best to push at his shoulders. “Stop. I need a minute.”

He rolls off of me so fast you'd think I'd tased him. He's across the room, back to me, hands buried in his hair in a

matter of seconds. I stifle a groan, because if his chest is gorgeous, it's nothing compared to his back, which is sculpted with bulging muscles. His pants are low enough on his hips to reveal the divots on either side of the base of his spine. His right hand scrubs down his face and disappears.

If I had to guess, he's giving his dick another squeeze.

I swear, I can almost feel it. My pussy clenches in response.

What was I thinking?

Why did I ask him to stop, again?

He could be inside me right now and ...

What the hell?

This isn't like me! I don't have this kind of reaction to men. Ever.

Maybe this really is all a dream. Or maybe I was hit on my head.

I sit up, pulling the blanket up to my chin. "What the hell is happening to me?" I mutter. "This is insane!" I keep muttering random nonsense as I climb from the bed, pulling the blankets with me, trying my damndest to wrap them around my body, clutching them to me like they alone can keep me from calling him back. "Where are my clothes? And my phone. I need to find my shit and get dressed and..."

And what? a small, panicky part of me asks.

Insane or not, this is really happening to me. This isn't a dream or a hallucination. On some level, I know that. Some level that's not controlled by my clit or my hormones.

And if this is all really happening, then where am I going to go? Back to the village of barbarians? Back to wandering in the wilderness? Back to cold and starving and desperate?

Panic starts clawing its way up my throat. Panic that's wholly unrelated to the man still standing with his back to me on the other side of the cave.

“Where am I?” I ask again, half expecting him not to hear me, let alone answer. “Who are you? What has happened to me?”

A beat of silence falls between us and then his hands drop to his sides and he slowly turns to face me.

“I am Irick of the house of Reylira born on the northern continent of Perse, stolen from the moon Græpus by the Manx and transported to this planet against my will. And you, my *be’lahshuk*, were brought to me by the Tides themselves.”

I shiver at his words ... because I seem to be doing that a lot. It’s partly his voice, deep, low, and intimate. But it’s also the *way* he says it. All those words I’ve never heard before, but he rattles them off like they’re supposed to make sense.

“I only know what like half those words mean,” I admit softly.

He scowls, giving a terse nod. “It is fine. I can be patient. You will learn.”

“Learn what?”

He stalks across the cave, his gaze never straying. “That you are mine.”

“Your what?” I demand, when he stops an arm’s length away.

“My love mate.”

Before I can protest, his hand lands on the back of my neck and the world once again goes black.

# chapter

## eight

Irick

“You sure she’s just asleep?” I ask Cyg, not bothering to subvocalize since my mate is still lying peacefully on the bed and there is no one else in the room with me. Initially, I had laid her on the bed on her back, covering her with blankets for warmth. At some point, she had curled on to her side, facing the wall, with the covers pulled up high and her hands tucked beneath her chin.

As peaceful as it is watching her sleep, I am eager for her to wake.

“Yes. As I have assured you once an hour for the past three.”

Sometimes, I think his bad attitude is getting out of hand. “Last time, when she was out so long, you assured me, it was because she was in shock.”

“I maintain that assessment. She had been on her own in the harsh cold for approximately four days before she found the village. That combined with the threats she encountered in the village undoubtedly contributed to her physical distress.”

“Stop reminding me,” I grumble, hating the reminder of how close I came to losing her. To never having her.

It is baffling to me how important this woman has become to me, even though I’ve only known of her existence for mere days. Only spoken to her in a language we can both understand once.

The idea that Torvin and those idiots in the village nearly killed her ...

“You should not distress yourself. She will wake soon.”

“What?”

“Your blood pressure is rising. I was endeavoring to assure you that she is nearing the end of her REM cycle and will wake soon.”

“Right.” I bite out the word.

Yeah, I’m sure my blood pressure was rising. I don’t bother to tell Cyg that it wasn’t the thought of her sleeping that caused it, but rather the temptation to hike down the mountain and blast the village to rubble in retribution.

“However, as I will remind you, it was for the best that she was out when you installed her language processing implant.”

“Right,” I say again. Because I do know he’s right. When I was first captured by the Manx and they installed my own implant, it hurt like hell. It was much worse than the tiny twinge I felt when I’d installed the subvocal processor where Cyg was once stored before I’d been arrested back on Perse.

I’d known I was about to be arrested for hacking and that I would most likely end up on Græpus, so I’d installed a tiny AI sliver of my family’s Historian in my skull. The language processing implant was useful for talking to the locals, since it (mostly) automatically translated my thoughts to their language and thus I learned their primitive language almost instantly.

Cyg was much more elegant than that.

“Though she will wake shortly, might I suggest that in the future you avoid using that particular technique to stimulate her *lynditsh* nerve in an effort to calm her down? The technique seems ... too effective on her.”

I stare at her sleeping form. “You think?”

“Indeed. Both times she has passed out and slept for a significant period of time. So perhaps her nervous system is more sensitive than yours.”

“But that’s it?” I ask. “She’s just overly sensitive?”

On a Persæen, pressure to the *lynditsh* nerve would cause them to black out for five minutes, tops.

“Yes. Given her rising body temperature, I estimate she will wake up in approximately—”

Before Cyg finishes the sentence, one smooth arm stretches out from under the covers twisting above her head. She makes a little snuffling noise, then pulls back under the covers and burrows deeper.

“See?” Cyg says in my ear. “She stirs already.”

Yeah, but I’ll feel a hell of a lot better when she wakes up properly. When she speaks to me again. Obviously, I made a mistake the last time. I moved too fast. I’d been too overwhelmed by my desire and by her proximity. I won’t make the same mistake twice.

I take a step back, just to be sure.

I must make more noise than I intend to because the burrowing stops. She stills completely, then sits bolt upright in bed. I keep the lights up this time, so her gaze finds me instantly. And she does not look happy to see me.

“You again,” she practically growls the words at me.

Not exactly the reception I was hoping for.

Of course, if I’m honest with myself, the reception I was hoping for was her throwing back the blankets and begging me to join her.

Yeah, I know. There’s a big difference between hope and expectation.

I hold up my hands in the universal gesture of surrender. “Are you feeling better?” I ask.

Clutching the blanket to her chest, she narrows her gaze. “Better than what? Better than when I was about to be burned at the stake? Better than when I woke up, naked, in a strange bed, only to be...” She trails off, seeming unable to find the correct word to describe what happened between us earlier.

I nearly grin at how flustered she looks.

“You know. Whatever,” she finishes with a huff.

Yes. I do know. But if she keeps talking about that, and I keep thinking about it, I’ll be hard as a battle ax again. And that’s what got us into this trouble in the first place.

I take another casual step backwards. Not wanting to seem like I’m retreating, but not wanting to be close enough to her to smell her if she becomes aroused again. Not that I’ll ever get the scent of her out of my head. Or the taste of her. Or the feel of her silky skin.

I have to clear my throat before speaking. “You must be hungry.” I gesture to the table I set up near the fire. The spiced tea that I made her has probably gone cold, but the berries are fresh and sweet. The bread, warm from the fire.

She looks from the table by the fire to me and then back again.

Her face is so easy to read, her expression is so clear, I can almost hear her thoughts. She is hungry. Starving probably. But she is for some reason reluctant to leave the bed and cross the room to the fire.

“I could bring the food to you.”

I would feed it to her by hand if that’s what she wanted.

Her gaze returns to mine. “No, thank you.” She holds out a hand to stop me. “You stay right over there, mister.”

“But you must be hungry. Cyg—” I cut myself off before referencing Cyg directly. I’m not sure what kind of technology her world has. When I first arrived here, the people in the village heard Cyg’s disembodied voice and believed he was a ghost. Since I don’t want a repeat of that, I skirt the issue. “I suspect you wandered quite some time before finding the village at the base of my mountain.”

“Your mountain?”

I gesture to indicate the room. “Yes. Obviously. My mountain.”

“You own the mountain, do you? I suppose that’s why you think it’s okay to just capture women, bring them to your lair and just do whatever to them when they wake up.”

I frown, mulling over her words. “Capture women? Do you think I have captured women other than you? I assure you, you are the only woman I have captured.”

“Is that supposed to be reassuring?”

“Yes. That is why I said, ‘I assure you.’”

She opens her mouth, and then snaps it closed, scowling. “Well, if I’m the first woman you’ve kidnapped, it’s not reassuring. Not to me. Because I’m still here. Trapped against my will.”

“I don’t understand. Do you wish to leave this cave? Do you want to return to the village?”

“Of course I don’t want to return to the village. Don’t be a smart ass.”

I consider her words. “I don’t believe I understand this term. An ass is an animal, correct? One typically used for transport. I was not aware they had a reputation for being intelligent.”

“Oh, for fucks sake,” she grumbles.

“Fuck?” I ask, perhaps a little too, hopefully. “I do know this word.”

“Oh, for... Forget it. Just forget it.” She makes a gesture as if to throw her hands up in frustration only to realize that if she does so the blanket will drop. “When did you learn English anyway?”

“I’m learning it now.” I raise my hand to the back of my neck where the implant has been for over a decade. “Just as you are learning my language. While you were out the first time, I installed a simple translation device that will integrate our languages.”

“A what?”



“I inserted a tiny subdermal neural interface chip at the base of your skull that—”

“You chipped me? Like a dog?”

I pause, my own neural interface struggling to keep up with some of the phrases she uses.

Before I can grasp her question, she throws another at me.

“Where are my clothes?”

Oh. Better. I have an answer to that.

“They were soiled from many days of travel.”

She wiggles to the edge of the bed and makes an effort to stand while holding the blanket to her. “Oh, I hope you didn’t pull any your-clothes-were-dirty-so-I-burned them bullshit.”

“No.” I frown, shaking my head. “Your clothes were dirty, so I cleaned them. Your people must waste clothing if they insist on burning things when they become dirty.” I walk over to the small table beside the door and pick up the stack of garments. I didn’t know how to remove the soil from all of them, since many were fabrics that were unfamiliar to me. But I did my best. I hold the stack out to her.

She snatches it out of my hands, careful to keep the blanket tucked under her arms. She tosses the items onto the bed and rifles through them, holding up one item after another. After a moment, she turns back to me. “Where are my underwear?”

“Your...” I let my words trail off, playing dumb.

“My underwear. My bra, my panties. Where are they?”

Still, I say nothing, even though I have a pretty good idea of the garments she’s referring to.

While she was asleep, Cyg had ample time to develop the language module that is allowing me to communicate with her. He used a combination of the things he heard her say, and information he’d retrieved from the technical devices she had in her satchel. Between that and the implant I’d inserted at the base of her skull, we should have no problem communicating.

Thank goodness I'd thought to scavenge some from the crash site when we landed here. Still, the lagging translation provides me with just enough excuse to pretend I don't know what she's talking about.

"I suppose you expect me to thank you for cleaning my clothes. Even though it meant you had to take them off of me first." She shoots me a glare. "Nice excuse to get me naked. You know in my world, men don't just strip women of their clothes."

"You were cold." I say going for practicality. "Your body temperature was dropping. I needed to get you clean and warm as quickly as possible. Since you were unconscious, the only way for me to do that was for me to undress you. I also was scanning you for any possible injuries in case you required medical attention."

Did I enjoy seeing her naked body? Yes. Naturally. But I certainly hadn't enjoyed the circumstances. When I had reached the item she called a bra, I'd been horrified. The skin beneath her fabric was chafed red. The binding clearly too tight. Naturally, I had destroyed the offensive item.

As for her panties, those I had not been able to resist keeping for myself. They bore her most intimate scent. I couldn't bring myself to wash them. Nor can I now bring myself to return them to her.

As if she knows what I'm thinking, she glares at me again. "Whatever. Turn around so I can get dressed."

I arch an eyebrow. "As you pointed out, I've already seen you naked."

*I have more than seen you naked, I want to remind her. I've touched you. I've tasted you. Pleasured you.*

Her cheeks flush a delightful pink. "Obviously. But that doesn't mean I want you to see me naked again."

"But you will. One day."

## chapter

# nine

Cressida

I get dressed, hastily and clumsily yanking on clothes.

Keeping my underwear?

That's a ballsy move for sure.

But the crazy thing is, I can't tell if it's an honest to god *move* or if it's just something he wants to do. Not that he's even admitted that he has them. Somehow, though, I just know.

And, yeah, part of me is screaming that it's wrong. That it's creepy. That I need to demand them back.

It's that sane, cautious, twenty-first century part of my brain that has spent my entire adulthood balancing my budget and taking care of other people. The part of my brain that paid my taxes and contributed to my Roth IRA. The part that cared for my mom while she was ill and still worked long hours and made cookies for the nursing home staff, even when I was exhausted.

It's the part of my brain that's been overworked and exhausted for a decade. It's the part of my brain that came on this trip to Europe after my mom died because I didn't know what to do with my summers when they didn't revolve around caring for her.

But there's another part of my brain. There always has been.

That's the part that stayed up late reading romance novels. The part that wanted to travel to Europe now that I have the time. No ... not just travel here. The part that wanted to *move* here. The part that had a hundred bookmarks in her browser about how to move to another country. The part that yearned for adventure and travel and something—anything!—different.

I don't know what actually happened to my underwear, but part of me is horrified by the idea that maybe he kept them. And another part of me is ridiculously thrilled.

That second part of me is aware of the way he's watching me as I jerk my clothes on. Because no, he didn't turn around. Of course he didn't turn around. Hercules would never.

Except...

I pull my jeggings up, hopping a little to get the elastic waist up. "I don't even know your real name," I mutter.

"I told you. I am Irick of—"

"Right. Irick of handbags."

"Perse," he says slowly, his lips twisting slightly into a hint of a smile.

"Okay, Irick of Purse. What is that? Some kind of tiny country most Americans have never heard of? Like Luxembourg or Liechtenstein?"

He smirks. "No. Perse is not a tiny country."

"Then what is it?"

"First, you tell me where you are from. You know my name, *Be'lahshuk*, but I don't know yours."

That word, the way he says it, it rolls over my senses.

Funny, despite all the weird terms he keeps throwing around, his English isn't accented. He speaks like he grew up listening to the nightly news in Middle America. Except for when he says things like *purse* and *bella shook*. Then, the words are thick. I can't describe the way those words roll off his tongue. The way they coat my mind, like there's magic in them too. Like I almost know them.

I feel like I *should* know them. That if I stopped trying so hard, I already *do* know them. Like their meaning is right on the edge of my consciousness, waiting to slip into my vocabulary when I'm not looking.

Which might sound crazy, but no crazier than anything else that's happened in the past four days.

Either way, he's right. He doesn't know my name and he can't keep calling me bella shook, because every time he says it in that delicious, deep rumble of a voice, I feel like my panties might fall right off. Or they would if I knew where they were.

Turning to face him fully, I straighten the hem of my sweater. "I'm Cressida Jones. I teach high school art history. I'm the last twenty-six-year-old virgin in America. I'm an orphan, because my mom died of complications from MS over a year ago and my sperm donor disappeared when I was eight. I have more debt than I should, and I love dairy and hate sushi. And the most interesting thing about me is the bumper stickers on my ancient, wheel-chair accessible Honda Odyssey, which I really should sell, but I just can't bring myself to do it because it's my last tie to my mom. So basically, I am the most boring person ever."

I don't know what I expect when I finish my tirade. Maybe for him to turn tail and run? The last time I even bothered going on a first date, which was years ago, the dude asked me about myself and then started texting his buddy before I even got to the name of my college.

Because modern American men suck.

But Hercules, aka Irick of Handbags (apparently), is not a modern American man. As if I couldn't guess that from his gleaming gold muscles.

Because my rant doesn't scare him off. He doesn't lose interest. He doesn't even blanch at the mention of my debt or my wheel-chair van, both of which are boner-killers for most guys. Maybe it's because he doesn't know what either of those things are. I'm still unsure how this language implant thing works, but I'm still giving him bonus points for it.

Instead, he's still watching me like I'm the most fascinating woman he's ever met. It's a bit disconcerting for someone who spends most of her life flying under the radar.

I clap my hands together, nervously. "So, now you know everything there is to know about me."

His lips twist in a smirk. "*Be'lahshuk*, I could listen to you talk for hours or even years and still not know enough about you."

I roll my eyes. "Right. Sure." Because of course he has a smooth line like that. And can deliver it without sounding like douche canoe. "But for real, can you just point me to the bathroom. Because I can't even remember the last time I peed."

That smirk turns into a chuckle. "Of course, *Shuka*. I am sorry I didn't think of it sooner."

Oh, for fuck's sake. How is he making taking me to the bathroom seem romantic?

He gestures me towards an open doorway. "The facilities you seek are through here."

He leads me from the cave through a stone passageway. Like the cave, the ceiling itself seems to glow with some ambient light I can't see the source of. I can't tell if the stone is glowing or if it's reflecting light from somewhere else.

At some point, the passageway splits. He tells me that the right-hand path leads to the outside, back towards the village. He says this matter of factly, like he's not at all worried about me leaving or running away.

I guess he isn't, since, as I've already admitted to him, I'm not interested in returning to the village of brutes and witch burnings. At least, not without my own personal Hercules by my side.

A few yards down the left-hand branch, the passage widens abruptly. I find myself standing in the open night air on a stone patio overlooking a picturesque garden. The moon is huge on the horizon and gives just enough light that I can

make out plants and trees. I can hear the babble of a brook nearby.

I keep myself from gasping at the beauty of it all, but just barely.

“This bathroom you seek, do you need to bathe or to relieve yourself?”

I nearly roll my eyes again, because why does everything he say sound so much fancier? I guess the phrase *I need to pee* didn't translate.

“I need to relieve myself.”

“This way, then,” he says gesturing me to the right. He leads me across the patio and down several steps to a small building, nestled against the side of the cliff. The sound of running water is louder here.

He gestures to the stream. “This stream runs through the garden. At the other end, there is a pool for bathing where the water is warm. Here where the water returns to the ground, is the facility you require.”

He presses a panel on the otherwise smooth black surface and a door slides open.

A light comes on as I step inside and, sure enough, there is a toilet. Not exactly like a toilet from back home, but close enough that it'll do.

By this point, I have to pee so badly I don't even bother figuring out how to close the door before I pull down my pants and squat.

Should I question the existence of a futuristic porta potty in the garden of Eden? Possibly. But frankly, right now, I'm just so relieved that I don't have to squat behind a bush like I did when I was hiking across the wilderness. There's even something like toilet paper—thank you, sweet Jesus!

When I'm done, I turned to look for some sort of lever to flush the toilet, only to realize the water from the stream passes beneath the building, eliminating the need for additional plumbing.

I step out of the building, looking from the stream to the toilet and then to Irick. “That’s nifty.”

He nods, his chest puffing out a little as if he’s basking in my praise. “When I scavenged the elimination facility from the wrecked ship, this seemed the logical place to install it.”

I let my mind skip across the troubling parts of that sentence as I walk along the stream for a few moments, Irick falling into step beside me.

Once we’re several yards from the porta potty, I stop and nod toward the stream. “Is the water clean here?”

“Yes. But if you wish something to drink, I have spiced tea back for you in the cave.”

As soon as he says it, I realize how thirsty I am. But I don’t need a drink just yet, and I’m not ready to return to the cave. Instead, I squat by the water and dip my hands, rubbing them together, and then shake the water off when I stand.

Five years as a high school teacher has taught me the importance of washing my hands as often as possible.

When I turn back to see him watching me, he’s smiling. “I’m pleased that your people value cleanliness as much as mine do.”

“About that...” In the silvery moonlight, his skin tone looks almost human. Even though I know in my gut he’s not. “Lay it on me, Irick of handbags. Where are you from? Really? I know it’s not Earth.” I gesture with one hand to the fancy porta potty and with the other to the back of my neck, where apparently he installed some kind of universal translator straight out of Star Trek. “I know all of this isn’t modern human technology, let alone technology from here. So where are you from?”

I expect a verbal answer, but instead he pulls me to him, turning my back to his chest, wrapping one arm around my waist and raising his other to point to the sky.

The moon has nearly dipped below the horizon now and the vast starry sky is more visible. Even with the remaining moonlight, I can see more stars in this sky than I’ve seen



anywhere outside a field trip to a planetarium. The sky is still familiar. I'm still on earth. It's just an earth without the ambient light of eight billion people.

It is still surprising and unfamiliar to me to not be uncomfortable with his physical nearness. Instead, his heavy strength at my back only bolsters my courage, reminding me that I'm not alone in this new world.

He gestures to the vast swath of stars spilled across the night sky. "You are familiar with the River of the Heavens?"

"Yes. The Milky Way. That's what we call it."

He's tall enough that when we stand like this, his chin brushes my temple, and I can feel him nod. "Yes. The Milky Way." He shifts slightly, and I feel as if he's turning his head to look at me. "Like the dairy you mentioned liking?"

I laugh in surprise. He caught that? Out of all the nonsense I rambled, he remembered that? I shouldn't be able to laugh under the circumstances, since my world has been upended, but I do laugh. "Not the same kind of dairy. It's a metaphor. Because there are so many stars. It makes the sky look white like spilled milk."

"Yes. I see that." I feel his chin against my temple again as he gestures to the Milky Way. "My people call it the River of the Heavens, because all water is sacred, the waters that brought us the Sullec Prophets."

"The what now?"

"I'll tell you of them later, *Shuka*, but see that cluster there? The one that looks like a dagger?"

I followed the line of his finger and nod. "We call that constellation Orion. There is his belt, and his sword."

"That is where Perse is."

"So somewhere up there, in a solar system near Orion, there's a planet called Perse and that's where you're from," I say softly, still trying to wrap my brain around it. Although it's easier than it should be, considering movies made me think that aliens would be lizard people or slimy giant bugs eager to

plant their larva in my mouth. “You’re a long way from home.”

“No farther than you.”

I turn to face him. He doesn’t release me, but allows his grasp on my waist to shift from one side to the other when I turn. “Where am I? Exactly? Because this sky is my night sky. I know I’m on Earth. But this is like no earth I’ve ever been on. So where am I?”

“If you had to guess? What would your guess be?”

I draw in a breath, the air that fills my lungs is surprisingly warm, scented with flowers, and moonlight, and with him.

“If I had to guess,” I say slowly, barely willing to admit it to myself, “I would say I’m asking the wrong question. It’s not a matter of where I am, but when I am.”

“Your guest would be correct.”

I draw in another slow breath, half expecting panic to hit, but somehow knowing that it won’t, because Irick is here. Because as scary as this is, I am not alone.

“Am I in the future? Some distant post-apocalyptic future? Or the past?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I have traveled widely since arriving and I have seen no signs of a civilization that has declined. So, I assume the past.”

I nod, then open my mouth to ask the next question I have cued up in my mind, but before I can get it out, his hands slip from my hips up to cup my jaw and I feel awareness jolt through me.

“Enough questions, my *be’lahshuk*. You have had a long day.”

I let out a harump of laughter. “I’ve only been awake for like, an hour.”

“Still, you are thirsty for more than answers and you must be hungry too. Let me take you home and feed you.”

He leans down as if to kiss me. I feel my blood heating in response, my skin prickling everywhere he touches me in a way that's so sharp it borders on pain. His touch is fire and it stirs things in me I've only read about in books, and even then never believed were real.

I feel myself rising on to my toes, my gaze dropping to those full, sensual lips of his. Those lips that already know my body. That have already tasted me in something more intimate than a mere kiss.

Abruptly, he steps back, trailing his hands down my arms to take my hands in his. "Enough." His voice sounds rough and he clears his throat before speaking again. "That is enough for now. I will feed you and then you will rest. And tomorrow I will show you the rest of our fortress."

# chapter

## ten

Irick

My *be'lahshuk* is silent as I lead her back into the fortress. Cressida of Austin. It is a beautiful name, even if in my heart she needs no name. She will always simply be the one my soul and my body are bound to.

Before the great war, when my father would tell me of the bonding between he and my mother, I never truly understood. Yes, I knew their bond was deep. I saw it every day in the way he would care for her, bringing her her favorite foods and whispering jokes the rest of us never heard. I saw it in the way they interacted, sometimes moving as if one mind controlled both bodies. She would reach for something, and he would hand it to her without even looking for her hand.

There were servants who prepared most of our meals, but they would cook together for the Festival of the Moon Tides, a time when the leaders of the great houses cooked for the whole town, preparing every item in the menu by hand, in the old ways, without replicated ingredients, as a tribute to the bond between the people and the leaders. Watching them cook together was like watching a dance, they moved together so smoothly. Every gesture, every word fluid but precise.

I think I had forgotten all of that until tonight, when I pulled my Shuka to my chest and showed her Perse. Until she turned in my arms and I felt the drive to cup her face, to complete the bonding that began between us the first time my lips touched her flesh.

Now, as I'm guiding her back into the fortress, I remember how it was between my parents. How easy and peaceful it was. I know it will be like that between us someday, but not yet. Cressida is not ready.

As thrilling as it was to cup her jaw in my hands and feel the quickening in my blood as my wrists touched her neck, I can be patient. Because I also remember what she said when I first began the bonding. She doesn't know what it means to be Be'lahshuk. She's never heard of the Tides of Be'lah.

I know she is my mate, but she does not yet believe it.

That is fine. I will wait.

I can be patient.

And in the meantime, I will show her in every way I know how, exactly how precious she is to me.

When I lead her back into the cave, I take her straight to the small table by the fire alcove. "There is spiced tea if you want it." I hold out the cup. "I can reheat it if you prefer it warmed. Though I have no dairy for it."

She takes the cup, holding it in her palms, grinning. "Actually, I take my tea black." She takes a tentative sip. "Hmm ... it's kind of like a chai latte."

"And that's a drink you like?"

"Yes." She takes another sip. "But I guess it could use some milk."

"Then I will find you an animal that produces it."

She laughs, and her delight makes me feel like a king. Or like the god the people in the village believe I am. I tug her toward one of the cushions beside the low table. "There is other food."

She sits, looking at the small bowls I laid out earlier while she was sleeping. "Raspberries?"

I give the word a moment to register, then nod. "Yes. These are similar. Perhaps smaller than the ones you are familiar with."

She pops one in her mouth. “Oh! It’s a little tart, but the flavor is so much stronger!” She grabs another and looks at the rest of the food, seeming to catalogue it out loud. “Walnuts. Some kind of jerky. And bread?” Her gaze meets mine. “Where did you get bread? If I’m right about the villagers being Stone Age people, they aren’t farming wheat yet.”

In my head, Cyg says, “She is correct. Humans on this planet will not domesticate grains for several more generations.”

I ignore his comment and answer her out loud. “This bread is made from a grain called gan’duhn from Perse.”

Her eyes widen and then she drops the walnut she was about to pop in her mouth and picks up the slice of bread, turning it over in her hands as she studies it. “Bread from Perse? Seriously?”

“Yes.”

“Can I eat it? Is it safe for me?”

I pause before nodding, waiting for Cyg to chime in. When he doesn’t, I say out loud, “I believe so. Some of the people in the village have consumed it without ill effect.”

She tears off a corner and pops it into her mouth. “I’ll start with just one bite. Go slowly just to make sure.”

“Yes. Slowly is good,” I say, reaching over to brush a drop of tea from her chin, thinking of my plan to pursue her slowly. To give her all the time she needs to get used to the idea that she is my *be’lahshuk*.

I’m about to say more when Cyg interrupts. “There is a sensor out in sector seventeen.”

She jumps at the sound of his voice, looking around frantically.

“Who is that?” After a second, she blinks and stops looking for another person. “Some kind of computer? Like an AI or something?”

I clench my jaw then nod. “Cyg, introduce yourself.”

“Cressida of Austin, I am Cyg, half of the Historian pair, Cygnus. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Her gaze meets mine, narrowing as she sets down the food she’s been eating. “Cressida of Austin, huh? So, it’s been listening to everything we’ve said? What is it? Some kind of AI? Was it here when—”

She cuts herself off, blushing and I know she’s thinking of intimacies we’ve shared. It pleases me that she wants to keep those moments between us, but I don’t like this annoyed light in her eyes. Just when I was starting to win her over.

“Yes, Cyg is what I’d call an AI, but not as you understand the term. I was going to wait to explain about him until you’d had a little more time to adjust.”

I say it all out loud, but direct the last bit to Cyg, since he knew my intentions and purposefully disregarded them.

“I do not think concealing my presence longer would have made my existence any more palatable to Cressida of Austin. And the matter with the sensor is quite pressing.”

I sigh, giving her a hard look. I had not planned to leave her side until I was certain she was settled. Until she was fed and happy and I knew she had accepted her place by my side.

On the other hand, I don’t want to mess with the fortress’s security, not when Torvin was ready to burn her at the stake less than two days ago.

I stand. “Fine. I will go check on the sensor. Cyg, answer any questions she has.”

I look over at her and see apprehension flickering across her features, either at the thought of being left alone or because she too is thinking of Torvin.

I lean down to cup her jaw, just for a moment. “You will be safe here, *Shuka*.”

“Maybe I’m not worried about myself.”

I grin. “Drink more tea. Then try to sleep. I will return shortly.”

# chapter

## eleven

I WATCH IRICK WALK OUT, trying to calm my racing heart.

What does it say about me that I feel a burst of panic at the thought of him leaving me here alone? That I feel more comfortable in his presence than I do alone?

All of these things I'm feeling seem to have hit too fast and too hard. Like I've been swept up by something that's beyond my control. Being with him feels amazing and terrifying all at the same time.

My entire life I've been simultaneously charmed and put off of romantic fantasies. I love romance novels, not because of the actual romance, per se, but because the one's I choose to read seem less about fate and more about two people working together to overcome obstacles and choosing each other every day for the rest of their lives. Maybe I relish the hard work in that, but also, it feels more relatable than the lightning strike of fated love.

Even with all the romance novels I've read, I still roll my eyes internally when the heroine meets a guy and "just knows" he's the one for her. I always want to sit her down and give a stern talking to. "You just met. How do you *know*? What if he's a rapist? What if he's mean to kittens or doesn't recycle? How can you really *know*?"

And yet, here I am, just hanging out in the mountain fortress of some dude I just met.

Now, true, I have considerably fewer options right now compared to ... oh, let's say, Bella Swan. I think we can all



agree she should have at least considered getting a restraining order.

But for the first time in my life, I can imagine why she didn't.

Maybe I can even understand her innate, gut-deep level of trust that Edward wouldn't suck her dry or break her like a twig.

"But how do I know?" I mutter to myself. "How can I just trust that he's a good man?"

I jump when Cyg replies, "By all measures, he is a good man."

"Shit." I press my hand to my chest. "Warn a girl, why don't you?"

"Pardon me," his disembodied voice says. "I do not understand that phrasing."

"Sorry. I just didn't know you were still there."

"Where else would I be?"

"I don't know. With Irick, I guess?"

"Most of my neural net is stored on the mainframe which can be accessed in the core tech room two doors down the hall."

"Wait. What tech room?" I stand, not sure what I'm going to do, but unable to just sit sipping my tea. "What's in this tech room? It's down that hall?"

I point to the doorway Irick just left through. The one that leads to the garden and to the village.

"No. It's through the doorway on the other side of this room."

As he speaks, the ambient glow of the ceiling spreads to light a corner of the room I hadn't noticed before. Sure enough, there is a door there. Not an open doorway, like the one that leads from this room to the passageway, but a closed, substantial-looking doorway.

“Huh. Is it locked?”

“It is always locked when Irick is not here.”

“Why?”

“To protect the valuable technology that Irick scavenged from the wreckage of the Manx spaceship from the ignorant humanoids in the village.”

“Huh.” I cross my arms over my chest, considering his words. “Ignorant humanoids? The same ignorant humanoids that are my ancestors?”

“Yes. Those ignorant humanoids.”

I huff and pace for a bit, before returning to the table to drink more tea, partly because I’m thirsty and probably dehydrated, but also because it gives me something to do while I think.

After a moment, Cyg says, “Shall I unlock the door so you can visit the technology room?”

I give another huff. “Better not risk anything valuable falling into the hands of this ignorant humanoid.”

There’s a pause that feels unexpectedly heavy, then Cyg replies, “I believe you misunderstand me. Irick doesn’t view you as one of them. I did not mean to imply—”

“Don’t worry about it,” I snap. “I’m just his ... what’s that term he’s always using? Bella Shook?”

“Yes. You are his be’lahshuk.”

And just like that, the translation doodad in my head must kick in, because I hear the word as it’s pronounce, but I also understand it.

*Be’lahshuk.*

“A vassal bonded by Be’lah,” I murmur aloud.

“Yes. Exactly.”

“Bonded how?” I ask, my mind running through all the things Irick has said to me. About how I’m *his*. How I belong with him.

Or was it *to* him?

A bonded vassal sounds like a slave.

I almost forget I spoke the words aloud when Cyg answers, “Bonded in everyway. On Perse, once *be’lahshuk* have completed the bonding ritual they are as one.”

“What does that mean? And how is this bonding ritual is completed?”

“It’s completed when the couple consummates physically and—”

“When they fuck, you mean?”

“Yes, that is part of it.”

“So if I fuck him I become his sex slave forever?”

“I am not sure that’s the correct term.”

“And what do you mean, that’s *part* of it. What’s the *rest* of it?”

“Perhaps this is something you should discuss with Irick.”

“Well, he’s not here, because he’s out defending his fortress from ignorant humanoids or clubbing baby seals or whatever he’s doing. So I need you to tell me exactly how this works before he gets back.”

“Irick has never clubbed a baby seal to my knowledge.”

“I was hyperbolizing! I do that when I’m stressed out. Just tell me how this bonding happens so that I don’t end up his sex slave.”

“The bonding process begins when each person is bathed in the sacred waters of Be’lah on the lunar planet of Nerida, one of the three lunar moons of Perse.”

“Oh,” I sigh with relief. “Okay. Then it’s fine. Because I’ve never been to Perse, let alone Nerida. So I’m fine.”

“Or in the pool in the garden here on Earth.”

“Wait. What? Why? Why are there sacred waters of Be’lah on Perse and on Earth?”

“Because all members of the seven royal families of Perse carry a vial of the sacred waters of Be’lah with them at all times. Once Irick settled here, he mixed the sacred waters from his vial with the waters of the garden.”

“Oh no.” I sink to the ground and drop my head into my hands. My clean hands. “And let me guess. When I washed my hands in the stream, that counts as bathing in the waters.”

“Yes. But it was not your first dosing. Actually, when Irick first brought you up to the fortress from the village, you were cold and—”

“Right. He said that, didn’t he? I was cold and dirty and the best way to get me warm was to bathe me and put me to bed. That fucker.” I push to my feet. “What else? What else has to happen for us to be bonded?”

“Skin to skin contact between the wrists and the neck usually begins the spread of the marks that indicates the match is approved by the Be’lah.”

Yep. That sounds about right.

That’s why he keeps touching my neck. Why my skin feels so hot every time he does. It feels like I’m being branded because ... what? I actually am being branded?

“Marks? What kind of marks?” I stand and cross to my backpack. I unzip it and start to dig. “Where’s my phone? I want to see these marks.” I pause, thinking. “No. Wait. My battery is probably dead by now.”

I’m muttering to myself again, so I’m a little surprised when Cyg replies.

“The technical device you call a phone has been charged and returned to your satchel.”

I still and look up at the ceiling. Wherever Cyg is, it’s not in the ceiling, but that’s sort of where his voice is coming from so that’s where I look. “What do you mean? You just happened to have a USB-C cord floating around in here?”

“Irick anticipated you’d want the device when you asked for it the first time you woke up. So he rigged a power source

to charge it.”

“Oh.” I sink to the floor, holding my backpack on my lap. “I don’t know what to make of any of this. Is he trying to make me his sex slave? But he’s also thoughtfully charged my phone? What the hell?”

I keep digging until I find my phone. Sure enough, it turns on and the battery is at full. I feel a weird sense of relief to have it in my hand. No I can’t call anyone but if it’s charged that’s something right?

So all of that is good.

Assuming sex slaves are allowed to play Candy Crush.

I turn on the camera app and put it selfie mode. Twisting it this way and that to see ...

Yep. I’ve been marked.

Sure, I’m a redhead, so I’ve always had freckles. But this is next level. I don’t just have freckles, I have a liberal sprinkling of leopard spots on either side of my neck.

“Great. I’m a fucking giraffe.”

“On Perse, the marks of mating are considered the greatest sign of beauty. Bonded pairs are rare. A gift to all who know them.”

“Yeah, but I’m not on Perse. And even if he finds my marks attractive, that still doesn’t mean I want to be his sex slave.”

“By all measures, Irick is good man,” Cyg says, as though my questions are an insult to him. “According to many cultures, he would be among the best. A leader, an innovator, a hero.”

His words simultaneously fill me with pride and shame. I should be proud of the man he is. Even if I don’t believe in soulmates, he does seem like an excellent choice for a life partner, even beyond my general lack of other options.

Yes, I’m a twenty-first century woman, but I don’t live in that world anymore. I live here where everything around us is

primitive except the fortress Irick built. He made much of this before I got here so it's not as if he created it for me, but there are touches all around that clearly reveal his undying faith and hope that the tides would bring him his fated mate.

"I have been exploring your culture more," Cyg says.

"Um ... excuse me? How? Do you have some sort of time-traveling verse of Google?"

"You had technical devices in your satchel that are encoded with information about the world you came from. I have accessed that data to increase the efficacy of your translation module."

"Oh. I guess that's why Irick needed to charge them."

"Correct. Though I believe he also thought they would bring you comfort." Cyg pauses before continuing, "I believe your use of the term sex slave is a misinterpretation. In Perse, be'lahshuk are both bonded to one another. Your people value love and romance when it comes to relationships."

"Yes, we do. Though I can't say we all agree on the definitions of those concepts." Somehow talking makes the loss easier to bear, so I keep going. "To me, they are verbs. Active choices you make on a daily basis. I have never had the luxury to sit back and hope that fate or ocean tides or whatever, handle my romantic life."

"They are the ocean tides of the moon of Nerida," Cyg clarifies. "I want to ensure I am comprehending your meaning. Is it your culture, in general, that is leery of a fate-selected mate or is that a Cressida of Austin belief?"

I snort because even though I don't think he—Cyg—it, whatever—is trying to be funny, his words are still amusing. "I can't say I am the only one to believe such things. I think it's quite common, actually, in most modern cultures, to believe in the notion of soulmates or 'the one.' Twin flames. Whatever you want to call it. It's just not anything I've ever seen legitimate proof of. In my experience, the relationships that start out hot and fast burn out just as quickly, because they have no foundation. The ones who build on something

together, from the ground up, have a great chance of endurance.”

“Your father,” Cyg says.

“Yes. My father left the moment my mother got sick. He didn’t have the commitment to deal with the toll MS took on her body. How the pain ate away at who she’d once been.”

“This distresses you. Angers you.”

“Of course. My father made vows to my mother. Forget the verbal promises he made to me. In the end, he wasn’t strong enough. Didn’t love us enough. If that’s a soulmate, I want no part of it.”

“I am not a human, nor am I Persæn, but I have enough of the information from both cultures to know that your assessment about Irick is incorrect. You are hearing the word slave in the way it comes from your world.”

“I wasn’t aware there was a favorable way to view that word,” I quip. I certainly do not need to be schooled on love by a robot or whatever he is.

“You are correct that in most usages of the word are negative. I can assure you that Persæn culture does not approve of the usage of slaves. But the way your human brain is interpreting *be’lahshuk* to that of heart slave. You are substituting the heart for flesh and believing Irick means to make you a pleasure slave. Are you not?”

I open my mouth to argue, but then pause, because yeah, that’s pretty much what I thought. Though his lack of pursuit these last few weeks do call that into question.

“That is the closest interpretation. Perhaps the concept itself does not lend itself to human translation. Your *be’lahshuk* is your other half. The one whom makes your soul whole. Yes, you are bound to them, but you are not owned by them anymore than they are owned by you. For historians like myself it is a literal half and half make a whole. For the Persæn people it is more complicated than that. Yes, they believe their matches are ordained by the Tides of Be’lah, but that does not mean their relationships are without struggle or

commitment. They do not blindly accept a mate. They, too, make the decision to love daily.”

His words, though delivered in a near monotone cadence, are fueled by passion. It’s an odd dichotomy, but speaks to the people he represents. As an art teacher, I know more than some, that a people’s creation, their art, is a mirror of their beliefs and views. So Cyg might not understand the concept of love in a way that allows him to feel it, he does seem to understand the way his people view it.

“Perhaps I have allowed my twenty-first century brain to make assumptions about things. I know better. Still, doesn’t it seem awfully convenient that Irick and I belong together and we just happen to land in the same place and time?”

“I do believe, Cressida of Austin, that is the point of the Tides of Be’lah. There is a pattern to the motion of the universe that is not easily seen. The Be’lah are everywhere and part of everything. They use the flow of the universe to bring order and peace to the souls they touch. They would not have paired you if you were not perfectly matched.”

“What else have I misunderstood or refused to see?” I ask, mostly myself.

“The water filtration system Irick created and employed for the villagers. He crafted it to look like their basic materials so as to not confuse them. But it should alleviate any problems with unclean water,” Cyg says.

Tears prick at my eyes. “He did that? Truly?”

“See for yourself,” Cyg says, then the viz screen reveals the well the villagers use. Another image flashes beside what looks to be a live feed from the village. It’s a diagram of some kind of ultraviolet filter deep underground.

I swipe at my eyes. “Why did he do that?”

“Irick has lived in isolation for many years. The people in the village know he is not one of them and do not welcome him, but he could stand by when the village was struck with what you would call dysentery. He devised the filtration



device for them. I estimate the people of this village are far healthier than those in other villages nearby.”

I give a sigh. “So he’s helped them and they’ll never know it.”

“Indeed. And then there is the matter with your reading viz,” Cyg says. “He figured out a way to charge your battery. I’m afraid we will not be able to add new content, but everything you previously had should still be there.”

“Wait, he fixed my kindle?” I ask. I dig more in my backpack and find my Kindle. The green light at the base confirms Cyg’s words. “Oh my hell!” I grab the device and hold it to my chest. No new books, but being able to have the ones I’d previously purchased is everything.

“Camera has been restored,” Irick announces as he enters the room.

I launch myself at him and he doesn’t miss a beat, just catches me as I splat against his wall of a chest.

# chapter

## twelve

Irick

My Shuka is in my arms. Willingly in my arms.

Her lips brush against my cheek and the need to complete our bond surges through my body. Can she feel it too? I know that Persæen women feel the bonding urge, but Cressida is human. So I am uncertain how that works. I could ask Cyg to scan her body for elevated temperature and other symptoms, but right now I am just enjoying her being in my arms.

Her full curves press decadently against my torso. My arms are wrapped around her, clasped together at the small of her back. I want to reach down and grip handfuls of her plump bottom. Have her open herself to me, encase me in the tight grip of her thighs.

“You are pleased to see me,” I state, realizing I likely sound like Cyg stating the obvious. But I am unaccustomed to being the cause of her joy.

“Yes,” she breathes. “I truly am.”

“Has something happened, my Shuka? Are you unwell?”

“Nothing happened exactly, but I have seen some things,” she says.

I set her down on her feet and pull her over to the bed area. “Cyg, do a full body scan on Cressida to ensure her health.”

She looks up at me and grins. “That is unnecessary, I promise I am perfectly healthy.”

“Scanning,” Cyg’s voice says.

I wait for the process to complete wondering if I should have him report subvocally, but decide against it. I cannot keep secrets from my Shuka, if we are to be partners like she wants.

“Elevated temperature, dilated pupils, elevated breathing rate as well as heart rate,” Cyg says.

I am feeling those same things.

“She appears to be in an aroused state,” he says.

I already knew that as I can scent her need.

“Oh my Hell,” she whispers. She leans forward, her forehead planting against my chest. “How embarrassing.”

“Leave us, Cyg,” I command.

I wait until I can feel the absence of his presence in my head. He doesn't fully retreat, there are still matters of safety to watch for. But this does allow him to disengage so he is not a silent observer in the room.

“He showed me what you did to the villagers' water source.” She beams at me. “And you figured out how to charge my reading device. Why?” Tears pool in her pretty green eyes. “Why did you do those things?”

I reach up, cupping one side of her face. I will not complete the bonding unless she is in agreement. But, in this moment, I can't not touch her. “For you. Everything is always for you.”

“I'm ready, Irick.”

“Ready for what?”

“Our bonding. I choose you. I don't know if I'll ever believe like you do about the tides and fated mates, but I feel it in here,” she taps on her chest. “You are the man I would want if I had an entire lineup of men to choose from.”

Her words fill my body with unquenchable desire. I want to pin her down and plow into her until we are both weak from the pleasure. But I need her to be certain.

“These things cannot be undone, Shuka. A bond is for life, yours and mine. You will be my one and only.”

“And if I say I need more time?” she asks.

“Then I will wait. You *are* my one and only.”

“I am certain, Irick. I want you. Not just physically, though I do want that, a lot. Like really a lot. Is that the bonding urge you mentioned?”

I nod.

“So you feel the same?” she asks.

“I have since the moment I laid eyes on you. I knew you were my beloved.”

“Then do it. Let’s complete the bonding. Tell me what I need to do.”

I turn us so that we’re sitting on the bed facing one another. I trail my fingers across the place on her neck where her marks are already beginning to bloom. They match the spots on my wrists.

I knew the moment I saw her that she was my mate. The marks we both bear are proof I was right.

Then I reach up first with one hand and then the second until I’m cupping her face. Our eyes lock and my wrists and hands begin to heat.

“Oh,” she whispers, her eyes growing round with surprise. “It’s like I can feel your heart beating under my skin.”

Then I seal our lips together and kiss her the way I’ve been longing to for weeks. My heart and my love, my *be’lahshuk*. Her tongue meets mine and together our mouths mate in a carnal dance that only serves to further boil my blood. Our kiss ends and she looks up at me, her eyes shining with moisture and emotion. I can feel it now. She loves me.

Me. Irick, the traitor. Irick, the convict. The tides brought me the most beautiful of women, both of body and face, but also her heart. She finds me worthy and I am ready to shout my joy from the tops of this very mountain.

“Irick, I need you,” she whispers.

“Yes, mate, I know. I need you as well.”

She tears at her own clothes, pulling her tunic off and then her leggings until she lays herself back on the bed coverings, her pale, curvy body bare for my feasting. I stand from the bed and remove my clothing and weapon, setting them neatly in a pile on the floor. When I turn back to face her, her eyes are greedily devouring my flesh.

“You find me pleasing to the eye?” I ask.

“Very much so. Pretty sure I’d have to be blind not to though. Your body is perfect.”

I shake my head. “No. My flesh has been permanently marked as a traitor. I am damaged goods. Still, I am thankful you find my form pleasant to look upon.”

Finally she lets her eyes lower to the juncture of my thighs. She releases a heavy breath. “You are a big, big boy, aren’t you?”

She reaches out to touch me, but stops short. Then with one figure she brushes against my swell.

“What is this?”

“It is my swell. I am told it will further complete the bond as I cannot find my own pleasure without yours.”

Her brows raise into her hairline. “I’m sorry, what now? You can’t come if I don’t come?”

I nod. “That is correct. It is our way.”

“Like you hold off until I come or you physically can’t?”

“Can’t. Your completion will become our completion.”

“Man, earth girls are so missing out. We should all be so luck to be paired with a Persæn male.”

I laugh and lower my body next to hers. “You have my heart, Cressida of Austin.”

“And you have mine, Irick of the handbags.” She giggles.

“Someday I hope that joke makes sense to me.” I let a hand slide down her body, outlining the curves of her body. “I find you exceptionally pleasing to the eye, in case I have not said so before.”

Her thighs spread. “Please touch me. I’m aching.”

“I will taste you.”

“I would prefer if you made love to me. We have plenty of time to explore and play with our pleasure. Right now, I want to be as close to you as possible.”

I drop my hand to her mound, sliding between her thighs. “I should at least make sure you are wet enough to take me since you said yourself, I am a big boy.” Her thighs spread further and I find her beyond slick. She is slippery and swollen, no doubt aching as much as I for our joining.

She welcomes me as I climb atop her form, her hips cradling my body, her hands running up my backside. The feel of her palms on my naked skin is decadent. Perhaps it is even soothing, but my need for her is so strong at the moment that I can’t feel anything but intense desire.

“Irick, please,” she whines. Her legs hike up on the side of my hips, wrapping around my body.

Then my bare cock is nestled against the wet heat of her pussy. I rock myself a few times, letting the head of my dick slide against her bundle of nerves. My swell has never received any stimulation and I can feel the thrumming of the bonding current softly buzzing there.

I notch myself at her entrance, pressing forward. Her greedy pussy swallows the first two inches of me and nothing has ever felt so good. She’s impossibly wet and hot and tight and I’m thankful that my body will not climax without her. Because if left to my own devices, I’d be coming right now before even getting all the way inside her.

Cressida grips my ass and rocks herself upward, impaling herself further on my dick. So I plunge the rest of the way inside her.

“Cressida,” I murmur her name, pressing kisses all over her face. “I am sorry to bring you pain, my Shuka.”

“No, its good. Full, I’m so full and it’s tight, but it’s also good.” Then she frowns and her head tilts slightly. “Are you vibrating?”

I laugh, my chuckle pouring through both of us. “No, not vibrating. There is a current between us. It comes from my swell. So maybe it feels like vibrating.”

She bites down on her lip. “Uh-huh. Right on my G-spot too.” She grins up at me. “You can move now. Oh, fuck,” she moans.

She’s not wrong. The pleasure is already unreal. Even if I don’t know what a G-spot is.

I pull back, then plunge forward, once, twice.

“Irick,” she cries out. “I think I’m going to come soon.”

I increase my tempo, lowering the slick, tight grip of her pussy walls as I move within her. We kiss, our tongues and mouths mimicking our bodies. And I thank the Tides again for bringing her to me.

I feel the start of her climax before she cries out. It starts at the spot next to my swell and is intense, almost like a sharp bite of electricity. The pulse radiates from that spot, then she’s squeezing my own release from my body.

I roar out her name, then collapse on my back, rolling her so she’s sprawled across my body. Our flesh is still joined, the wet mixture of our completed bonding leaking from her body.

“I love you,” she whispers against my chest.

“And I you, my Shuka.

We stay like that, in our bed, sharing pleasure again and again for the next few days. And I know this is only the beginning.



We hope you loved Cressida and Irick’s story. Please consider [leaving us a review](#).

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# thank you for reading!

Kat and Emma have been besties and writing partners for the last two decades (we were mere children when we started). We love working together and writing LOL, steamy rom-coms full of characters you can't help but fall in love with.

Please keep scrolling for an excerpt from one of each of our single-authored books. Navy SEAL's anyone? Kat's Covert Curves and Emma's In Too Deep are even [connected by a family](#). Told you, we like to work together.

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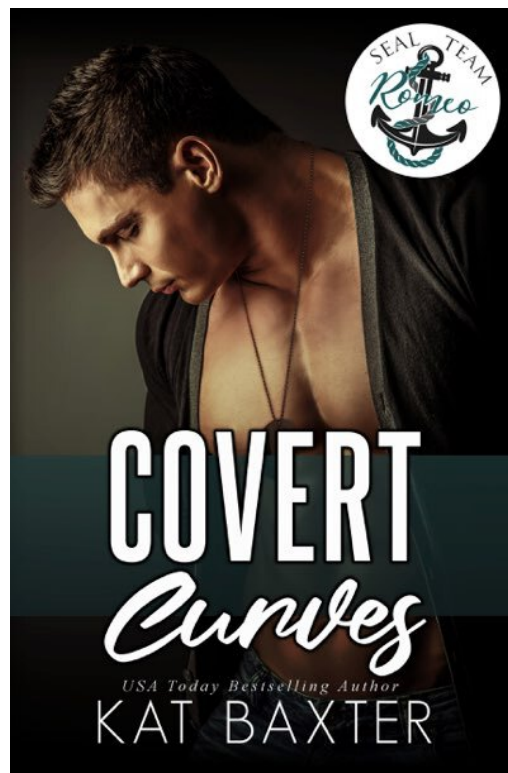
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**excerpt from  
covert curves by  
kat baxter**



Remy

I like to pretend that when I'm on leave, I'm a different person.

On leave, I can sleep late. Eat crap food that's bad for me. Watch stupid shit on YouTube. Ignore my phone if I want.

Of course, none of that is strictly true. Even when I'm on leave I'm still a SEAL. That's just not the kind of thing you turn on and off. At thirty, if I eat too much shit while on leave, I pay for it when I get back. Of course, the biggest of the self-delusions is the bit about ignoring my phone.

The truth is, I have to be reachable twenty-four hours a day, three-hundred and sixty-five days a year. Especially me, because I'm the intelligence guy on my team. So they call and text and email me all hours of the day and night with random requests.

But, man, do I like to pretend I don't have to be *always* available.

Which is why, when I'm sitting in my parents' kitchen a couple of days into my leave and my phone rings, I almost let it go to voicemail before flipping it over and checking who it is.

Thank God it's not my commanding officer. Still, the name flashing on the caller ID surprises the hell out of me. I slide to answer.

"Wade, hey man. Everything okay?"

My older brother grunts his response on the other line.

Five years older than me, Wade has always been the quiet, brooding type. It's only gotten worse since his accident.

"I need a favor," he says.

"Sure. Anything you need," I say quickly.

Probably too quickly. I've always looked up to Wade. I've always wanted to be Wade. That's probably true of every guy who has a brother five years older and inestimably cooler. When we were kids, our parents used to call me his shadow.

I don't think either of us quite knows how to handle my obvious hero-worship now that Wade isn't a SEAL, but I still am. Just one of the many ways Wade's accident has rippled through our entire family. I guess we should be thankful we

weren't on the same SEAL team. Especially since several of his buddies didn't make it back.

Of course, it's not about me. And the fact that I make it about me, if only for a minute and only in my own head, is just a reminder that I can be a selfish shitbag sometimes. Which is one of the many reasons I'll never be able to fill his shoes. Not even now that he's not a SEAL and that ... well, fuck. I've made it about me again.

I clear my throat. "Whatever you need, I can do it."

"It's not really for me." Wade, who's never been one for chatter, gets straight to the point. "I got a call last night from General Fieldmore. He asked for a favor."

I let out a low whistle. General Fieldmore is the real deal.

"Yeah. Exactly," Wade says. "He knew I was on medical leave, but he didn't know ..."

Wade pauses there, the unfinished part of that sentence hanging heavy between us. Obviously, the general didn't know the extent of Wade's injuries or that he was still in rehab. The learning how to walk all over again with a leg made of metal and plastic kind of rehab. The kind of rehab that means Wade won't be able to do this favor.

I jump in to fill the silence. "Whatever he needs, I'll do it."

"One of his golfing buddies is an Army colonel from Dallas. The guy has a daughter who lives in Saddle Creek. His youngest daughter ran away from home to visit her older sister. The general knew I was from Saddle Creek and asked me to find the girl and bring her to Houston by this Saturday. There's some kind of political fundraising gala that her parents have to attend, but they want her with them."

Yeah, I'll do anything for Wade, but ... "If some kid ran away from home, isn't that a matter for the police?"

"She's not a kid. She's twenty-two."

I frown and scrub at the back of my neck. "Okay then, if she's an adult, it's not really running away."

“Yeah.” Wade makes a noise of grumbled annoyance. “Apparently, she’s a real piece of work. She can’t hold down a job and has delusions of being some kind of Instagram influencer. The whole rich girl starter pack.”

“Okay, so she’s a brat. But none of this sounds like something that justifies a Navy SEAL tracking her down.”

“Apparently, they’re afraid she’s dabbling in drugs. They just want to get her home safely so they can get her some help. But you can see why this guy needed to call in a bunch of favors to get someone to track down his daughter and bring her home.”

“To keep things hush-hush, I’m assuming,” I say. “She’s a fucking adult.”

Wade clears his throat. “I need you to do this for me. I know you’re on leave. I know you’re probably already home. Probably eating some of mom’s cornbread right now.”

I glance down at the residual buttery crumbs I left on the plate to my right and roll my eyes. “It’s my leave, Wade. Can’t this colonel just come down here and get his own damn kid?”

But even as I ask the question, I know the answer. He’s a colonel and he outranks me. Even if this isn’t an official mission. Even if I’m not a part of the Army and therefore he’s not in my direct chain of command—or anywhere near it, for that matter—I know the answer. I’ll do it because my brother asked me to. That’s all that really matters.

I exhale slowly. “Don’t worry about it, brother. I’ll take care of it.”

“I’m texting you her information, now.”

“How’s rehab?” I ask.

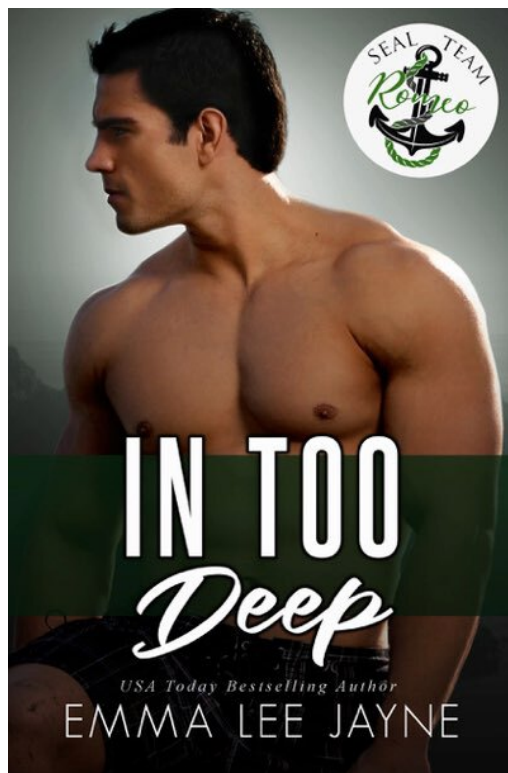
“Rehab is rehab. I don’t mind the physical work, but I could do without the group talk sessions.”

I chuckle. “I imagine the therapists are enjoying that as much as you are.”

“Fuck off,” Wade says. But I do hear a hint of a smile in his voice.

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# excerpt from in too deep



Nick

Here's the thing about being a Navy SEAL: you're trained to expect the worst in any situation.



Statistically speaking, the best-case scenario never fucking happens. The weather conditions suck. The resources you were promised are insufficient. The bad guys are either smarter or better equipped than the intel let on. Sometimes they're stupid, but just plain lucky. The point is, shit always goes sideways.

It's just the nature of the work. It's the nature of the world.

So you plan for every contingency, and even then, you try to be flexible enough so that when none of those work out, you can make decisions on the move and still somehow snag a win, not always, but often enough.

Planning for the worst has kept me alive this long, so I figure it works.

Which is why, as I sit here in Ace's, a bar in the small town of Saddle Creek, nursing a Shiner Bock, waiting to meet Cassie Guidry for the first time in person, I keep my expectations low.

She's the kid sister of my best friend and fellow member of my SEAL team, Remy Guidry.

She's also the woman I'm in love with.

Yeah, you heard me right.

Kid sister of my best friend. (A guy who, for the record, could absolutely kill me with his bare hands.) And I'm meeting her for the first time tonight.

It's complicated.

Long story short: she started sending me emails and care packages a couple of years ago when she found out I didn't have any family stateside. At the time, she was dating Tripp Dushane, aka Reginald Douche Canoe, Esquire. That didn't stop me from slowly falling head over ass for this chick.

Hell, if knowing she has two older brothers who are both SEALs and who could both kill me with their bare hands wasn't a deterrent, then some pansy-ass lawyer boyfriend wouldn't keep me from falling for her.

Then, Reginald Douche Canoe cheated on her and broke her heart, and here we are.

Okay, so it's not that complicated and the short version wasn't that short.

The point is, she's single now and I'm taking my shot.

So when Remy said he was going home to Saddle Creek, Texas, for his leave, I tagged along, knowing it was my chance to meet her in person.

She lives and works in Austin, a couple of hours east of here, but I know she'd come home to see Remy while he was in town.

So here we sit in Ace's waiting for her to show up, planning for shit to go wrong, and hoping desperately that it doesn't. And, yeah, I'm a little nervous about whether not she'll live up to my expectations.

I know what she looks like. I've seen countless pictures of her, a couple that Remy has shown me, way more from stalking her on social media. She's fucking gorgeous. Not that it would have mattered to me. I fell in love with her via emails and DMs.

Neither Remy nor I are the kind of guys who need to talk just to fill the silence, so as we wait for his sister to show up, we're both scrolling through our phones.

I surreptitiously pull up some of the emails Cassie and I have exchanged over the years and reread them.

Like I haven't been rereading them all the damn time since I found out she was single.

*From: Frogman52@altmail.com*

*To: C.Guidry@DushaneandDushaneLaw.com*

*Re: Introduction*

*Cassie,*

*Thanks for the emails you've been sending. Like I said, it's just nice to hear a voice from home.*

*I noticed, though, that you didn't take me seriously about not needing to send me packages. You really don't have to do that.*

*The messages are enough.*

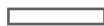
*I wish I could respond more often. But I bet you're used to not hearing from Remy and Wade when they're deployed, so you know the drill.*

*I always enjoy your stories of life in Austin and whatever you're reading lately.*

*I'm not sure that I can trust your assessment of the weather in Texas, though. Sure, you say it's hot, but surely it's not as hot as it is here.*

*Cheers,*

*Nick*



*From: C.Guidry@DushaneandDushaneLaw.com*

*To: Frogman52@altmail.com*

*Subject: I have to ask*

*Nick,*

*Yes, you said I didn't have to send you packages. But you didn't say I couldn't. Besides, I figure everyone needs a new toothbrush every once in a while. Even before Remy was in the Navy, he never switched out his toothbrushes as often as*

*he should've. Besides, if I'm going to send candy, I need to balance it out with dental care. It's all part of the circle of life, yin/yang of care packages.*

*The real question is this: did you enjoy the snacks?*

*I know hard candy can be a bit controversial, since everyone under the age of 82 prefers chocolate, but I simply don't trust the military to get your mail in time for me to send chocolate, so butterscotches it is. After all, wherever you are, may not be as hot as Austin, but it's probably close.*

*Also, even if it is hotter than Austin, at least you don't have to fight with your annoying coworkers over how low to keep the air conditioner. I like to think that if it was merely the heat in Austin, I could handle it better. My boss keeping the offices in the low 60s in the summer makes everything worse.*

*Also, I have to ask. What's with the email address? I get the frogman part. But "52"? Did you just pick a random number? If you're anything like my brothers, you probably tried multiple variations of "FrogmenHaveBigDicks."*

*Until next time,*

*Cassie*

Despite myself, I chuckle when I get to her line about "FrogmenHaveBigDicks."

Remy glances up from his phone, a question in his gaze.

I close the file I keep her emails in and shrug. "The Onion," I say to explain my chuckle.

He nods, then glances to the door, then breaks into a grin and stands.

My damn heart catches in my chest.

I haven't even seen her yet, but I know his smile means she's just walked in. My heart is fucking pounding like my tank is low on oxygen and I'm on my last breath of O2, just knowing she's in the room.

It takes every ounce of control I have to focus on my phone a little longer—because I don't want to seem as pathetically desperate as I feel—before slowly standing and sliding my phone into my back pocket.

Only then do I let my gaze travel to the woman who's just walked in the door.

Like I said, I've seen pictures. I've seen the professionally taken portrait on her law firm's website. I've seen posed, well-lit, filtered shots on her Instagram page. I've seen the temporary stories she puts up, hair in a ponytail, sweaty from running a 5K. I was in the room when she FaceTimed with Remy about Wade's accident, when she'd been crying all night and her eyes were puffy, her skin red and splotchy.

I've seen a hundred versions of her and imagined a thousand more. And I'm still not prepared for that first, in person sight of her. She's tall and lean, too inherently energetic to be graceful. Heart-shaped face, brown hair shot through with reddish highlights, mouth just a little too large. She's stunning and perfect.

I know the second I see her, that even though I tried to prepare for the worst, I'm in trouble here.

If the worst happens, if she refuses to even give me a chance, then I am well and truly fucked.

Grab your copy of **In Too Deep**

# my alien caveman



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# about kat baxter



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR, Kat Baxter writes fast-paced, sweet & STEAMY romantic comedies. Readers have dubbed her “The Queen of Adorkable.” and her books “laugh-out-loud funny,” and “hot enough to melt your kindle.” She lives in Texas with her family and a menagerie of animals. Kat is the pseudonym for a bestselling historical romance author.

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# about emma lee jayne



I WRITE the kinds of books I want to read. Fast-paced books with lots of world-building, snarky heroines, and swoony heroes. I love story, pop culture, gossip, and baked goods. I'm a modern-day hippy and certified LEGO nerd.

I live in the Austin, Texas hill country, with my geeky husband and two extremely geeky kids. We have dogs, chickens, cats, and more LEGOs than should be allowed by law.

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