



MONROE

DESTINED PARANORMALS BOOK TWO

TAYLOR RYLAN

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MORTIMER PRESS, LLC

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Cover by Jay Aheer of Simply Defined Art

www.simplydefinedart.com

Editing by Sandra Dee of One Love Editing

www.oneloveediting.com

Proofreading by Judy Zweifel of Judy's Proofreading

www.judysproofreading.com

Cover image from CJC Photography

www.cjc-photography.com

Cover Model: Joseph Woods

SYNOPSIS

Can a humbled fae and a rescued omega wolf find happiness together?

Monroe Rivertown was publicly humbled in front of most of his village when his younger brother, Montgomery, was chosen by the fates to join his mate before he was. He spent well over a year self-reflecting and trying to become a better person. Not only for him but for his future mate as well. When tragedy strikes his family, he steps in and takes over, giving up all thoughts of ever getting a mate of his own.

Oscar Davis was thankful to have been rescued, but he knew he had to return to the one place he never wanted to see again so he could protect his younger siblings from the same fate as him. He finds himself suddenly responsible for two teenagers, and what should have been a happy time for the reunited siblings is filled with drama and frustration.

Monroe and Oscar are both more than willing to accept the other's claim. But can they figure out how to make time for their newly formed bond while still meeting the needs of their siblings?

Monroe is the second book in the Destined Paranormals series. It is a 40,000-word novella that focuses on fated mates and how they figure out those first few weeks together. This is in an mpreg world, and there will be a baby or possibly two, but this story does not focus on or cover the pregnancy.

WELCOME TO THE UNIVERSE OF DESTINED PARANORMALS

The Universe of Destined Paranormals is a world of interconnected series set in one universe. Because of this, it is recommended that you read the books in chronological order.

[HONEY CREEK DEN Series](#) - When the child of the created warlock goes searching for his mate, a domino effect occurs and the den is blessed by the Fates.

[TIMBER VALLEY WOLF PACK Series](#) - Magic is changing and the wolf pack is next to be blessed by the Fates. Does Edison have something to do with it?

[WARLOCKS OF AMHERST SERIES](#) - EDISON'S warlocks have finally been blessed by the Fates and it's their turn to find their fated Ones.

[VAMPIRES of the Beloved Gem Series](#) - Master Nikolai's vampires aboard the *Beloved Gem* realized that their time has come to find their beloved ones.

[PARANORMAL COUNCIL ENFORCERS Series](#) - The magic has shifted and the Paranormal Council has been formed. Will the

chosen enforcers be next to find their forever mates?

DESTINED Paranormals - It's time to meet new fated mates, both close and far from the Paranormal Council. New as well as familiar faces will be seen in this series. You can expect lots of HEAs, and very low angst in this series. Basically, all the fluffy mate stories.

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CHAPTER I

MONROE



December

Something woke me, but when I pushed up onto my elbows and glanced around the room, I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Maybe it was the wind, perhaps it was one of my siblings, I couldn't really be sure.

When I heard a noise outside in the hallway, I tossed the covers back and climbed out of bed. I winced at pain that went through my foot as I stepped on a toy. From the feel of things, it was most likely one of Mason's trucks, but I couldn't be certain.

The noise sounded again, and I hurried across the hallway into the other room, where Mason and Maelie were. It wasn't ideal that they were together, but I didn't have much of a choice since the house only had three rooms, really. Two bedrooms and a kitchen/living room combination. Well, then, of course, the single bathroom.

So much had changed in the last three years. I'd done a lot of thinking when Montgomery left. The next time the fates returned, I hadn't even bothered to go see them. There was no use, as far as I understood. I'd done what they'd said though. I'd stepped up, and now I was raising my two youngest siblings all on my own. Actually, I was basically the only parent either of them had ever known.

Thankfully, when I entered the kids' room, Mason was still very much asleep. Maelie, I discovered once I picked her up

from her crib, had a leaky diaper and had soaked not only herself but her bed as well. I sighed quietly and took her from the room and directly into the bathroom.

The light was bright when I turned it on, but that couldn't be helped. I needed to bathe to clean off the mess. I started the water, hoping this wouldn't be a long bath and she'd go back down quickly.

“Hey, Maelie. Let's get you cleaned up and back to bed, all right?”

My sister continued to snuggle into my chest, and I was thankful that I normally slept shirtless. It meant I would need to wash my torso while washing her up, but that was easy enough to do. I set Mae down on the floor beside the tub, and adjusted the temperature of the water. When it was the correct temperature, I put the plug in to fill it enough to be able to clean her properly.

I grabbed a cloth and tossed it into the tub along with her favorite toy before I carefully laid her back on the floor and undid her sleeper. “I think I need to get you bigger diapers for nighttime,” I told her. It wasn't as if she could actually carry on a conversation. She was one. She could barely walk, but that didn't stop her from crawling everywhere. She was still at the surfing-the-furniture stage.

I had her undressed in moments, and then after checking the water to be sure it wasn't too hot, I set her in the tub. Immediately, she grabbed for the toy, and it went immediately to her mouth. I cringed a bit, but this was a child that ate the soap bubbles—I was sure that the diluted urine in the water wouldn't hurt her.

I soaped up the cloth and went about washing first her, then my own torso. I dried myself off before I rinsed Mae and then let her play for a few minutes. She looked up at me with sleepy eyes, so I turned off the water and pulled the drain plug. The tub was so slow to fill that it still only had a few inches of water in it. Mae was shivering a bit when I placed her on the towel, so I picked her up and went to my room, where I had her changing table. It was just easier, and then she and Mason

could play in their room without me having to worry about either of them climbing it.

I had her dried, lotioned, and in a fresh diaper in no time. I thought about my life and how much it had changed as I put another sleeper on my sister. Four years ago, I still had my parents, and they were working on popping out Mason. I glanced down at Mae as she stuck her thumb in her mouth and started sucking. I would need to change her crib before I could place her back in it, so I put her in my bed and hoped she would doze off quickly and it wouldn't be an issue.

She immediately rolled to her side, grabbed the corner of the blanket, and held it with her other hand while still sucking on her thumb. I dashed back to the room she shared with Mason and had her crib stripped and changed in under a minute. When I went back for her, I found Mae sound asleep, and although her thumb was still in her mouth, her mouth was now lax around it.

As carefully as I could, I carried her back to her room and placed her in her crib. Thankfully, she and Mason were both somewhat heavy sleepers, and she didn't wake. When I checked on my brother, he was quietly snoring while lying on his stomach with his behind in the air. I smiled and shook my head, but he was four, and, well, I guess that was comfortable when you were that age. I couldn't really remember much of when I was so young.

I left the bedroom, turning off the bathroom light on my way by. There was a small light in the kids' bedroom; it gave enough to be able to see and not step on anything. Remembering the truck I stepped on earlier, I shuffled my feet once I was back in my own room. It wasn't large by any means, and the truck had been on the far side of the bed, but that didn't mean it was the only one. Sure enough, I kicked something, but I couldn't tell if it was the one from earlier or not. I climbed back into bed, hoping to get a little more sleep before I had to be up and at work.

I'd been able to get a management position at the store in our village. Since we didn't have to pay for housing or any of

the electricity, my income paid for living expenses for me, Mason, and Mae.

Something had gone terribly wrong when our mother had been pregnant with Mae. Mother had been sick almost the entire pregnancy, and she survived only long enough to give birth to Maelie, although my baby sister had been born early. Almost too early. Our father lived for a week after, surviving long enough to name Mae and ask each of his older children to take responsibility for the younger ones. There were six that were considered underage at that time, but Maxwell was only weeks away from reaching official adulthood.

I wasn't sure why Father had thought I was the best suited to take the two youngest, but I'd ended up with Mason and Maelie. Mason had been three and Mae only a week old when I suddenly found myself solely responsible for my two youngest siblings. Mary-Sara and Madelyn were with Melody and her mate, Chad. That left Martin and Maxwell. Maxwell had moved in with his best friend's family, and Martin had been taken in by our oldest brother, Malcolm. He and his mate had offered to take Mason and Maelie, but I'd told them our father's wishes, and although they questioned it, they left with Martin and went back to their own village.

Why was my mind so focused on this suddenly? It had been over a year. It was a struggle most days, but we'd settled into a routine and did the best we could. I was lucky that I could take Mason and Mae to the childcare center here in town. I knew I probably didn't rate a spot, let alone two, but I had one a few weeks after Maelie had been born. Those first few months...I wouldn't wish them on anyone. I wasn't sure how new parents did it. But I wasn't technically a new parent.

Yes, I loved my siblings. At this point, they were more than just my brother and sister. They were mine in every way that counted. That didn't mean it wasn't difficult though. I was doing it alone, and that meant everything fell to me. All of the fussing, tantrums, feedings, playing, caring, all of it. It was all on me.

I ran my hand down my face and sighed deeply. There was truly no use in obsessing over it. This was my life now. This

was what I'd been given. I would not have a mate; I would spend my life raising my two youngest siblings until they hopefully found happiness. I'd accepted this, and I was all right with it.

I tossed and turned, thinking about life while my parents were still alive, and wondered again how my brothers who had been chosen to go to the human realm were doing. Matthew and Montgomery. They would have children now. Did they have lots, just as our parents had? Or had they had one or two and called it good?

I would never know. I didn't even know where they were, except not here. Did they think about us? Did they know about our parents? Were they upset if they did? One thing that my siblings and I could all agree on—none of us missed our parents too much. They weren't parents to us. They were someone to order us around and force us to raise children that they continued to have.

I couldn't remember a time when I saw either of my parents change a diaper or feed one of their children. Maybe they had with Morgan and possibly Marissa, but who knew after that.

I was only frustrating myself as I thought about my parents and how terrible they were at being parents, so I rolled over onto my side and did my best to fall back asleep. Mason and Mae would be awake for the day before I was ready, I was sure, but I would have to get up and start our day by fixing them breakfast and then getting them ready to take to the childcare center while I spent my shift at the store.

I didn't mind my job. It was one I'd had since I was sixteen, only now I was in a management position. It paid a decent wage, and although we would never be one of the more prominent families in the village, my siblings and I didn't want for anything.

Thinking about the mundane task of doing inventory on all of our new stock, I was finally able to get my mind to shut down enough to feel myself dozing off. It had been a long day, and tomorrow would be no different, so sleep was certainly the

goal at the moment. I took a few calming breaths, and finally, there was that wonderful feeling of sleep.

I woke to the sounds of Mason making silly noises and Mae giggling. I smiled and once again tossed the blankets aside before I hurried off to the bathroom. I took care of my morning needs and then went to check on my siblings. I knew Mason had most likely already been to the bathroom, but Mae would need to be changed before I got her dressed.

“Good morning, you two,” I said, entering their room. Mason grinned at me, but Mae grabbed my attention.

“Da-da. Da-da,” she said, reaching for me. I felt terrible about her calling me that because I wasn’t technically her father—I was her brother. I was the only parent she had, though, and the only one she had ever known.

“Come here, little one,” I said, reaching for her. I picked her up to take her to my room to get her changed. “Mason, I put your clothes on your dresser for you last night. Would you get dressed for me?”

“Okay.”

I left the room and went across the hallway to my room and placed Mae on the changing table. “Good morning, little miss. How are you this morning? Did you sleep well after your middle-of-the-night bath?”

She was all smiles and her normal squirmy self. I wasn’t sure how she could be completely unaffected by her midnight adventures, but I was thankful. She didn’t seem to be fussy this morning, which was always a bonus.

“Da-da.”

“Yes, little miss?” I asked as I removed her sleeper and then went about changing her diaper. It was something I’d done hundreds of times for younger siblings in my life, and at this point, I considered myself to be a pro at it. Maelie just continued to babble, and when I had her changed and dressed, I picked her up and grabbed the wet diaper. Mason was standing in the doorway when I turned, and I offered him a huge smile.

“Monroe?”

“Hmm?”

“If Maelie gets to call you dad, can I as well?”

I wasn't at all surprised by his question. In fact, I'd been expecting it. He had only been three when our parents had died, and really, they hadn't done much for him up until that point. Sadly, Mary-Sara had been doing a lot of the care, as had Martin. I would go to work and then bring them something to eat that wasn't basic bread and cheese. I did what I could to take the responsibility off them and watched after Mason in the afternoons and evenings. It might be cruel, but our parents honestly weren't more than breeders. They popped out child after child, and that was it. They expected the older ones to take care of the younger ones and pretty much didn't do much of anything except spend time in their bedroom behind a closed door.

“Sure, Mason,” I told him. I ruffled his hair on our way down the short hallway—it was only four steps long—and set Mae in her high chair. “What would you like for breakfast?”

“Can we have porridge?”

I nodded. It wasn't my favorite, but it had been a staple when growing up in our parents' house. They had a lot of kids. Fifteen including me. We often were provided for by the goodness of our fellow villagers. It wasn't surprising that all of my siblings who had found their mates had been quick to leave the village.

I went to the small icebox and pulled out a cup for Mae with some fruit juice in it. After I poured Mason some as well, I got started on making porridge for my siblings. I had just pulled out the ingredients when there was a knock on the door. That wasn't usual, and although it was a little later than normal, I wasn't late for work. We'd been quiet all morning as far as I knew, so the fact that someone was here before breakfast had me worried.

I glanced at Mason and Mae as I walked toward the door. Mason, too, seemed worried about the intrusion. I had no clue

as to who it could be, but when I answered the door, the absolute last person I expected to see was standing there.

“Hello, Monroe. Might we come in?”

I looked beyond the tall, slender fate Thomas and saw his much more muscular Chosen, Canyon.

“Umm, I guess. Although I’m not sure why you’re here. I’ve not done anything except take care of my siblings for the past year.” I stepped aside and let them enter our small home. They truly were the last people I’d ever expected to see standing outside my door. The last I or anyone else in the village had heard, the portal between our world and the others had been locked shut. If they were here, perhaps that meant it was now reopened, and there was the possibility of others being able to find their forever mates somewhere else. That wouldn’t be for me though. I had responsibilities here, and I wouldn’t even consider leaving Mason or Maelie behind.

Mason saw our visitors and quickly came rushing to me, wrapping his arms around my thigh while trying to both hide behind me as well as see around me to look at our visitors. Maelie chose that moment to toss her cup and then scream because it was now on the floor, so I did my best to get to the cup to give it back to her. Only, it was suddenly back on her tray, and Mae was giving me a confused look. I turned back to the fates and nodded. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Thomas lowered his head just a little before he held out his hand toward the table. “Perhaps we could talk?”

I nodded. “I’m not sure what you want to discuss. I’ve not done anything except take care of Mason and Maelie. We were under the impression the portal was locked and wouldn’t be reopened for a long time.”

I was almost positive it had been a little over three years since Montgomery left, but I couldn’t be for certain. My understanding was our time here was a lot different than what was up in the human realm.

After they sat down, I set Mason in his chair and stood behind him. He looked up at me, worry on his face.

“What about breakfast? You were going to make porridge.”

I ruffled his hair again. “I will in just a bit. Did you want some fruit now? Or we might have some bread from the bakery left.” I really hoped we did. I desperately needed to go through the store and do my own shopping, but I’d just not had the time recently.

“I can help with breakfast,” Thomas said. Seconds later, there were several types of foods on the table, and Mason looked up at me with wide eyes.

“What do you say?”

“How did he do that?”

I chuckled. “The same way I could have just as quickly fixed your porridge but didn’t. Magic.” I gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze. “Now, what do you say?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome, young Mason.” Thomas looked up at me. “Would she like some eggs?”

“They’re one of her favorites,” I told him. I could easily use magic to make her eggs, but I didn’t have any and didn’t wish to take from someone else. I couldn’t simply magick eggs out of nothing. I could bring them here, but then whoever the chickens belonged to, they would be short eggs. I desperately needed to do the shopping.

The eggs suddenly appeared on Maelie’s tray, and she immediately grabbed for them before I could check the temperature. I gasped, worried she would hurt herself, but she shoved the eggs in her mouth and chewed with a grin on her face.

“They’re not hot,” Thomas said. “Quite cool, to be honest. But she’s young, and even I know that young children don’t seem to mind having cold food.”

He wasn't wrong. They often took so long to actually eat that by the time they were finished, everything was ice cold.

"What can I do for the two of you? I have to get Mason and Maelie to the childcare center not long from now before I go to work."

Thomas looked thoughtful before tilting his head. "Until we entered the realm this morning, we were unaware of what had happened to your parents. I am sorry for your loss."

I shrugged before using magic to make myself a cup of hot tea. It looked as if I wouldn't be getting breakfast before I needed to leave, but I could at least have some tea.

"It might be cold of me to say, but I don't miss them." I shook my head while staring blankly at the table, where Mason was shoveling in some sort of flat bread that was covered in brown liquid. "We don't know exactly what happened to Ma, but she struggled with her pregnancy with Mae. She didn't survive the birth, and Father only a week longer. I've had Mason and Mae since."

"I'm really sorry," Canyon said.

"Thanks, I guess. If they'd been better parents, they might be missed, but we've survived. Everyone stepped up, and now here we are."

"Yes," Thomas said. He stared at me for a moment, causing me to squirm a little. "Are you happy here? Do you still wish to go to the human realm?"

My eyes widened. "I'm content," I said quietly. "I no longer have the ability to up and leave. I have..." I looked toward Mason and Mae. "Yeah, I have others who depend on me."

Thomas and Canyon shared a look. "There is a paranormal council in Montana," Thomas said. "They have a store, and although it does have a manager already, he would much rather go back to teaching at the local college. There is an assistant manager for the store, but they could use another."

Why was he telling me this? "And? How does this relate to me?"

“Your mate is in Montana, and his situation is much like yours, so don’t think for a moment he wouldn’t be accepting of the little ones being part of the package.”

My mate? I felt my mug slip from my fingers but never heard it crash. I had a mate? And he was in Montana? Could this possibly be happening?

CHAPTER 2

OSCAR



Raising teenagers wasn't for the faint of heart. I didn't regret going back for my younger brother or sister, but they were more than a handful. Teenage girls were something else entirely. I could relate to Joseph, but Hailey? Nope. We'd been able to work through the whole shifting thing, but now came the mood swings, apparently. I kept telling myself that it would get better, but I was frustrated, and it was getting to the point that I didn't like my sister much anymore.

"You're not being fair, Oscar. All of the others are going. Why can't I?"

I sighed and counted to ten. I made it to five before she started again.

"Are you even listening to me?"

I was. But I was choosing to ignore her. We'd been over this more than a dozen times now.

"You know you're not the boss of me, right? I don't have to listen to you. You're only my brother."

"Hailey, stop being a bitch," Joseph said as he entered the kitchen. As expected, Hailey gasped.

"Oscar! Are you going to do something?"

I looked up from my cup of coffee and stared at my sister. "What do you want me to do? Wasn't it you who just thirty seconds ago said that you didn't have to listen to me? Now you want me to do something because it benefits you in some

way?" I stood up and glared down at Hailey. "I'll do something." I nodded at her. "I'll give you one last warning before I ship you off to live with someone else in the pack." Hailey gasped again. Joseph snorted.

"You wouldn't dare. You can't just ship me off."

"There's not a whole lot of shipping to do, Hailey." I set my now empty mug in the sink and turned to lean against it. I crossed my arms in front of my chest and glared at my sister. "I'm not our father, you are correct about that. Our father is dead, which is exactly what he deserves for what he allowed to happen to us." I stood up, ready to be finished with this conversation again. I'd had it monthly since we'd been brought back here to Montana. "If you want to go to the solstice festival, fine. Go. But if you get into trouble, that's it, Hailey. You will be living with someone else because I'm tired of the disrespect you throw at me for going through the hell I did to rescue you."

I knew she was upset. I understood it. She'd not been put through the same amount of hell that I had, but that didn't give her an excuse to constantly berate and abuse me. I was doing the best I could with what I had available. I worked a full-time as well as a part-time job just to provide for her. All it got me was exhaustion and disdain from her. Thankfully, Joseph understood, and I'd not had a single issue with him. He had actually picked up a part-time job at the diner here in Timber Valley, working in the kitchen. I didn't mind as long as his grades didn't slip too much. I wanted so much more for my younger siblings than what I'd been given. I was trying to provide that, and at least one of them was able to see that.

I heard Joseph and Hailey arguing, and I knew I should put an end to it, but it wasn't even seven in the morning yet, and I just didn't have it in me to stop them. I hadn't gotten in until after two, and I was tired. That didn't matter, though, because I had to be at my full-time job in less than an hour, and it was going to be an incredibly long day.

I grabbed my coat, pulled it on, and picked out my keys from the small basket at the end of the counter where we kept our loose things. "I have to go to work," I called out, not

expecting anyone to answer because I could still hear them fighting.

I was at a loss as to what to do with Hailey. She was upset because we were in Montana. All right. I could change that just as soon as I saved up enough money to move us. But that was going to take time, and she loved to spend money, which meant it would take even longer.

I opened the door and almost walked directly into a very solid chest. I managed to stop, but just barely. Immediately, I recognized the wolf standing in front of me, but I couldn't understand why he would be here. He didn't live in the area any longer. Canyon had found his mate in a fate and he was now the fourth fate and lived with Thomas in the fate realm. What was he doing here?

"Is something wrong?" I asked as I pulled the door shut behind me.

"Not exactly, no. My brother mentioned how you were having some issues with your sister."

I sighed. I wasn't upset with Alpha Forest. He was actually one of the nicest alphas I'd ever met. He was fair, and he wanted nothing but the best for his pack, and it showed.

"She's fourteen. She's being difficult, which I'm told is normal for fourteen-year-old girls. She doesn't want to listen, and I have to work two jobs now to support her spending habit so she can fit in with her friends." I didn't care for most of her friends. They weren't all bad, but there were a few that were absolutely trouble. She just couldn't see it, and if I couldn't get her away from them, she was going to end up in more trouble than I could fix.

"What can we do to help?"

I chuckled. "I'm not sure." I glanced at the old SUV that I drove. It wasn't the greatest, but it ran fairly well, and it got me and my siblings from point A to B without too much fuss. "I have to get to work. Did you need to see one of them for something?"

Canyon shook his head. “I’m actually here to see you, Oscar.”

“Me?” I was now shaking my head. When he nodded, I shook mine more. “No. I’m not mate material. I don’t get a mate, remember? You and your mate need to match someone else. I don’t have time for a bossy alpha who is going to want a bunch of babies. I already have Hailey. She’s more than enough for five babies. Seriously.”

“Oscar, you know that’s not how it works.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Listen, Connor, I don’t have time for a mate.” I started toward the SUV.

“Canyon.”

I stopped. “What?”

“Canyon. My name is Canyon. And it’s already done. You and your mate both need each other right now. He can help you with your siblings, and you can help him with his.”

I was incredibly confused. “What are you even talking about?” I shook my head again. “No. No mate. I don’t need more teenagers throwing fits around here. No. I have to get to work,” I said again.

Canyon touched my shoulder, and suddenly, we were no longer standing outside the house that I lived in with my siblings. We were now standing inside Alpha Forest’s house. We weren’t alone, and there were definitely unfamiliar scents in the house. I glared up at the wolf shifter-now-fate when I picked up on one in particular.

“That is so very wrong of you. Dirty and wrong. You know what scenting him will do to me.”

“It’s time, Oscar. You need your mate, and he needs you. You’ll find that your situations, although not quite the same, are somewhat similar. You both have two siblings you are responsible for. Trust me when I say that it might not seem like it at first, but you two truly are a perfect match for one another.”

I wasn't sure how, but I'd accept that if he said so. He was a fate, and they were supposed to know these things. They worked out perfectly for Chase and Eli. Their mates adored them. But they didn't have nearly the baggage I did. I had a teenage boy who was about to go off to college next fall, but honestly, Joseph wasn't an issue at all. That was all Hailey. She had decided that she needed to be queen bee, and I was really tired of it.

"Fine." There was no getting around it now that I'd scented him in the house. Technically, I probably could, but it would eventually throw me into heat, and I really didn't want to go through one without a mate if I didn't have to. Mine had always been irregular anyway, but when they hit, they hit hard, and that wasn't something I wanted to deal with alone.

"Good. Come meet Monroe. His little brother is Mason, and the baby is Maelie."

Baby? There was a baby involved? I could guess how my mate had ended up being responsible for young siblings, and it wasn't anything good.

I heard talking the farther we went into the house. I knew we were headed for the large back room that was filled with windows that let in amazing light. I wouldn't ever complain, but I would love to someday be able to have a house that had a lot of windows.

I heard squealing and then laughter, followed by quiet talking. When we entered the back room finally, I discovered the other fate sitting there with Alpha Forest and alpha mate Aspen. I wasn't sure where their children were, but the noise had come from two much younger children. Those I could assume were my mate's siblings. They were definitely cute.

"Oscar?" Aspen said as he slowly stood up.

"Hello again, Alpha Forest, alpha mate Aspen," I said. I nodded to Thomas, the other fate that was sitting in the room with the others. But it was the tall, slender man who stood with a slow smile gracing his face that drew my attention. He was most certainly not overly intimidating like most alphas

were. Immediately, I felt a sense of safety as he started walking closer.

“Hi there. I’m Monroe,” he said while holding his hand out in front of him. When he was close enough, I took his and instantly felt a tingle in my palm. What was that about?

“Oscar,” I said quietly. I cleared my throat and tried again. “I’m Oscar. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Da-da, da-da.”

Immediately, I let go of Monroe’s hand and looked toward the little cutie that was running toward him. She wasn’t exactly steady on her feet, and there was one point that I was certain she was going to fall down, but she managed to make it to Monroe and grab ahold of his pants.

He gave me an apologetic smile before he bent down and picked her up. “This is Maelie. We call her Mae more often than not though.”

I waved to her. “Hi, Mae. I’m Oscar. You have very pretty curls.”

“I have curls too!”

I looked at the boy who was rushing over to us and chuckled. I knelt down so I was more on his level. “Yep, you do. And what’s your name?”

“Mason. But everyone calls me Mason because I don’t have a nickname.”

I nodded. “Me either. I’m just Oscar. No nickname or anything like that.”

“That’s all right. Monroe doesn’t have one either. But he said I could call him dad since Mae does. He’s our brother though. Our mom and dad died when Mae was born. I don’t remember it, though, cuz I’m so little.”

My eyes widened, and I could only nod. “My parents died too. But I was older when it happened. That doesn’t make it easier though.”

Mason nodded, then held out his truck. “Do you like trucks? I do. I had three, and Monroe let me bring all of them cuz he said we were moving here. There is a mountain with dragons,” Mason said with big eyes and lots of enthusiasm.

“There is. I have a friend who is mated to a dragon, and they have baby dragons. Well, they will shift into dragons when they become teenagers.”

I wasn't sure Mason's eyes could grow any larger, but they did. “Whoa. That's so cool. I'm going to have magic when I get older. Monroe said he'd teach me how to use it. Do you have magic? Or are you a dragon?”

I shook my head. “Nope. I'm just an ordinary wolf. A little one at that.”

“I'm sure there is nothing ordinary about your wolf,” Monroe said. He held out his hand, and when I took it, he pulled me to my feet. When I tried to drop his hand, he held on tighter, and those tingles came back.

I couldn't help but smile at him. The things I was currently feeling, I'd not experienced since I was a teenager with my first crush on an alpha in the pack.

“Da-da,” Mae said. Monroe looked at her, and when she pointed at me, she grinned. “Daddy?”

My eyes widened now. “That's right, Mae. Oscar is going to be your other daddy. Is that all right?”

The adorable little girl just babbled nonsense before she stuck her thumb in her mouth and laid her head on Monroe's shoulder.

“We're getting a daddy? Really?” Mason asked.

I glanced down at him and nodded. I didn't know what else to do, really. I couldn't, nor would I deny that Monroe was my mate. Mason ran off yelling and whooping, and Monroe leaned in closer. “I'm sorry about that. I never meant to put you on the spot like that.”

“It's all right. We are mates. But I think we should probably talk and discuss some things.”

“Of course. I have a few things I’ll need to make sure you are aware of as well,” Monroe said. I nodded at him, and he stepped away a little. When I gently tugged on my hand, he sent me a questioning look but did let go and wrapped his now free arm around Mae, who had fallen asleep.

“It’s good that the two of you are in agreement that you are mates and are willing to work on things,” Thomas said as he joined us. “There is, of course, the housing issue that needs to be addressed.”

My face flushed red at that. My house was on the smaller side. There really wasn’t room for another three people in it, and now that it had been mentioned, I realized that it probably wasn’t the best for Mason and Mae to be around Hailey with the way she was acting.

“What’s wrong?” Monroe asked.

I shook my head. “Nothing too serious. My house is on the smaller side. Alpha Forest was generous enough to offer it up. It’s a pack house.”

Just then, Alpha Forest joined us where we were standing just inside their back room. “There are some larger houses that are available if the two of you want to look at them. But I was under the impression that you would be moving to Treasure Ridge?”

I was confused and looked to everyone else for an explanation. I received it from Thomas, who nodded once. “Monroe is to be the new manager at the council’s store on Treasure Ridge. One of the perks of that is that he will be provided with housing up on the mountain if you two decide to live there.”

That made sense. I pinched the bridge of my nose and tried to calm my racing mind. A gentle hand on my shoulder drew my attention to my mate.

“What’s wrong? We don’t have to live on the mountain if that’s not what you wish. I was told there is a childcare center up there that I can have the children in as well, which is most

certainly helpful. I understand you probably have a job down here though.”

I sighed. “Two, actually. Raising teenagers is expensive.”

“Two?” Alpha Forest asked, his tone somewhat stern. “Why haven’t you come to the pack for help?”

“Because Joseph needs a car to go to college next year, and Hailey is all about material things anymore. She has a new group of friends that are really not good for her, but whenever I try to explain that to her, she throws it in my face that I’m not her father and she doesn’t have to listen to me.”

Someone cleared their throat, and looks were passed around between the others. I was going to hear it from someone, I was certain.

It was Thomas who spoke up. “Yes, well, you and Monroe can discuss that and work all of that out when you are ready. For now though, it’s obvious that the two of you recognize each other, and you will have time to work things out and claim one another.”

I tried to look apologetic to my mate. I didn’t have time to let him claim me right now. “I have to get to work. As it is, I’m going to be late. Then I have a shift tonight at my second job. I don’t work there tomorrow though, so maybe we could talk then?”

“Nope, that’s not how things work, Oscar. You are no longer alone in your fight,” Alpha Forest said. Aspen came over and joined us just then and carefully took Mae from Monroe, who seemed hesitant at first but gave up his baby sister.

“Don’t worry. We have a crib still, and both of them will be perfectly fine here while you two have your time together to form your bond,” Aspen said. He gave Mae a gentle squeeze and closed his eyes with a huge smile on his face. Alpha Forest gave his mate a loving look, but now that Monroe’s arms were free, he used them to reach for me.

“Is there something you find displeasing about me?” he asked.

“No. We do need to talk though, but meeting my mate wasn’t on my radar this morning. I was just hoping to get through the day without another tantrum from Hailey.”

“Yes, we’ll deal with that as well,” Alpha Forest said. “Dad and Papa are coming to help out with both of your siblings, and Papa was going to swing by your place and pick them up. They’ll be perfectly fine here until the two of you are ready for everyone to be together in your new place. You just need to let us know where that’s going to be.”

Everyone seemed to be looking at me expectantly. Talk about a shotgun mating. “I guess we’re living on the mountain. It’s closer for Monroe, and maybe I can find a job up there too.”

“Fantastic,” Thomas said.

Monroe gave me a confused look, but I didn’t know what to tell him. I had responsibilities much like he did. Sure, we would share them now, but he had two siblings he was raising. His were still young though, and things were cheaper for them. I was about to ask him if we could meet up tomorrow after I got off work, but my stomach did that flip thing, and we were no longer standing in Alpha Forest’s house. It was silent where we were, and when I looked around, I saw that only Monroe was with me.

“Did you do this?”

Monroe shook his head.

I took several steps away from the door that we were standing just inside and found myself walking into a gorgeous house that had my eyes widening. There was definitely a wall full of windows that showed the forest behind it.

“Where are we?” I asked.

Monroe had come up behind me, and although he wasn’t actually touching me, he was standing close enough that I could feel the heat coming from him.

“I would have to guess that we’re on the mountain. You mentioned your house was too small. My job will be up here, and it comes with a house as a bonus. This is probably it.”

I nodded. That made sense. I looked up at Monroe, who I found staring intently at me. “We should probably talk for a bit before anything happens. There’s a lot about me that you need to know.”

“That sounds...ominous.”

I shrugged. “I was sold by my parents and older brother to a sex trafficking ring. If you consider that ominous, then I guess it is. I found it to be a living nightmare, so yeah, I guess it is.”

I wasn’t sure what I expected from Monroe, but a look of understanding wasn’t it. He gave me a smile and took my hands. “Let’s go talk. You’re right when you said we had a lot to discuss.”

I nodded and let Monroe lead me into the house. It was already furnished, and I had to wonder just what all we would find if we went exploring. Time would tell.

CHAPTER 3

MONROE



My mate was adorable. I could tell from the very beginning that he was both overwhelmed and hesitant. His life, much like mine, hadn't been an easy one. I was curious to get to know all about him and wondered what it would take to get him to trust me. Our situations weren't ideal. Most couples didn't meet their fated mates with children already in the picture. Would he be accepting of Mason and Mae? Would he want children with me? I wouldn't mind having one or two, but I didn't want a lot of kids. But I wasn't an omega. I wouldn't be the one carrying them; Oscar would. That was something we were going to have to discuss, very soon.

But first, the basics. The house was more than I'd ever seen. Even the most prominent families in our village didn't have a house the size of the one we were currently in.

“Do we even know this is our house? Or I guess yours since you're the one that is taking the position at the council store. I'm not sure what work I'll be able to find up here. I do know I can continue working in Timber Valley though. There are others that come and go from the mountain every day.”

I held up a hand for Oscar to wait, and then I went to the front door and stepped outside. The ground was covered in snow—it was the end of December, after all—and from just a few steps away from the front door, I could see the council building. It was impossible to miss it. I hurried back inside and closed the door behind me. Inside was much warmer, and I shivered at the sudden temperature change again.

“I would say definitely ours. Not mine, ours. Unless you have decided you don’t wish to mate with me?” I really didn’t want that. I wasn’t going to say anything to Oscar about how my body would react if he decided that he wasn’t interested. I wouldn’t force him though. It had to be his choice.

Oscar sighed, then plopped down on the couch. I went back to where he was and sat at the other end, waiting. “It’s not that I don’t want to. But...I’ve been through a lot, Monroe. I was forced to do things that nobody should ever have to do.”

I nodded. “I understand that. I’ll be patient. We can get to know each other. Take our time.” It would become painful, that much I knew. But perhaps the fates could help with that in some way?

Oscar sighed again. “No. That’s not what I want either. We’re mates, and I really don’t see a reason to wait unless you don’t want to claim each other right away. But my life is pure chaos. I work two jobs, I have a teenage sister that’s a bitch all of the time anymore, and I honestly wouldn’t want her around your two siblings with the way she’s been acting. She didn’t use to be like this. She was so sweet. But when we came here after she was rescued, she found some not-so-great friends.”

“I believe that Alpha Forest is going to work on that. At least, it sounded as if he was.”

“I really hope so. I get it; I’m not her parent. I’m all she has now though, and she just treats me like she’d rather I hadn’t made it out of that basement.”

That was wrong, and I hurt for my mate. “I’ll help in any way I can. I’m not sure if I’ll be seen as any type of authority figure, but I can try.” I had plenty of experience with teenagers. “I’ve dealt with teenagers before. I’m one of fifteen.”

“Fifteen?” Oscar asked, his eyes wide.

I wanted to groan. “Yeah, my parents were big on kids. Having them, that is. They did as little as possible to raise us, or really anything other than spend time locked in their bedroom.”

Oscar seemed to want to say something but held his tongue.

“You can ask anything. I have no secrets, really. I used to be a bit of an entitled ass because I desperately wanted out and away from my family. I worked on fixing myself, and now I’m raising my two youngest after our mom died in childbirth with Mae. Our dad only lived a week after that.”

“I’m so sorry,” Oscar said. He reached out for me, and when I held my hand out, we were just able to reach each other.

“Thank you, but it might make me sound like an ass, but I don’t really miss them. They weren’t parents. Not really.”

“I don’t know which is worse. My parents and my older brother sold me and later my brother and sister. They were both rescued before anything happened to them, but I wasn’t so lucky.”

“Do you need anything regarding that? Should I know anything?” I honestly knew next to nothing about sex. Of course, I knew how it actually worked, but I’d never had it. It was just something that fae didn’t do until we met our mate.

“I’m good. I had therapy for a while. I did a lot of self-reflection, and I decided I wasn’t going to let them win. I shouldn’t freak out or anything, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

I nodded but glanced down at my lap. This was probably the most unromantic mating to ever happen. I was certainly attracted to my mate. But it was apparent that we both had a whole lot going on, and we would need to make sure we focused on us and prioritized our bond so we wouldn’t have issues.

“I feel that we need to make a date or something,” I said.

Oscar chuckled. “A date? Why?”

I shrugged. “Maybe because you’re my mate and I want to treat you right? Don’t you want to be taken out on dates?”

Oscar looked thoughtful for a moment before he shrugged. “I’ve never thought about it, really. I don’t think I’ve ever been on one. I haven’t really dated anyone before. It wasn’t that I wasn’t overly interested; I just was busy. First college, then work.”

“What did you go to college for?”

“Art,” Oscar snorted. “It was a waste though. You can’t make money with art unless you know someone, it seems. When I went to college, my parents were different—they were still loving and encouraging. I’m not sure what happened to cause them to change so drastically.”

“What kind of art? Do you draw? Paint? Sculpt?”

“I don’t do any of it anymore. I used to draw a lot. And I like photography because I would take pictures that I found aesthetic and then put them onto paper with pencil or charcoal.”

That was amazing. I wanted him to know that and to be able to do that again. We all needed to do things that made us happy, and if he wanted to do art, he should. “You should do that.”

“What?”

“Your art. You should go back to it. From what I saw in Timber Valley, I would think that the area would be filled with prospective things for your artwork.”

Oscar snorted. “I have two teenagers to support. I can’t afford to do art. Not only that, but I no longer have any of my supplies. I wait tables during the day at a restaurant in Timber Valley, and at night, I’m a bartender at a human bar south of here. I don’t have time for anything other than to be tired and berated by my sister for not being good enough.”

That just made me angry, and it was definitely going to change. Oscar was going to be able to do art again, even if only as a hobby.

“I have questions, and maybe we should look into going on a date today because, yes, I do want to date you, even if we have our siblings to take care of because our relationship is

going to be important as well. But my first question is, do you want children?" I knew it was odd to just throw that out there right out of the gate, but I needed to know before anything happened. I knew how biology worked, and if we claimed each other, Oscar would go into heat soon after.

"One or two, maybe. I'm not really wanting a bunch of kids, if that's all right. I understand you come from a very large family, but I already have my two younger siblings. Now with your two, who are way younger, maybe one or two for the time being?"

I grinned. "Perfect. Next question. Do you want to continue working?" Oscar started to reply, but I held him off with a hand up. "I'm going to be making a sizable income. Yes, there is childcare here, and yes, I'll put Mason and Maelie in it. I'm not expecting you to just take over their parenting. I would never ask that of you. Or either of your siblings. They are my responsibility, and I'll take care of them. Just as I will take care of you and your siblings."

Oscar furrowed his brow and shook his head. "That seems unfair. Why do you have to take care of me and everyone else, but I don't have to take care of anyone?"

"I want to take care of you and your siblings."

Oscar glared. "I get it that I've been doing a crap job of taking care of mine, but—"

"No," I said, probably a bit too harshly. I pinched the bridge of my nose a moment before I looked at Oscar and tried to smile. "I want to take care of you. I've been here in this realm for two days now, and everything has been gone over with me in great detail. I'll make more than enough for you to not have to work. All fae are given funds when we're brought over because we don't have the same type of money. It's been placed in a bank account, and my income will also be there. I'm told that the council has been through a very recent restructure and that one of those things is personnel and how they're taken care of."

Oscar started shaking his head.

“No what?”

“You shouldn’t have to shoulder everything. That’s just not fair.”

“I’m not saying you can’t work. It’s not a requirement though. If you want to do your art, I’m good with that. Since I have young children to take care of, I was told I’d be working an earlier shift at the store. I’ll be home for supper every evening. I’ll pick the kids up from the childcare center on my way and then come home.”

Oscar was still shaking his head. I wasn’t sure why, and he wasn’t really telling me what was going through his mind.

“I can watch them. If they’re comfortable with me. I don’t mind kids. I like them, in fact. Joseph is in his senior year of high school; Hailey will be starting it next year. But if we’re going to be mates, shouldn’t I shoulder some of the responsibility of taking care of your younger siblings? Didn’t you just say you would help with Hailey? You said ‘them,’ but Joseph is seriously a nonissue. He helps with cooking and housework, and I don’t have to worry about him. Hailey, it’s just the current crowd she’s hanging out with.”

I couldn’t help but grin. He was trying to keep things even, and I appreciated that. “I won’t say no. But don’t want you to feel as if you have to take care of them. We can plan to take things day by day and see how it works out. It might be that you decide they’re too much for you. Mae is a sweetheart, but she can get fussy at bedtime.”

Oscar snorted. “All little kids get fussy at bedtime. That’s why they’re going to bed. Because they’re tired.”

“Probably true.” I stood and held out my hand. Oscar looked at it before he finally took it. I helped him up off the couch and pulled him closer. I had no intention of doing anything, but I wanted to touch my mate. He looked up at me expectantly, but I wasn’t sure how to tell him that I hadn’t ever kissed anyone before. I’d never been with anyone, ever. I had read about it and had of course seen others kissing in public in our village. But it wasn’t something I’d experienced myself yet.

Instead, I carefully reached out and ran a finger down the side of his face. It was soft, and I knew that it wouldn't take much to develop feelings for my mate. I was already well on my way. Yes, it was fast, but he had already proven that he was a giving person. He was taking care of his younger siblings. Something I hadn't been willing to do even a few years ago. Having to be responsible for them for the past couple of years, and now being their only parent had been such a huge shift in how I saw life.

I grinned at Oscar before I took a step away. He looked at me in confusion. "How about we explore the house? It'll be interesting to see what all is here."

I did bring Oscar's hand up to my mouth and kissed the back of it. He stared at me, his mouth opening slightly. I was, of course, nervous. I didn't exactly know how to please my mate. I would have to figure that out with some help from him.

When I started walking toward the kitchen, I gently pulled Oscar along with me. We found a few appliances on the countertop, and I had to wonder what some of them were, actually. I would ask Oscar later. He opened the icebox and looked at me with a huge grin on his face. "Well, they're planning for us to claim each other."

"What? Why?"

Oscar tugged on my hand, and when I was standing behind him, I saw that the thing was full of bottles as well as fruit.

"The energy drinks and fruit. I would imagine there are a bunch of protein and granola bars in the pantry."

"Well, we'll need some other things in the icebox. I don't see juice."

Oscar looked up at me, then slowly shook his head.

"What?"

"Refrigerator. We call it a refrigerator here. The icebox is this, but we call it a freezer."

Oscar pulled open a drawer in the bottom, and I slowly nodded.

“I’ll try to remember. Things are a bit different where I’m from.”

“I wasn’t complaining. We’ll work it all out.” Oscar pulled me along as we explored the kitchen. It was full of everything we would need, including a large cabinet full of foodstuffs.

“There’s a letter here,” Oscar said, pointing to it on the end of the counter.

Dear Monroe and Oscar,

We hope you understand that we all feel the two of you are going to be a perfect fit for one another. Please trust us when we say that it might be a bit of a bump in the beginning, but it will all be worth it in no time.

The children will all be fine, and we will ensure that they are most certainly cared for while the two of you adjust to being a combined unit instead of two separate ones.

Trust in each other, and give your mating a chance.

Thomas & Canyon

Oscar looked up at me and shrugged. “Well, there you have it,” he said as he placed the piece of paper back on the counter. “I wonder how many bedrooms this place has.”

“We could go look,” I said. I fully expected to have my siblings still share a room. In order to have a house large

enough for all of us to have our own room, that meant this place had to be huge. There was no way that a house of that size would be given to me as a perk of accepting the position I did. Would it?

We went back to the room with the large windows, and Oscar looked around. There was a hallway, and he went through it with me directly behind him. There was a bathroom as well as another room. It had a desk and chair, and I had to wonder if they were intending on someone else living here. Why would we need such a room? It also had a bunch of windows that let in a lot of light. It was somewhat bright out, but I was sure that was mostly because of all of the snow. I shivered thinking about it.

“What’s wrong? Are you cold? We could turn the heat up if you are.”

“I’m not cold, no. I was just thinking about all of the snow outside. We don’t have snow in our realm. It’s warm and green all of the time.”

Oscar grinned. “There wasn’t snow where I’m from either, and it got downright hot and humid in the summer, but I’ve found I prefer the winters here. My wolf loves the snow, and I look forward to running in it when I can.”

“I’ll watch while you and your siblings run and play. Maybe I’ll do some magic of sorts for the little ones, and they can feel like they’re involved.”

“That’s right. Fae have magic like warlocks.”

I nodded.

“You can do magic.”

I nodded again.

“That’s pretty cool. I don’t know. I think I might have preferred to have been born a fae with magic instead of being just a wolf.”

With knowing what had happened to him, I could understand that.

“Let’s see what’s upstairs,” Oscar said. He pulled me along, and I had to wonder just what we would find up there. The house was already plenty big enough for our current family, but would it support a growing one? Did Oscar really want children? He wasn’t getting just a mate but a ready-made family. But then again, so was I, and I was more than ready and willing to accept his siblings into my life. But would they accept me?

I followed Oscar up the staircase, worrying about them and how we would keep Mae from falling down them.

“We’ll get gates for the top and bottom. I’m not worried about Mason, but Maelie will need to be watched for another year or so before she can safely go up and down the stairs,” Oscar said as we climbed them.

“Gates?”

“Yep. I’ll show you later.”

“All right.” We made it to the top of the stairs and found a long hallway with doors everywhere. “Just how many bedrooms are there?”

Oscar grinned up at me. “I’m not sure, but it’ll be fun to find out,” he said. He grabbed my hand again and pulled me along the hallway, passing several rooms and heading for the door directly in front of us.

CHAPTER 4

OSCAR



Monroe was definitely hot. He had these eyes that reminded me of chocolate. I loved chocolate. He'd been so sweet and a perfect gentleman. I had to admit I was a bit surprised he'd not kissed me in the living room. I understood that we didn't really know each other yet though. I could wait, and we would do things on his timeline.

The main bedroom was huge. Larger than any I'd ever seen. I was certain that there were others on the mountain that had an equally large main bedroom. The bed was most likely a king-sized bed. There were matching nightstands, two dressers, and a chair in the corner by the windows. The windows had dark shades that were partially closed, and off to the right were two doors.

"Is this real?" Monroe asked.

"Yep. You said you've been here for two days. Where have you been staying?"

"With Alpha Forest. I kept the kids in the same room with me though. I didn't want to take up space when I know he has so many kids of his own."

"They're great though. All of their kids are amazing," I said absently as I walked toward one of the doors. I pushed it open and found myself inside a massive walk-in closet. There was a mirror on the wall in front of me, and on either side was a long bar for hanging clothes. Above it were shelves and cubbies, and I couldn't help but chuckle. There was absolutely

no way I had enough clothes to fill even a quarter of the space on one side.

“Whoa.”

I looked up at Monroe, who had come in behind me. “I hope you have a lot of clothing. What I own will fill about this much space,” I said, holding up my hands on one of the bars.

“Do you really not have much?”

I shook my head. “I have clothes. Most of my stuff goes in a dresser. I don’t know, maybe ten shirts that I hang up. I work in a restaurant and a bar. I don’t have lots of clothing beyond that.”

Monroe narrowed his eyes. “I’m not going to be one of those mates. But you need to quit one of your jobs. There are two of us now, and I can help provide for you and your siblings. Our situations are similar, and it was suggested that we would be a good fit, as we’re mates.”

I tilted my head to the side. “Was suggested?”

Monroe took my hand and led me out of the closet and over to the bed. He sat down on the side, pulling me down beside him.

“Yes. Things are quite different in my realm. I’ve been getting a lot of information for the past two days about how things work here. Much is the same, but there’s enough of a difference that it needed to be gone over with me before I was just dropped in the store and somehow was supposed to meet you as well.”

“I’m not sure I can just up and quit my job, Monroe. I have responsibilities, and I’ve been doing it for a while now. I don’t think you realize just how much teenagers cost.”

“I’m sure quite a bit when compared to little kids. But I know I’ll be making more than enough to support all six of us comfortably.”

“What do you consider comfortable?”

“I’m told I’ll be making just at six figures and with provided housing it’s enough for a growing family. The

childcare center is no cost. The store up here is very reduced cost because the council is subsidizing it for the council and all of its personnel.”

I was torn. That amount was certainly more than enough to support us, and I would love to be able to not have to work my nighttime job at the bar. It wasn't that it was a terrible environment, but it was a human bar, and there were very few paranormals that came into the place. And now that I thought about it, if—no, when we claimed each other, I was certain that Monroe wouldn't want me to be around humans that spent all night flirting and trying to take me home with them.

“You seem thoughtful.”

I nodded. “I'll gladly quit my bartending job today. I don't care much for it, but the tips were good. I don't know about my job in the restaurant. I...” I groaned when I thought about it more.

“What's wrong?”

I looked at Monroe. “The restaurant I work in isn't a pack restaurant or anything.”

Monroe gave me a confused look.

“If we claim each other, it's possible I'll get pregnant.” I shook my head. “I can't be pregnant around humans. They don't know about us, and it would be very bad.”

Monroe chuckled. “How did you end up working for two human-run places?”

“I needed money. My sister goes through it like crazy.”

Monroe leaned closer with a serious expression on his face. “I'm not going to be terrible, but it's time for her to learn about limits and how not everything we want, we get.”

I sighed. He wasn't wrong. I knew I was overcompensating because I felt terrible that I'd not gotten back to Mississippi in time to get her and Joseph out before the beta got to them.

“I know you're right. I also think I created a monster, and it's going to get really ugly when she's suddenly moved

somewhere else away from her *friends* and suddenly doesn't get everything she wants."

Monroe shrugged. "We'll deal with it together. I have a lot of experience with younger siblings. I'm thirty and am number six of those fifteen."

"You're thirty, huh?" Would he be upset I was a few years older than him?

"I am. Is that too old? Too young?"

I snorted. "I'm only thirty-four, Monroe. I'm not ancient or anything like my therapist. He's a gargoyle, and I'm pretty sure he's like eight hundred or something. I never asked though."

Monroe started laughing, and I took that opportunity to give him a playful shove. He fell back onto the bed but then surprised me by pulling me down with him. I lay there, staring at my mate and wondering what the fates were thinking pairing us together, but it was supposed to work. I didn't know how, but I was going to give it a go because my wolf definitely recognized Monroe as our mate.

"You're not too old, that's for sure. Your age doesn't bother me, and I hope mine isn't an issue for you."

"Naw. I honestly expected a much older mate if I ever found mine. But I'm not going to complain." I sighed. I started to reach out for Monroe but instead pulled my hand back. If my mate wanted to touch me, he would. Instead, I toed off my shoes, letting them drop to the floor with a thud, and moved farther onto the bed. "So, tell me about fae. I have never met one, and I honestly don't know much about them, I'm sorry."

Monroe gave me a beaming smile, and when he sat up, I thought he was going to leave, but instead, he removed his own shoes before he moved onto the bed and lay beside me. I was on my side staring at him while he was on his back looking at the ceiling.

"I'm not even sure where to begin," Monroe said.

"Wherever you're comfortable. You said you have magic. What else about fae should I know?"

Monroe glanced at me before he looked back up at the ceiling. “Let’s see. Well, we have magical powers that we come into when we hit puberty. Sometimes they can go wonky when an omega is pregnant, but not always. Fae get bored easily and can cause mischief, but that’s usually more of an omega thing than a sire thing.”

“Really?”

“I can think of dozens of instances where it’s been seen in omegas, but not one from a sire, unless it was at a festival and we were all acting out in such a manner.”

“Huh. I mean, I guess I’ve heard about warlocks having issues with their magic while they were learning how to use them all, but I’ve never really been around someone regularly who had magical powers.”

“Everyone learns theirs at different speeds, but for the most part, we’ve mastered our powers by our mid-twenties or early thirties. I’m told that it can take warlocks longer, but I also believe they are more powerful than we are really.”

“I know only a few warlocks and only because of the council. One of the other omegas that I was held captive with ended up with a warlock as a mate. They have twins now.”

“Yeah? That’s amazing. Out of all of my siblings, none are twins.”

I suddenly realized something, and I sat up, a bit freaked out for a moment. Monroe sat up as well and reached for me.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I was held with two others. A fox shifter, the one I mentioned who had twins with his warlock mate.”

“Yes, and the other?”

I looked to Monroe with wide eyes. “Chase is a wolf shifter like me. His mate is a dragon, and they have twins.” I took several deep breaths. “What if they did something to us, Monroe? What if there was something in the food they fed us or something, and now we’re going to all have twins?” I absolutely did not want twins. It was already difficult enough

with Hailey, and if you added in Monroe's two young siblings, that was a lot. One baby would be busy enough, but two more? At once?

"Hey, hey, calm down." Monroe reached out and rubbed up and down my arm. "If we have twins, we'll have twins. We won't be alone. We'll have help."

I looked at Monroe, confused. "How? Where? I won't ask my brother to help, and at the moment, I wouldn't trust Hailey to hold a baby, let alone change or feed one."

"Where are we going to get help? I don't know anyone. Everyone I know has their own kids. They don't have time to help us."

Monroe shook his head. "You are definitely getting ahead of yourself. One, you're not even pregnant yet. Two, if you have twins, we can hire someone to help. Having four under five years is a lot. I've never experienced quite that amount of chaos in a house, but every other year is a lot as well."

I shook my head. "I don't get how we're going to hire someone. Who? Where will they come from?"

Monroe tilted his head to the side. "Have you completely isolated yourself from the pack? From the council?"

I glared at Monroe. "I've been busy working, trying to take care of my siblings. The pack is nice enough, and they've helped me out a lot already. But I don't want to be too needy and wear out my welcome."

"Your pack, the council, they're here to help. If you are having issues with something, they'll help. Same as with children. There are others who will come and just sit and listen for a baby if you need to shower or take a nap."

I shook my head. "How do you know this?"

"Because it was told to me over and over during the past two days. The childcare center here on the mountain is funded and run by the council because they know that some of the enforcers have mates that work, and not everyone has family in the area to help. Others possibly have family but can't help. We have options if we want to utilize them."

I had no idea how he knew more about this place than I did, except for the fact that he'd been given a crash course yesterday, it seemed. And, well, I'd done just about all I could to first get away from here and then avoid any and everyone here that I could. That was something I did not regret. Had I made things way more difficult on myself than they really needed to be?

“You seem confused.”

“I wouldn't say confused, really. More like frustrated. I never really had a good pack. My birth pack wasn't the greatest, and although I've been to pack runs in Timber Valley, I wouldn't really consider myself a member though. I just live here because they let me. I couldn't stay where I was, and I really had nowhere else to go, so I came back here.”

“Why are you frustrated, then?”

I thought about that for a moment to see if there was truly any reason other than my lack of thought about actually trying to be a member of the pack. Alpha Forest had given me a home, a pack-owned home to live in with my siblings. They helped with therapy for my siblings, and then I'd pretty much settled into a routine of working and trying to make things up to my siblings for the shittiness that our family and pack had put them through.

“I guess because things were more difficult than they needed to be, and I have absolutely nobody to blame but myself. Deep down, I knew I could go to someone, anyone, about the issues I was having with Hailey. I can guarantee she's not telling her therapist how much of a bitch she's being. I just wish I knew what was causing it. I know she's hurting. I know she is. But every time I've tried to talk to her, I get the same response. I'm not her father. I can't tell her what to do. Stuff like that.”

Monroe nodded slowly. “We'll work on it together. I, too, am not her father, but I have young siblings that I have to protect. I can't have her bringing anything negative to the house. I'm sorry, but I can't.”

I shook my head and reached for Monroe's hand. I laced our fingers together and smiled at the size difference. Monroe wasn't a massively muscled alpha. But he was, I guess, a sire? He was a lot larger than I was, and his hands were as well. Mine were definitely smaller than his. Then again, I was a bit on the smaller side, even for a wolf omega.

"I won't ask you to. I'm with you completely. I'll make it clear that the crap with her ends because, yeah, we can't have that around the kids, and if I get pregnant, I'm most likely going to snap and just chuck something at her."

Monroe chuckled. I looked up from our hands curious.

"Surely not. Would you really throw something at your sister?"

I shrugged. "I can't say that I've not thought about it before. Usually a pair of shoes she absolutely had to have and then only wore once, maybe twice. Or a shirt that she loved and was all the thing, and then wore it once and said it was *so last week*." I rolled my eyes. Monroe sighed.

"I'm not sure I'm ready for teenage Hailey. I'll figure it out in a hurry, but I can honestly say that none of my siblings ever acted like that at her age. We never had to go through what any of you did though, so I will admit that our circumstances are completely different."

I shook my head. "I wouldn't go that far. You had different trauma because of your parents."

My stomach growled just then, and Monroe raised an eyebrow at me in question.

"I didn't get a chance to eat breakfast. I was going to grab something in the kitchen at work. I barely got my coffee down before Hailey started in on me about going to the solstice festival tonight with her friends."

"Yes, we should go. It can be a date," Monroe said as he scooted to the side of the bed. He tugged me with him. "But first, we feed you. There was plenty of food in the kitchen. And we never did explore all of the other bedrooms. We can do that after breakfast."

Monroe pulled me from the room, and I glanced back at it, wondering when we'd get back to it. It already felt cozy and inviting.

“Are you going to tell me more about fae? Or, more specifically, yourself?”

“I will,” Monroe said as we started down the stairs. He was holding on to my hand tightly, going slowly as the floors were bare wood and quite slippery if you weren't careful. We were both now in our socks, and I wondered if we'd be able to put some sort of carpet runner on them. That would be better for the kids and, overall, probably me. I was trying to think ahead, and, well, I was most likely going to be giving birth to our first child come spring. I couldn't see that not happening, actually.

“You sit at the table, and I'll fix breakfast,” Monroe said and pulled out a chair for me.

“I'll help. I can cook.”

Monroe shook his head. “I'm simply going to look at what's available and then use magic. I need to feed you, and that will be so much quicker.”

Oh. Well, that was handy, wasn't it? Did I really end up with a mate that had magic like Eli did? Did that mean that Monroe could change diapers with magic? I seemed to remember Eli mentioning that Benjamin did that for him at times. Or maybe it was make bottles. I couldn't remember because like so many things in my life, I'd made things difficult. I'd pushed both Eli and Chase away when they'd been sincere and only wanted to be friends with me. I'd been horrible to them, and I knew I owed them an apology.

Fingers ran through my hair, and I blinked as I looked upward. Monroe was standing there, concern on his face again. I quickly looked down at the table but didn't see anything, so I looked back to my mate.

“What's wrong?”

“I asked you how you like your eggs?”

“Oh. I'm sorry. I was thinking. Umm...scrambled with cheese if we have it. If not, just scrambled is fine with me. Is

there bread for toast?”

“There is. Did you wish for some?”

“Yes, but seriously, I can make it,” I said, starting to get up. Monroe’s hand that had moved to rest on my shoulder held me in place.

“Nope. Anything else you’d like?” he asked. I suddenly smelled eggs, and when I looked down, I saw a plate full of them, along with several pieces of toast as well as a bowl of fruit.

“Wow. No, this is good. Are you going to eat?”

Monroe shook his head but did sit down beside me. “I ate a very large breakfast at Alpha Forest’s house. I will have tea with you though,” he told me. A mug suddenly appeared in front of him, and I wondered if I could get one of those as well. It seemed he already knew what I was going to ask because another suddenly appeared in front of me.

“Sugar? Cream?”

“Just a hint of sugar is perfect,” I said. Monroe winked and then picked up his mug, his eyes never leaving mine as he took his first sip.

“You should eat before the food gets cold. After that, we’ll talk some more.”

I was certainly on board with that. With the way my stomach was growling at the scents coming from the plate, I wasn’t going to delay eating. The sooner I ate, the quicker I would learn more about my mate. I called that a win for me in all ways.

CHAPTER 5

MONROE



I was positive that two years ago, I wouldn't have been ready for my mate. Being left behind while my younger brother was picked ahead of me to come to the human realm was quite a kick to my pride. I did a lot of self-reflection and knew that the only reason I was able to step up and take responsibility for Mason and a newborn Mae was because I'd spent so much time really thinking about my actions and who I was. I'd not liked who I realized I'd become. When our parents passed, I honestly didn't even think twice about stepping up and taking care of Mae and Mason. It had been rough, sure. But they needed me, and I felt a connection to them.

I was feeling that and so much more with Oscar. My mate had been through things that nobody should ever have to go through. He was a fighter though, and even after everything he'd gone through, he went back to the pack that had sold him for his younger siblings. In my opinion, he more than deserved to have someone take care of him for a change. I wanted to be that person. I had a feeling he was going to fight me every step of the way, but I was willing to be patient. He was fiercely independent, after all.

I had time. We had the rest of our lives. Granted, the tingles that were going through my body were telling me that I only had days before I was in excruciating pain, but that wasn't the point. Oscar had already said he was willing to go through with us claiming each other. The way he mentioned it was incredibly unromantic, but I hoped to change that.

I had no experience. None. Not even a kiss, so this was all going to be completely new for me. I would figure it out though, and I was certain my mate would help me. He'd reached for me several times already. He didn't seem to be shying away from me, so that had to mean something, didn't it?

"Do you use magic often?" Oscar asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Sometimes. I don't use it for everything. And I definitely don't if I'm not fully awake. I'm too afraid I'll mess something up and hurt someone by accident. I could never forgive myself for that." That was exactly why I didn't use magic in the middle of the night when it came to taking care of Maelie. Unless I knew for a fact that I was completely awake, I did everything the way we learned it when we were young. I couldn't risk hurting her. Or Mason for that matter. More than once, we'd heard stories about how explosive fae magic could be when not used correctly.

"I can understand that. I wouldn't want to hurt anyone either." Oscar stood and took his empty plate to the sink. I watched as he rinsed it, then opened what I knew was a dishwasher before placing it and the fork inside. I saw his mug was empty and took both of ours to him, putting them on the top rack where they would be washed later.

"Did you want to go out? We could go explore the mountain," I suggested.

"Umm, do you have a coat? Are you going to be warm enough?" Oscar asked. "It's December in Montana, on top of a mountain." Oscar glanced toward the windows before he shook his head. "I'm not sure, but I'd say there's at least a foot of snow outside."

"I can have a coat in moments," I told him seconds before I was wearing one. He had one on but had taken it off and dropped it by the front door when we first arrived. "I'm ready whenever you are."

"Well, then there's really no excuse to not go out and explore a little, is there?"

I shook my head. I wanted to spend the day with him. I already knew that a whole lot of our time together would be “practical” and spent “parenting” when, in reality, neither of us were technically parents yet. We had been thrown together because, for whatever reason, we were going to be perfect together. I could see it on some level.

I followed Oscar to the front door, intending to hold his coat for him while he put it on, but he beat me to it. I would have to be quicker next time. I did get to the front door before him, and when I held it open, he gave me a smile as he walked through.

When I stepped out, I saw that it had started snowing. It was just a few flakes here and there, but it was pretty, and I wondered how long it would last. I was caught staring up at it, and when Oscar reached out and took my hand, it was my turn to smile at him.

“I’ve never actually seen it snow before. I know what snow is, but we don’t have it in the fae realm. The cold is something that’s new as well, but I have to say that I’m not upset about it.”

“We’ll have to get snowsuits for the kids and play in it with them. Maybe we can build a snowperson or something like that.”

“They would like that, I’m sure.” I gave his hand a squeeze and then pulled it to the oversized pocket of my coat and placed both of ours inside. “Where would you like to explore first?”

Oscar looked around, his gaze landing on the council building. “Did you want to go check out the store? You’re going to be working there, aren’t you?”

“I am, but I’ll be given a formal introduction next month at some point. You have friends that live here. Did you want to meet up with them? Is there a café here on the mountaintop?”

Oscar shook his head. “Not that I know of. There’s a store, a bakery, and the council building. But you said there’s a

childcare center, so maybe there is a café and I just don't know about it."

I was at a loss. I didn't have a vehicle, not that I knew how to drive one anyway. And we were stuck on top of the mountain with nothing really to do.

"All right. What do you suggest? Where can we go, or what should we do?"

Oscar looked around and shrugged. He pulled me back into the house, and when we were under the small front porch, he reached up. I bent down, wondering what he wanted. When his hand ran through my hair, I realized he was brushing off the snow. I reached out and did the same for him, and then we went back inside.

The temperature was drastically different, and I wondered just how long we'd be able to stay out in the cold tonight. I shivered a little, and Oscar sent me a concerned look.

"You'll need a hat and gloves if you're determined to go to the solstice festival tonight. And probably a warmer shirt. Maybe a sweater or sweatshirt? I'm not sure. But you'll need to dress in warmer clothes."

"You weren't cold?"

Oscar shook his head.

"We were only outside for a few minutes," he said as he took off his coat. He placed it back on the floor beside the door, and I did the same.

"We'll need to find somewhere for coats and things, I guess."

Oscar went to the other side, behind me, and opened the door that was there. Inside was obviously a closet with a bar.

"We just need hangers. I have some, and we can bring them when we move in, but for now, I guess we could take and hang them on the back of the dining room chairs."

I nodded, and with a little bit of magic, the coats were there. Oscar looked around me, then up at me, and shook his head.

“What?”

“It’s just going to take a lot to get used to that.” He walked away but stopped after a few steps. “Oh, don’t let Hailey abuse the fact that you have magic. Don’t do things for her because you have the ability.”

“I can handle Hailey. I’ve dealt with younger siblings before. Trust me when I say she’s not going to be an issue.”

Oscar nodded once and then motioned for me to follow him. We ended up back in the back room where we’d started. The couch was dark leather and overly plush, perfect for taking a nap on if you asked me.

“I’m really at a loss. I’m not sure what to do. I’ve not had a day off in a long time, and when I had a morning off, I had to spend it doing housework or shopping for food or things for the house. I’m not sure how to handle downtime.”

I grinned. “We spend it together, getting to know each other.”

Oscar nodded. “All right. Ask me questions. Tell me what I should know about you, things like that.”

I wasn’t sure where to begin, really. We’d already talked some, and I knew if and when we claimed each other, we would have our bond that would share all of these things with one another. But I believed there were certainly some things that we should talk about and discuss personally. There were just some things that your mate deserved to hear from you firsthand.

“Anything important about you I should know?” I asked after we both had settled onto the couch on opposite ends.

“Umm...well, I think you know the most important things. I always wanted to be an artist, and my parents even encouraged it when I was younger. I, of course, wasn’t thinking about long term and, after I graduated, couldn’t really find a good job. It sucked. My older brother was an ass about it, but that was expected, I guess.”

“I still think you need to get back to your art. We can figure out how to sell it, and you can do something you say

you love.”

Oscar sighed. “I wish. I just...there’s bills.”

I nodded. “I understand that too. I’ve been informed about the bills and how money works here. We will be all right. And besides, there are two of us now.”

I had always envisioned that my mate would stay home and raise our children. At least until they went off to school. But that didn’t mean I would be an absent father. I had that growing up, and I’d always wanted something better than that for my own kids. And now my two youngest siblings.

“I just don’t know, Monroe. I’ve been on my own for a while now, and it’s kind of hard to rely on someone else, to trust them,” Oscar said. He immediately held up his hands and shook his head. “I do trust you, for the most part.” His eyes widened again, and I started chuckling when he covered his face with his hands.

“I get it. I do. It will take time, and I’m willing to take that time to earn your trust. It’s expected, and I’m not offended in any way.”

“I’m sorry,” Oscar said after dropping his hands to his lap.

“Don’t be. I do understand. Trust takes time, and that is to be expected. We have really been thrown together all of a sudden, and I think that if you weren’t responsible for your two siblings and I wasn’t responsible for mine, we would be looking at everything much differently.” Oscar seemed to agree with me on that but still looked uncertain.

“I don’t get it,” he said after a moment of silence.

“What?”

“How you’re so calm and easygoing about all of this. You came from an entirely different realm, and everything has been thrown upside down and inside out for you, and yet, you’re just chill. You have a positive outlook about everything.”

I bit my lower lip because it was immensely difficult to not laugh at the thought of me being positive about everything.

“I wouldn’t necessarily say that,” I told him. “I used to be incredibly selfish. I’ve already admitted to that.”

Oscar shrugged. “Yeah, but we all did, and I can understand wanting out of where you were. I’ve been there before too. But now, you’re in a completely new world, and yet, you’re happy, excited, positive, and you’re all...it’ll be all right, and we’ll make everything work.” Oscar sighed. “I just wish I had that positive outlook on everything. My life has been...” Oscar seemed to think for a moment. “I would say I’ve been in reaction mode and doing damage control for a while now. Since school started and Hailey met her new friends.”

When Oscar said friends, he did the air quotes gesture, which told me they weren’t really friends.

“Can maybe her brother—I’m sorry, I don’t remember his name.”

“Joseph.”

“Can he maybe help watch out for her? Maybe put her on a better path?”

Oscar was shaking his head. “No. She insisted on going to the human school.” Oscar groaned. “I apologize now. She’s going to be really pissed when she comes back because I’ve already pulled her, and she’s going to be going to the shifter school on pack lands now. I did it last week when she threw her plate of food at me. The plate broke against my head, and the mess hit the floor.” Oscar rubbed his head absently. “I told her to clean it up, and she refused. It was there for two days before she finally cleaned it up.”

I was trying to keep an open mind about his sister. She was obviously going through something; I just didn’t know what, but we would definitely be getting to the bottom of whatever it was. There would be no more throwing of plates or food, and I absolutely would not tolerate her hurting my mate.

“Does the pack know?”

Oscar shook his head.

“You need to tell them.”

“I didn’t want to involve anyone. I think that Joseph might have mentioned it to someone because he goes to the shifter school. He wanted to be around other shifters, which I thought was great. For whatever reason, Hailey didn’t. That was my first mistake because it only took a few weeks for her to fall in with the wrong friends and start acting out. The hate is always directed at me though, so I just take it.”

Not anymore, he wouldn’t. I was not going to allow it to happen. “We’ll fix it. Whatever is going on, we’ll figure it out, but she’s not going to act like that anymore. All right?”

Oscar nodded and looked hopeful.

“Good. I won’t let her throw things at you any longer. We’ll figure something out, and if we have to get others involved, we will. But no, even I know that’s not how things are supposed to be.”

“I know, and I should have reached out when she first started showing signs, but I thought it would even out. If I get her the things she wants, she’s better, for a bit. But it’s never-ending.”

Nope, we weren’t going to be doing that any longer. I had Mason and Maelie to think about, and she would not be acting out in any way. They were little, and there was no way I was going to allow them to get caught in the crossfire or for Oscar’s sister to hurt him ever again.

“What about you?”

“What about me?” I asked.

“What important things about you should I know?”

Ah yes, now we’d gotten back to me. This was where I needed to tell him all about my secrets.

“Well, let’s see.” I tried to make it sound like I didn’t really know what to mention. “Oh, something that perhaps you don’t know about fae. Sound good?”

“Absolutely. What is it because I know exactly nothing about fae other than you have magical powers and live in a whole other realm.”

I chuckled with Oscar. True. We were here more than I think other paranormals realized, but we weren't nearly as numerous as the ones who were from this realm.

"We usually meet our mates young, we tend to have some number of children—on average three to five—and we don't date until we meet our mates." There. Did that work? Would that explain things well enough for him?

"You don't date? At all?"

I tilted my hand back and forth. "Some do, but it's incredibly rare. Most of us don't date or have any sort of relationship until we meet our mates. It's very rare that we haven't met our mate by midthirties at the very latest. Most of our mates are found in other villages unless we're one of the few that have been chosen to come here.

"No relationships. Nothing of that sort at all. No dates, no kisses, no sex, nothing."

"No sex? Never?"

I shook my head.

"Anything?"

Another shake of my head. Oscar's eyes widened.

"Is that an issue for you?" I asked. It would hurt if it was. Sure, I wasn't going to be the best he'd ever had, but I could learn. I knew how it worked, and I knew how to please him if he only gave me the chance. But in practice, I'd never done anything of the sort."

"Not even a hand job?"

"Absolutely nothing. You will be my first, my only. Is that a problem?"

Oscar's mouth opened and closed for a few moments before he shook his head. "Are you serious?"

"I am, but you seem as if this is a problem for you. I cannot change it at this point. I was brought here because my mate is here and there was a need for my services at the council store."

Oscar's mouth continued to open and close. "No, I just...I feel bad."

I raised an eyebrow at him in question. "Why?"

"Because you're stuck with me. I already felt bad about that, but now I feel extra bad. I had two...you know, before I was sold. I don't really count what they did to us, but it still happened."

I moved on the couch to where I was sitting in the middle and could reach him. I took his hands in mine, bringing them up to my mouth and kissing the backs of both. "I am not nor would I ever be upset about what happened to you beyond that they did despicable things to you and others. No person should ever be subjected to what you have gone through. Ever. There's no reason or excuse for things of that nature."

"Thank you. I should be okay. For when we do..."

It took me a moment to realize what he was referring to.

"Oh. You mean sex. When we claim each other?"

"Yeah. I don't have any type of fear around you, and I haven't from the very beginning. Not that I don't think you couldn't hurt me because you probably could, even without the use of magic. You're at least fifty pounds heavier than I am and about eight inches taller. I'd say you could do what you want, if you were of a mind."

I shook my head. "I'm not. We'll go at your pace, as I said before. When you're ready, it'll happen, and not a moment before."

And I would. I would wait for my mate to be ready. He deserved no less than that.

CHAPTER 6

OSCAR



Not even a kiss. I was trying not to dwell on the information that my mate had given me. He'd never even kissed anyone. Ever. I felt terrible about that. He was stuck with me. I most certainly wouldn't consider myself the person to teach someone else how to kiss, let alone be their first at being intimate in other ways. I was not the person Monroe should be learning these things from.

We had decided to go back to Timber Valley and pack up some of my stuff. It was easy enough to get off the mountain, but once we were at the bottom, we were on foot for more than several yards. It wasn't that I lived incredibly far from the mountain—nobody did. But it was cold, and Monroe wasn't a shifter and didn't have the heat of an animal to help keep him warm.

“Can you do magic down here?” I asked as we walked away from the cabin that the council had turned into the transport building off the mountain. It was a bit secluded, so it didn't get a whole lot of attention, which was certainly ideal since so many came and went from it throughout the day.

“I can, why? My magic isn't limited to any one particular place.”

“Can you, I don't know, magick us to Alpha Forest's house? Not inside it but in front of it? I live only just down the road from him. Well, and a block over, but it's maybe a five-minute walk and not a thirty-minute one.”

“I can,” Monroe said. He reached for my hand, and seconds later, my stomach rolled, and we were standing exactly where I’d asked. I looked at the large house and wondered if Monroe would like to go in and see his siblings.

“Should we go say hi?”

Monroe shook his head. “No, we should go to your place and pack. Then we’ll go back to the new house, and after we unpack, we’ll have lunch and then head to the festival. Or does it start tonight?”

“It starts around lunchtime. But I think the majority of the activities are happening tonight.”

“Then we go on as planned. We’ll walk over to your place, pack some things for you, and then go back to our new house.”

I could do that. It would give me time to come up with a plan to figure out what to do about Monroe. I’d never really been good at being forward with alphas. Or, in Monroe’s case, a sire. Sure, some omegas were amazing at being forward, but not me. I wouldn’t necessarily say I was shy, but I wasn’t a sassy twink either.

I gave Monroe’s hand a squeeze and started walking in the direction of the house I shared with my siblings. That gave me pause for a moment, and I stopped, wondering how that was going to go down. Would they be happy for me? I had no doubt that Joseph would be, but I had no way of knowing if Hailey would be or not. Most likely not because I was going to be quitting at least one of my jobs and wouldn’t be able to give her everything she wanted all the time. There was absolutely no way I would ever ask Monroe to provide things like that for her. And like he’d mentioned during one of our many talks already, that wasn’t a healthy situation, and it needed to end. He was one hundred percent correct about that.

“What’s wrong?”

“What do you mean? Nothing’s wrong,” I said, looking up at my mate. We were still holding hands while walking down the street. Luckily, the sidewalk had been shoveled, and I wondered if it had been done by the individual occupants of

the houses on the street or if Alpha Forest had asked for volunteers from the pack to do it.

“Your aura is saying you’re upset. I can’t really sense your feelings too well yet, not until we claim each other, but your aura is worried, I’d say.”

Was he sure he couldn’t sense my feelings? “I’d say you’re doing a great job with reading my feelings. I am worried. I’m not actually looking forward to having another meeting with my sister this morning.”

“Well, if it’s going to be an issue, once we get to your place, I can use magic and put us inside in your bedroom. Would that help?”

I nodded. It would. I felt like I was already dooming this mating. I’d had such a terrible morning with Hailey, and I just didn’t want to deal with her again. The last thing I needed right now was for her to make the day worse. It was supposed to be an amazing and wonderful thing—meeting your mate. I wanted that for us, and if she pulled her usual act, it would mar our day.

We walked to the end of the block, crossed over, and went to the next road. We were in the fourth house on the left side, and when we arrived, I was a bit surprised to see the lights off at the house. My vehicle was still in the driveway though, which was a bonus.

“There’s nobody inside,” Monroe said as I started up the pathway to the front door.

“No?” I asked, looking over my shoulder at him.

“No. There are no auras in the house. It’s empty. Could they have gone somewhere?”

I shrugged. “They’re both on break from school for the year. They’ll go back the beginning of the year, but they weren’t going anywhere until later, I thought. Obviously, I was wrong about that.”

I walked up the three steps to the front porch and crossed it to the door.

“This is a cute porch. I like the chairs,” Monroe said as he indicated the rockers. They were currently covered in snow, and it was too cold to sit out here, but I thought about how I used to come out here and sit and cry silently after Hailey finally went to bed. I didn’t know what switch flipped and how I’d gone wrong, but I couldn’t seem to get through to her. I’d tried everything. I’d even resorted to working two jobs in order to spoil her, hoping it would help. It hadn’t. It had only made things worse.

“You’re sad now,” Monroe said, placing his hand on my shoulder.

“Just wondering where I went so wrong. She sees a therapist, but I can’t seem to get through to her.”

“We’ll work it out together. You’re not alone anymore. We’re a team now,” Monroe told me. He brought his hands to my face and cupped it, and I thought for a moment he was going to kiss me, but instead, he smiled before his hands moved from my face to my shoulders. He took a step back, and I pulled the keys from my pocket and opened the front door. Inside smelled like home, only it felt off.

“My room is upstairs,” I said, pointing to the stairs off to the right. I went up the stairs with Monroe behind me, and when we reached my room, I was thankful that I was normally a tidy person. My bed was made, and all of the dirty clothes were in the hamper, which was a relief. “How much do you think I should pack?”

Monroe smirked. “You don’t actually have to pack anything,” he said just before he winked. Once he did, I felt something shift in the room, and when I looked around, the room was void of anything that had been personal. I went to the dresser and opened drawer after drawer, finding them all empty.

“What? How?”

Monroe held up his hand and wiggled his fingers. “Now that I’m here, I was able to send all of your things to the house on the mountain. They’re in the bedroom there.”

“Seriously?”

Monroe nodded.

“Can you do that for my bathroom things too?”

“Of course. I just need to know where your bathroom things are.”

I took Monroe to the bathroom and indicated which items were mine. I watched as they disappeared and wondered just how easy moving was going to be.

“Is any of the furniture yours?”

“No. The house is a pack house and came furnished. It’s for new couples that are just starting out or families that have come here seeking sanctuary. My siblings and I fit that description, not that they wouldn’t have helped us anyway. Alpha Forest and Alpha War have been amazing about welcoming others to the area when the council has rescued them. Even before that, from what I’ve heard.”

“I haven’t met Alpha War, but Alpha Forest and his mate have been nothing but amazing since I arrived. It has to be somewhat of a burden, I would think, to take in three complete strangers and house them with your family.”

“That’s just part of being alpha, I think. I don’t remember my pack’s alpha ever doing that, but he was always a bit of an ass. Us kids didn’t have a whole lot to do with them, except during runs and things like that when we had to, but I never really liked him much. Or the inner circle.”

“We didn’t have that type of dynamic in our village. Or any of them around either.”

“What is it like?” I asked as I turned and leaned against the counter.

“What? The village?”

“Yeah. And your realm. You said it was warm all the time.”

“Yes. It’s green, the weather is mild, but it’s very different than what you have here. We don’t have phones or televisions,

nor do we have the same foods. It's a bit of a shock to come here from there. There are books that we all read because, since as long as I've been able to read, we've known it's a possibility that we could be chosen to have a mate in this realm. It goes over the basics that we can expect here, things like that. I know about your world a little, but I look forward to experiencing it firsthand."

"I mean...I don't know. I'm not sure I could live without a phone or a TV. But I've always had them. I guess if I grew up not having something, I wouldn't miss it." That still didn't sound like the greatest thing, but I could see it from that perspective.

"Is there anything else you want sent to the other house?"

I thought about it for a moment and nodded. "Yeah. Follow me?"

I led Monroe out of the bathroom and down the stairs to the living room. In the corner was a small shelf that had books on it. They were all I had left from my days as a starving artist, but they meant a lot to me, and some would be incredibly expensive to replace. I didn't have many, and the shelf was mostly empty, but I didn't want anything to happen to them either.

"Can you please send these? I don't recall seeing a bookshelf or anything. But if you could send them to the house, I'll stack them and put them away in the bedroom closet."

"There were shelves in the other room with all of the windows. I think it was supposed to be an office? It had a desk. Personally, I think it would make a great art room for you, and we should use it for that."

I just grinned because although that sounded amazing, it wouldn't be a reality for at least some time. I might eventually get back into my art, but I didn't have time for that right now. I was too busy raising my siblings, and now that I had Monroe in my life, that meant I had Mason and Maelie in my life as well. They were adorable, and I knew I would quickly fall for both of them. How could you not?

“You don’t believe me,” Monroe said.

I shrugged. “It’s not that I don’t. I will admit that I love the idea. But I don’t have the time or the funds to dedicate myself to art. I have bills, and little kids and art supplies don’t always go hand in hand. Especially not for incredibly expensive art supplies that don’t come out of clothing or floors.”

“If you say so. I want you to have the things in life that bring you joy. If that’s art, then you have art,” Monroe said.

The books suddenly disappeared from in front of me, so I stood. “Thank you,” I said.

“You’re very welcome. Is there anything else in the house?”

I started to shake my head but remembered that I should probably get our important papers. They were in a metal box in the small coat closet behind the front door. I moved across the room and into the hallway, and when I opened the closet, I quickly found the box on the shelf. Just to be safe, I put in the combination on the lock, and when I saw all of the papers there, I closed and relocked it.

“Yes, this and these coats. We should take them as well. They’re too small for you, unfortunately, but I’d like to go ahead and take them. All of the house things were already here. The pans, dishes, most of the furniture. The house is fully furnished for a reason, and I don’t want to ask you to send my brother’s or sister’s things yet because I’m not sure where they are or if they have anything with them.”

“Fair enough. Then on that matter, why don’t we take your vehicle to the parking lot, and after we park it there, we can find our way back to the house and figure out what to do until we go to the solstice festival this evening.”

I nodded in agreement. I wasn’t so sure about the festival, but if he wanted to go, I’d go. He had most likely never experienced something like that in his realm, and I wanted him to experience and enjoy everything that we could offer here. I already felt as if he was getting the shorter end of things by having me for a mate. Especially since he was completely

inexperienced in all things, and I was...well, me. I'd been through some things, and they weren't pretty at all.

“You're doing it again.”

I looked up at Monroe. “What?”

He shrugged. “I'm not sure, but you're thinking about something not pleasant.”

I sighed. It was going to take a whole lot of getting used to. Having someone with magical powers in your life certainly had perks. But there were drawbacks as well.

“I don't really mean to. My mind just goes to not-so-wonderful places sometimes still. I was doing better, but with everything going on with my sister, it's been a lot of stress, and my mind has started wandering back there again.”

Monroe reached out slowly, running his fingers through the side of my hair. He leaned down, and I thought for sure he was finally going to kiss me, but instead, his lips touched my forehead. He then leaned his against mine and closed his eyes with a big sigh. “I've said it before, and I'll keep saying it always. We're a team now. I'll help with your siblings, and hopefully, you'll help with mine. I'm not going to ask you to take over their care, but maybe help me out in a bind.”

I moved my head, breaking the contact. “We can talk about it once we're back at the other house, but you have to remember what you're saying. If we're a team, and I'm going to essentially be their other parent, then I get to help out with them. It's not going to be without some hiccups at first because I have pretty much zero experience with kids as young as Maelie. But I'm wanting to try. If that's not something you can accept though, then maybe we should hold off on us.”

Monroe flinched, but his face said nothing.

“I just don't want you to feel pressured.”

I grinned at him. “I don't. I mean, even they seemed excited about getting another daddy. So we're going to be one of those rare paranormal couples that starts life with a ready-made family. We'll work it out, as a team.”

“As a team,” Monroe echoed.

“Good. Now that that’s settled, let’s get back to the house. I’m not sure how long we’ll have until our siblings are joining us, but we really need to get busy working on figuring out our mating and how we’re going to do that.”

I started toward the door, and Monroe stopped me with a hand on my arm. I looked at my mate and found him staring at me with a sad look on his face.

“I don’t want it to be a chore, Oscar. Nor do I wish for you to feel that it’s some sort of business transaction. I understand our circumstances aren’t ideal, but I hope you can grow to care for me someday. I will wait until such a time, and when it happens, it does. All right?”

I was at a loss for words. Did he not want to claim me? Did he not wish to be mated soon? I was struggling to get the guy to kiss me, so I knew there was no way I could get him to claim me unless it was his idea.

“All right. I apologize if I made you feel that way. Things are different for shifters. We have an animal half that tells us who our mate is. They’re ready to join our lives almost immediately. From the time we start shifting, it’s ingrained into us that we should always trust in our animal. They know what’s best for us. Mine is saying you are what’s best for me. I’m ready whenever you are. So we’ll go at your pace, Monroe. Not mine. The ball is in your court.” I didn’t know how else to say it. We would be waiting on my mate, the sire of my future children. When he was ready, he could claim me. Then we would truly be a team. Monroe seemed a little lost for words. I moved again, this time getting around him and to the door. “Let’s go back to the mountain. I’m sure we can find something to do with our time until this evening.”

I opened the door and waited for Monroe. After a moment, he nodded and walked out. I gave the house one last look, wondering if I’d return or not. Sure, my siblings were still here, but Alpha Forest had said they would be looked after. They weren’t moving to the mountain yet, and I had no way of

knowing when they would be joining us. I only hoped that when they did, things were much happier.

CHAPTER 7

MONROE



One could say that a positive about living on Treasure Ridge was that I would be close to work. Another positive was that it was where the winter solstice festival had been moved. It was within walking distance of all of the houses here on Treasure Ridge, including ours. It was being held in an open meadow behind the council building, and by the time Oscar and I made our way there, the celebration seemed to be in full swing.

“Do you know any of these people?” I asked as we joined the others. The ground was cleared from the snow, something that I was certain was magical since not only could I still feel the magic, but there were several inches of snow everywhere else.

“Possibly. I know a few people in the council, but I haven’t really had a lot of time to hang out with them.”

I brought Oscar’s hand to my mouth and kissed it through the glove he was wearing before I gave it a gentle squeeze. “Then let’s go see if we can find them. If not, then maybe we can make some new friends.” I pulled Oscar along with me, wondering who everyone was and if I’d ever get to know them.

“Are you cold?” Oscar asked. “Would you like some hot eggnog or maybe a hot tea?” Oscar pointed to a brightly lit tent that appeared to be a concession tent of sorts.

“If you would like something to drink, then we most certainly will go and join in the festivities.”

“I was asking you. You’re the one I’m worried about being cold.”

I leaned down and kissed Oscar on the forehead again. His lips were so very tempting, but I knew I certainly wanted our first-ever real kiss to be a bit more private because I was certain I wasn’t going to be all that great at it.

“Let’s go grab something to drink and see if they have anything else. I’m excited to experience your customs and things. Do they do this every year, do you know?”

Oscar and I started toward the tent that seemed to be quite popular, and as we grew closer, I could see and smell why.

“I think they did last year. I’m not sure if it’s an every-year thing or if they just started recently. I’ve not really been too involved in much. I haven’t had time.”

I hoped to be able to lighten his load and give him a good life. That was all any good mate should want for their life partner, and hopefully, I would be able to provide that for Oscar, our siblings, and any children we should have together. I wasn’t who I was several years ago, and I really hoped that now I was ready for these things. I felt ready, and it was my desire to be a good mate and provider.

“What would you like?” Oscar asked. I saw a handwritten sign behind a table that was supposed to be a serving counter.

“Whatever you’re having,” I told him. I could read the sign but didn’t necessarily know what certain things that were on it were.

We reached the front of the line, and Oscar told the person behind the table what we wanted. When he asked about payment, we were informed there was no cost, that the council was funding the celebration, and we were welcome to come back as often as we wanted.

I took a cup and a bag that was handed to me and waited for Oscar to do the same before we found a table toward the front of the tent and sat down. I opened the bag and pulled out two different pastries. “What’s this one?”

“That’s the donut. It will be either apple or pumpkin. Which did you ask for? I didn’t quite hear you because I was busy reading the menu board.”

“I asked for pumpkin. I don’t know what that is, so I thought I would give it a try.”

“You don’t have pumpkins in your realm?”

I shook my head. “We have apples and other fruits, but I do not recognize the word ‘pumpkin.’” I pulled the donut to my nose and gave it a deep smell and closed my eyes in appreciation. “Whatever this is, it smells amazing.”

“They are. I got the apple cider one though, so if you’d like to try mine, you’re welcome to.”

I grinned at my mate. “That’s sweet of you. I do not wish to take your treat. I am happy with this one, I believe.” I took a bite and nodded as I started to chew. It was certainly different from any flavor I’d ever eaten before, but I enjoyed it immensely and decided I would need to find out more about pumpkin donuts. These were delicious, and I certainly wouldn’t mind eating more of them.

We ate our donuts, followed by a three-pack of cookies each, and drank our eggnog. I discovered that I personally didn’t care for it and wouldn’t ask for more, but I gave it a try for my mate.

Once finished, we disposed of our cups and bags and left the tent to go explore. The area was decorated with magical lights all around the area; there were games with prizes, a giant bounce house that the children were giggling and playing on, and an area that others seemed to be climbing and then sliding down on round plastic things.

“Those are sleds?” I asked, pointing to the others as they shouted as they came down the large pile of snow.

“Saucer sleds, yes. Did you want to give it a go?”

I thought about it for a moment or two but then shook my head. “If it’s something you wish to partake of, I’ll gladly wait at the bottom here for you.” It wasn’t that it looked dangerous—it didn’t. But I wasn’t sure I should try something of that

nature when I was so unsure of the others around me still. I didn't know anyone here, and what if I somehow came off as unprofessional before I even started my new job? I couldn't take that chance. I needed to ensure that I could provide for not only my siblings but now Oscar and his two as well. I had a family, and I couldn't risk jeopardizing my position here.

"We can go do something else," Oscar said, his voice pulling my attention away from those sliding down the hill.

"I don't wish for you to not have fun while here. It was my idea to come in the first place. If you want to give it a go, I'll wait here."

Oscar shook his head. "Nope. Let's go do something else. How are you at playing games?" Oscar grabbed my hand and pulled me away from the sledding hill, and we went back to the area that seemed to be filled with games.

"What's the purpose of these?" I asked as we walked slowly through the different game stations.

"To have fun. Maybe win a prize or two."

"What shall we try to win?" I asked, pointing to a couple of different games.

"Well, I think that Maelie would like a stuffie," Oscar said. He still had my other hand and pulled me toward a game that had a wall of balloons behind it.

"What is it that we need to do?" I asked.

"Throw the dart, pop the balloon, and if you break enough of them, we get a prize."

"Sounds easy enough." Oscar and I moved up to the counter when space became available, and we were both given a set of darts. I watched Oscar pick one up and throw it toward the balloons, and when it hit it and the balloon popped, I got the idea of the game.

I joined in on the fun, and when it was all said and done, we had both hit the majority of our balloons, and we were both given a prize. Oscar won a stuffed polar bear, and I was handed a stuffed tiger. Both were cute, and I had to agree with

him that Maelie would certainly love them. Mason most likely as well.

We took our prizes and moved on to the next activity, which I actually found the most fascinating. “These are absolutely gorgeous,” I said quietly to Oscar as we walked among the blocks of ice that had been carved into various shapes. There were dragons, gargoyles, bears, wolves, different types of large cats, and what looked like some sort of wolf but not. I stopped in front of it.

“That’s a hellhound,” Oscar told me. When I pulled my eyes from it, my attention was immediately taken by the snow that suddenly started falling. I glanced up briefly but looked back to my mate with a smile on my face.

“A hellhound?”

“Yes. When I was rescued with Chace and Eli, it was by a hellhound. He wasn’t the only one, but he was one of them that rescued us. Actually, if not for him, I wouldn’t be here because we were being held in a basement in New Orleans.”

I wasn’t sure what that actually meant, and it obviously showed on my face.

“There aren’t basements in New Orleans because the city is below sea level. They flood. The only reason that particular basement wasn’t flooded was because of the demon who had us. He had some sort of magical stone or something. It was keeping the place from flooding. Probably some other things as well. But when the stone was taken away, the basement started to fill with water in a hurry. We were locked inside a room with bars for a door.”

What he was telling me was actually terrifying. The thought that he could have been trapped in a basement while it was filling with water... I shook my head. It did no good for my mind to wander in that direction. I needed to focus on now. We were both here, on this mountain, together. We were about to start a new adventure together. I wouldn’t fret over what happened in the past. I would be supportive of my mate if he was still dealing with what happened to him. I wouldn’t dwell on it though.

“So you were rescued by a hellhound.”

“Yes. I’ve seen him and the other hellhounds a couple of times while they were on runs or when I was up here and one of them would be doing patrols. They all take turns, as far as I know.”

That was incredibly interesting. I hoped to one day meet this hellhound and was given the opportunity to thank him for what he did for my mate and the others he rescued at that time.

“What do you want to do now?” I asked. “Would you like to continue with the sculptures and other games and things?”

Oscar shook his head. “I want to go home. I’ve just met my mate today, and although I don’t expect anything to happen until he’s ready, I don’t really want to be around others either. My wolf isn’t really happy, and I just want to be in a little bubble with you for a little while.”

I honestly hadn’t thought about things from that perspective. I just wanted my mate to have someone show him attention and that someone cared. But why would he think that nothing was going to happen between us?

“Then home we will go. I apologize for insisting we come out tonight. It wasn’t the best planning on my part. I only wished to show you that I valued you and wanted to give you the attention I feel you deserve.”

Oscar grinned up at me. “Good. Let’s go,” Oscar said as he pulled on my hand. I chuckled as I let him lead me away from the ice sculptures, and we quickly departed the area where the festival was being held. Once far enough away for Oscar, he slowed his pace, and we continued on at a relaxed walk while the snow floated down around us.

“I have never seen snow fall like this,” I said after a time. “Well, this heavily. It was snowing earlier, but this is different.”

It was truly a beautiful sight. We could see it falling in the light the lamps provided along the pathway, and there was just something so serene about it.

“I’ve seen snow before, but it wasn’t until I moved up here that it was an every-winter thing. There isn’t snow where I’m from in Mississippi.”

“Do you miss it?” I asked suddenly. I knew there would be certain aspects of the fae realm that I would miss, but as a whole, I wouldn’t wish to go back. There wasn’t enough positive there for me to desire to return.

“Not really, no. I understand my birth pack has been through a massive overhaul, and everyone that was in charge is no longer in charge.” Oscar snorted. “Most aren’t even alive any longer, from what I’ve been told.”

If I didn’t know of Oscar’s past and how his pack was involved in his being sold, I would be concerned about his comment. But I wasn’t. He had every right to feel that way.

“I believe the correct response to that is rightly so,” I hedged.

Oscar gave me a beaming smile. “Yes,” he said quietly. We continued walking at a slow pace in silence for a few minutes until our new house came into view. The lights from the top of the council building gave the falling snow a completely different feel, and I could only call it romantic.

“May I kiss you?” I asked suddenly. I’d wanted to for hours now but had lacked the courage to do so. It hadn’t felt as if it were the right time, but now, possibly, it would be. The mood felt more romantic, at least for me.

“You don’t have to ask. You’re my mate.”

“Ah, but I do. Yes, we are mates, but I would never force you to do something you were uncomfortable with.”

I leaned in, cupping Oscar’s face with my free hand, and gently pressed my lips to his. The tingling that had been coursing through my body all afternoon flared before it calmed slightly. It seemed to center where we were touching though: my hand on his face, our hands laced together, and my lips on his.

I was a bit insecure about it all, but when I heard a quiet moan from Oscar seconds before his lips parted slightly, those

insecurities fled. When Oscar's tongue gently touched my lower lip, it was my turn to moan at the sensations it caused.

Oscar's tongue pushed forward, causing a zing to go through my body when it touched mine. Wanting nothing more than to participate fully, I pulled my other hand free and placed it on the back of Oscar's neck at the same time my own tongue pushed back and found its way into Oscar's mouth. He moaned once more but then pulled away by turning his head to the side.

"I apologize," I said immediately and took a step back. I wasn't sure if it was my lack of experience that made things awkward or that he felt I was pushing too fast for too much. Either way, I didn't wish to upset my mate, and I wanted to make sure I addressed whatever was wrong that caused him to pull away so quickly.

"Why?" Oscar asked. When I looked at him, he looked hurt, and his aura seemed to agree with that.

"I did not mean to make you uncomfortable. I know I'm not experienced in these things. I'll ask that you are patient and give me time to learn what it is that you enjoy."

Oscar growled, and I'll admit that it was adorably cute to hear his wolf side come out. I couldn't wait to meet his wolf and thought that perhaps I was about to because he seemed to be struggling at the moment. Instead, I found the front of my coat grabbed, and Oscar started walking, pulling me along with him toward our house.

"Did I do something to upset you?" I asked as my mate continued to pull me along behind him. It was easy enough to keep up with his steps, but he wasn't speaking, and that had started to worry me. I went through everything I could think of that I could have done wrong, and the only explanation I could come up with was that I'd pushed for too much too fast. I knew about his past and that I would possibly have to wait for some time before he was ready for me to claim him.

Oscar finally stopped when we were standing in front of our house. The snow was falling harder now, and I wondered how much more we would get. Would Oscar want to go out in

it tomorrow? Would he talk to me? He was currently glaring up at me, and I had no idea why.

“Are you going to talk? What did I do wrong? I understand I’m not the greatest at that stuff, but I am trying.”

“That’s the thing, Monroe. I’m not upset. You did nothing wrong. And I want nothing more than to be inside our house with you when you do that again and again. For the first time in I don’t know how long, I felt something. Something here,” Oscar said as he touched his chest and then moved his hand down his torso. “I want us. I want to be yours, but I’ll wait if you’re still unsure.”

Unsure? “Oscar, I would love to call you mine. I know you have a somewhat difficult past that wasn’t of your own choosing, but that doesn’t bother me. You’re mine, and I want nothing more than to be yours.”

“Then take me inside and claim me.”

I took several deep breaths before I nodded once, and after taking Oscar’s hand in mine, I walked inside our house with my mate by my side.

CHAPTER 8

OSCAR



My wolf was pushing me hard, and I had no complaints about his stance on Monroe claiming us. Especially after that sweet yet arousing kiss. Who knew that a hesitant kiss could be such a turn-on? I hadn't, but now I did, and I wanted more. So much more.

It had been quite some time since I'd even thought about being intimate with anyone, and I was happy that it was my mate who would be my first after everything that had happened to me. My first and last, because this would be for the rest of our lives, and I already knew I needed to have Alpha Forest give his brother thanks from me. I had no doubt that Monroe was exactly who I would need in my life. He was generous, strong, and patient.

Despite all of that, I was a bit nervous. It couldn't be helped though. I knew Monroe wasn't experienced in anything of this sort, and I wanted him to have a wonderful experience. But I didn't exactly have a whole lot of knowledge either.

The moment we entered the house and the door closed behind us, a heavy feeling of nerves hit. I was definitely nervous about the outcome. I wanted this to be good for Monroe. I wanted his first time to be everything and more.

"I can sense your nervousness. We don't have to do this. We can wait until you're absolutely ready."

I shook my head. "I'm ready now. I just have all of these expectations on myself to make this perfect for you. I'm not sure I can, but you deserve that for this."

Monroe stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. He gently turned me to face him, and I somehow got lost in his eyes. They were mesmerizing.

“Oscar, I’m with you. It’s already going to be amazing. Stop putting so much pressure on yourself. It’s true I’ve never actually done what we’re about to do, but I do know the mechanics of how it’s done. Just like here, we do have a class on it when we’re in school.”

Of course they did. Didn’t everyone? I took a deep breath and nodded. Monroe grinned and then took my hand and led me up the stairs.

“Do we need to do anything first? Maybe shower? Or take a bath? Something like that?” I asked. I quickly realized that now I was stalling. Monroe picked up on it immediately and sent me a glance while we continued on up the stairs. Once we were in the bedroom, he led me to the bed and had me sit on the side. He knelt down in front of me, taking both of my hands in his, and brought them to his mouth and kissed them gently.

“You are obviously nervous, and I understand. I’ve said it many times: I can wait, and we will go at your pace, Oscar. The most important thing to me is that you are ready and comfortable.”

My wolf whined in my mind. I tried to hush him, but he wasn’t listening. He was whimpering and calling out, wanting our mate to claim us. I knew I needed to not only trust my wolf but my mate as well, and now I had to figure out how to reassure Monroe that I was ready.

“I am. I want this. I’m obviously nervous. I want this to be good for you.”

Monroe raised an eyebrow at me. “But not for you? Do you believe you’re not going to find pleasure in what we’re about to share?”

I wanted to. I’d very rarely enjoyed sex. Obviously I didn’t when I’d been held captive, but that wasn’t the extent of my

experience. Although, I wasn't sure I should really call it "experience."

"I want to. You're my mate, Monroe. I know that alone will be pleasurable. I can't help but be a bit nervous though."

"We'll go slow, all right?"

"Slow? Meaning?"

"Meaning slow. Maybe we should do as you asked earlier. Perhaps a soak in the bath first would be a good way to get you to relax. Who knows, it might even help set the mood," Monroe said as he held up a hand and snapped his fingers. He stood, and when we went to the bathroom, I quickly realized what that was about. I looked up at my mate.

"Do you have to snap your fingers to do magic?"

Monroe smirked. "No. I did it for emphasis." Monroe raised his eyebrows at me, and the bathroom and everything that he'd done to it was suddenly gone—the room was now exactly as it had been earlier.

"Where did...can you bring it back?"

Monroe nodded slowly, and once more, the bathroom lights were dimmed, there were candles all around the tub, which was once more filled with steaming, fragrant water, and there was quiet music coming from somewhere. I didn't really care—it was just barely there, but it was enough to tell me that Monroe was trying, and I appreciated everything he was doing.

"Shall we?" Monroe asked, holding out his arm toward the tub.

I nodded and unzipped my coat. I should have left it downstairs, but I wasn't exactly thinking about it then.

"Are you all right to undress in front of me?" Monroe asked.

I chuckled. "I'm a shifter. We get naked in front of others all of the time," I told him. Monroe's brow wrinkled, and I laughed. "It's a part of life here. We have to get naked in order to shift. If we don't, we can get tangled in our clothing. If we

need to shift in a hurry, that could mean the difference between escaping or getting hurt.” I pulled my hoodie off and tossed it on the floor on top of my coat. I sat down to undo my boots because there was no way they were coming off without being unlaced first.

“I accept that. It will take a bit to get used to, I guess. I’m not trying to be possessive or controlling. I just wasn’t raised around shifters, and we didn’t go around getting naked in front of one another.”

I had heard that more than once. Warlocks and vampires didn’t get naked around their coven members either.

“I don’t plan on shifting often near others, so you won’t have to worry much,” I told him. I dropped both of my boots on the floor and pulled my socks off before I stood and undid my pants. I wasted no time and pushed them down my legs, stepping out of them and then standing completely naked in front of my mate. His eyes were wide and, after a moment, turned from surprised to appreciative. I took a deep breath to gain courage and stepped toward my mate. “If you’d like to join me in the tub, I’d love that. But I do recommend undressing first,” I whispered.

I walked to the tub and carefully stepped into the steaming water, moaning at the heat as it surrounded my foot and leg. When I was standing in it completely, I glanced over my shoulder to find Monroe staring at me. I sat and sighed at the feeling of the hot water washing away the stress of life. When had I last taken time for myself? I couldn’t remember, honestly. Once I was rescued, I wasn’t in a good place mentally, and it took months for me to be ready to even think about anything other than the bare minimum for survival.

I happened to glance to my left just as Monroe’s clothing was suddenly completely gone and he was walking toward me in the tub. I sat up, leaning forward to allow him in behind me. There wasn’t any other way he could fit in with me comfortably that I could see. The tub was plenty large enough, but it wasn’t really wide enough for us to sit side by side in it.

“Are you sure you want me behind you?”

I snorted at the question.

“I would think you would be behind me anyway at some point tonight, so yeah, I want you back there.”

Monroe stepped into the tub, and as he sat, the water level rose slightly. When I leaned back again, it was to lie on a solid chest, and I had to go searching for Monroe’s hands to find them. When I did, they were in the water, on the bottom of the tub beside his thighs. I took them, wrapping his arms around my chest, and I sighed when he finally seemed to relax.

“It’s all right to touch me, Monroe. You’ve gone to all of this trouble to set this up for us, and I want you to be comfortable and relaxed.” Well, at least until later. Then, I still wanted him to be comfortable, but relaxed wasn’t what I was hoping for in a bit.

“Tell me if I do something that makes you uncomfortable?”

I nodded. “I will.” I knew he was concerned, and I understood why. I would never be able to forget what happened to me. But I no longer had nightmares, nor did I feel any discomfort or unease in being here with Monroe like this.

His hands slid down the center of my chest a little but quickly moved back up and onto my shoulders. I moaned when he started rubbing them. Monroe chuckled and continued to rub my shoulders. That felt amazing, and I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against Monroe’s shoulder as he continued to do it.

“Someone is finally starting to relax.”

I smiled. “The same could be said about you,” I replied.

“It’s important to me that I don’t overstep.”

I sighed. “I’ll let you know if you do anything that makes me feel uncomfortable. Promise.” I would. But I was getting frustrated, and that wasn’t a good thing. I knew he was being sweet and was only worried about me. But I was ready. I wanted this. We’d spent all day talking about any and everything. I wanted to have my mate and have that

connection that others seemed to have once they were claimed. Why couldn't I have that as well?

“That’s good to know. I’ll take you at your word.” Monroe’s hands moved farther down, and I couldn’t help but moan when they moved to my lower abdomen. With where we were and how we were situated, he couldn’t quite reach my cock, which wasn’t nearly as impressive as his if you asked me, but Monroe seemed to have that figured out already because his hands moved back up my body, to my shoulders, and then down my sides from behind. With the new angle, Monroe’s hands were easily able to reach their intended target, and I couldn’t help but hiss at feeling someone else’s hand around my cock for the first time in a very long time.

“Still good?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” I managed to whisper back. I bit my lower lip hard, hoping the sting would keep me from coming in about ten seconds. It had been so long since I’d felt anything even close to sexual, and now, knowing my mate was the one giving me pleasure, it was too much.

I tasted blood and realized my canines had dropped already and I’d bitten through my lip. I gasped and quickly pushed Monroe’s hand away from my dick, grabbing it at the base as hard as I could to cause a bit more pain in hopes of not coming in the water.

I moved away, turning slightly to look at my mate. He looked...shattered. I shook my head, hoping he’d give me a moment.

“Too good,” I said, panting, trying to get my body under control. “Too long.”

Monroe blinked a few times, tilting his head to the side. “I don’t quite follow.”

“It felt too good.” I took a couple of deep breaths, and when my body stopped tingling, I let go of my cock slowly. It didn’t feel like I was about to orgasm imminently any longer, so I sighed in relief. “It’s been forever since anyone has touched me, Monroe. And it’s you.” I held out a hand, hoping

I'd not broken what we were building. "You're my mate, and my body is going to react to you always. It's how I'm wired. I was going to come. Embarrassingly fast."

Monroe smiled slowly. "So, good things."

I shook my head. "No. I didn't want to already. You need to have pleasure."

"I was. In case you haven't noticed"—Monroe indicated to his own groin, and I got a good look at his hard cock. I'd, of course, felt it on my backside, but I'd not seen it yet. Not hard like that. Now, if only the water wasn't in the way—"I was very much enjoying what we were doing. The point was to relax you?"

"No, the point needs to be not relaxing now. We should be excited?"

Monroe chuckled.

"Just not as excited as I was."

"Or perhaps, get you really excited, and then we move on to even more exciting things once we dry off and go to the bedroom?"

That sounded...logical. And very fulfilling.

"Now I wish I wouldn't have stopped you."

"Well, come back," Monroe said, reaching for me. I went back willingly, and Monroe quickly pulled me back against his chest. I was going to suggest I turn and we could both find some relief together first, but his hand was already wrapped around me again, and when his lips touched my neck, I was a goner, and I simply gave in to the pleasure he was giving me.

"That's it. So beautiful, those noises. I can't wait to hear them in our bed."

That pulled a whimper from me. When Monroe's hand reached the head of my cock, he rubbed it over the tip at the same time he gently bit my neck. That was all it took for my body to overload with pleasure, and I shouted as I came. Monroe groaned against my neck, his body shaking with mine as my body experienced wave after wave of intense pleasure.

It took a moment for me to realize his hand was no longer moving on me but was holding my cock at the base. His lips were kissing up and down the side of my neck, and I could only relax there against him as I slowly became more aware of everything around us.

“That was...over too quickly,” I said. Monroe chuckled against my neck now. He gave it one more kiss, this one a little lingering, before he removed his hand and placed it on my hip.

“There will be more. Many more before the night is over if I have anything to say about it.”

“Yes, please,” I said. It was all I could think to say because who wouldn’t want orgasms with your mate? I definitely did.

“Can I take care of you the same way?” I asked, turning again but this time not moving away from Monroe. His arms moved, and he laced his fingers together in front of my stomach.

“You may. But I came when you did.”

My eyes widened.

“What? I didn’t...how?”

“Well, you didn’t quite realize it, but you were moving your hips in and out a bit, and, well...the friction, combined with being with you, was more than enough to bring me pleasure as well. There won’t be any issues with me pleasing you, so please don’t think it’s over for the night. I have plans, Oscar, and they include you wearing my bite and me yours.”

“Bite? You’re going to bite?”

“I guess I didn’t share that. I apologize. We don’t have an animal side, but we do, for some reason, have canines that drop when we claim our mates. It’s how we mark.”

I thought about that for a moment and couldn’t really make sense of it, so I simply shrugged and went with it.

“Are you ready to get out, then?” I asked.

“I can be. Are you ready to take this further in the bedroom?”

“I am.” I stood, reaching for Monroe, and when we carefully stepped from the tub. I started looking around for a towel, but when I felt a warm breeze cover me, I suddenly felt dry. I didn’t even need to look to my mate to know that he was responsible. He simply took my hand and led me from the bathroom and into our bedroom. In there were more candles, which I’d realized were battery powered, and the bedding had already been turned down. I took a deep breath as I approached the bed with Monroe.

“Thank you, Oscar,” Monroe said, his fingers trailing down the sides of my face.

“For what?”

“For accepting me. Us. For being willing to take on not only me but my siblings, who see me as dad. For trusting me to help with yours. For what we’ve already shared today.”

I smiled up at my mate. He was incredibly charming and sweet. I wasn’t sure how or why exactly, but I wasn’t going to question the reasoning for our pairing. I would instead be forever grateful and live my life to the fullest with Monroe by my side.

“You’re welcome. It’s not been difficult. I know it won’t be easy, but I think we have a pretty good chance to make it work.”

“You do, do you?” Monroe asked, a smile on his face. I placed my hands on his waist and grinned up at him.

“I do. Now, what were you saying about more orgasms?” I asked teasingly.

Monroe raised both eyebrows once, and in a blink, I found myself lying on my back on the bed with my mate beside me.

“Don’t say I didn’t follow through with my promise.” Monroe gently trailed his fingers down the center of my chest until they made it to his intended target. I moaned, but that was cut short when his hand suddenly let go and moved farther down. I knew exactly where this was going, and I wanted to make sure my mate knew I was with him and nobody else while he prepped me for what was yet to come. I opened my

eyes and met his as I threw my left leg out, opening myself up to my mate.

When his fingers found my hole, he seemed a bit surprised that I was already wet. He shouldn't be though. I'd already had one orgasm, and I was with my mate.

“Are you wet for me, Oscar?”

“I am. I'll need to be stretched, but I can do it if I need to.”

Monroe shook his head slowly, and when his finger swirled around, then slipped inside without hesitation, my mouth opened a bit as I took a deep breath at the new sensation of my mate getting me ready for him.

CHAPTER 9

MONROE



It was taking all I had in me to remain calm enough to not rush. My body was on overload, despite the orgasm I'd had in the tub with Oscar. I wanted this to be a memorable experience for him, and that meant I needed to get myself under control and not rush either of us.

“You are truly amazing, you know that?” I said as I slowly moved one finger in and out of Oscar's body. He was slick but tight, and that told me it had been quite some time since anything had happened with regards to penetration. I understood though, and I wanted to ensure my mate that I could and would be patient with him and his needs no matter what.

I continued to slowly move my finger in and out of Oscar, stretching him slower than I would have thought, but I didn't exactly have experience. I knew it took several fingers, but Oscar didn't seem to be relaxing like I'd read about.

“Am I hurting you?” I asked quietly.

“No.”

The answer was quick and short, and I could tell that although he wasn't lying, he wasn't exactly being truthful either.

“Are you uncomfortable? Can I do something else you like?”

Oscar sighed and then looked toward me. “Could you kiss me?”

I grinned and moved in for another kiss. When our lips touched, the tingles in my body seemed to center on where we were touching, and not only did my body start to heat again, but Oscar's seemed to relax. I added a second finger easily, and when I pushed my tongue gently against his, I slowly moved my fingers inward. I matched the same movements and was rewarded with a loud moan from Oscar. I smiled against his mouth before I pushed my tongue back into it.

I encountered a canine and grinned again, wondering how long it would take for them to make an appearance, and now I had my answer.

Again and again, I moved my fingers in and out of Oscar's body while dueling against his tongue and flicking mine against his canines, which appeared to be incredibly sensitive.

After several minutes, Oscar turned his head to the side and gasped for a breath of air. "Monroe, I'm ready," he said after turning back toward me.

"Are you sure?" I did not wish to hurt him. I never did.

"Yes. I need more," Oscar told me. I nodded and slowly pulled my fingers from him. I'd managed to get three in him, and although I wasn't as large as I knew some alpha shifters most likely were, nor did I have a knot, I knew that I was slightly thicker than my three fingers were.

I wrapped my fingers around my cock, using Oscar's slick to lube it a bit, and then used magic to clean my hand before I moved in between his legs.

"Is this position all right?"

"It's perfect. I would love to see you. And it's easiest to exchange bites this way."

I nodded in agreement. Since we were both going to bite to claim one another, this was indeed the best position. For now, at least. The night was young, and we had all night to spend together.

I grabbed ahold of my cock, and after placing it at Oscar's hole, I applied a little bit of pressure before I raised my eyes to look at my mate. He was biting his lower lip, and I stopped

immediately, concerned that I was either hurting him or this wasn't going to happen tonight.

“Don't stop.” Oscar took a deep breath and looked at me. “It's been a while, and I need to relax. I'll think about your kisses because they're wonderful, and they worked earlier.”

“Maybe if I moved to the side and I could reach your mouth?”

Oscar shook his head. “You'll be able to kiss me again just as soon as you get past that outer barrier. I'm more relaxed now. Promise.”

“I don't wish to cause you pain or any type of discomfort, Oscar.”

“I'll let you know. I will,” Oscar said reassuringly.

I took him at his word and lined back up, this time adding a bit more pressure in hopes of getting in enough to where I could move over his body and go back to kissing him. I suddenly had an idea, and although I wasn't sure if I should or not, I used a little magic to help that particular area relax a bit. I knew I'd been found out immediately because Oscar commented on the sudden tingle he felt down there seconds before my cockhead slipped in.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing that will harm you. I just used a little magic to relax your muscle.”

Oscar grinned. “I like it. The tingle is a nice touch.”

I gently moved forward, lying down on top of my mate now that other parts of me were where they would need to be for what was about to come next.

I moved my hips forward a bit, and Oscar continued to stare at me, his expression one of happiness. “Better?” I asked.

“Not bad at all. How are you doing? Are you all right?”

I nodded. I was about to explode, but I was determined to make this as best as I could for my mate, and that meant I needed to hold off for a while yet. I leaned down onto my

arms, putting myself close enough to Oscar that I could finally kiss him again. When I did, his arms immediately wrapped around my back under my arms, and he held on, pulling at me. I took the hint and pushed my hips forward a bit more, and that was all it seemed to take: Oscar's body completely relaxed, and I slid all the way in, my hips touching his.

I held still, waiting to both calm down myself and let Oscar adjust to me. It was a bit difficult to get myself under control because Oscar felt absolutely amazing. His body perfectly encased mine, and it had to be true that we were made for each other.

"I'm good now," Oscar said. "You can move."

I couldn't help but chuckle a little. "I wish I could. I'm afraid that if I do, this will be over rather quickly."

"The next round can end whenever. We'll be able to go again and again. That's a benefit of being a paranormal and with our mate," Oscar told me. I knew he was right, but I still wanted to make this round last longer than thirty seconds. We would only get to claim each other once, and I wanted it to be both special and memorable.

I took a few deep breaths, trying my best to once again calm my body enough to continue. When I finally felt at ease, I moved my hips back and then reversed and pushed forward. I closed my eyes, and Oscar moaned.

By the third thrust, I knew I was fighting a losing battle, and I slid my hands under Oscar, placing one hand under his neck and the other under his head while my hips continued to slowly move back and forth, my cock sliding easily in and out of my mate. When I finally got around to kissing my mate again, he moaned into my mouth loudly. I wasn't at all surprised when I encountered a sharp canine on either side, and when I searched farther, there were the bottom ones.

I felt my own canines start tingling but didn't focus on them dropping. I couldn't because if I did, I would lose what little focus I had and I'd end up biting Oscar, and that would be the end of what we were sharing.

Oscar seemed to take that choice away from me, though, when he suddenly pulled his mouth from mine and buried his face in my neck. He pulled my head closer to his, and when I felt his canines scrape against my neck where it met my shoulder, all hope of holding out was lost. That little tingle magnified at the touch of his canines; I couldn't hold back any longer and let go. I felt my cock swell slightly and then groaned against Oscar's neck as I came. Instinctively, I opened my mouth and bit, instantly tasting blood and then pulling my teeth from Oscar's neck.

He shouted into the room at the same time warm wetness covered my stomach, and then his own teeth found my neck, and I felt a sudden pinch, followed by an instant calm. That didn't last long, though, because the calm was replaced with a gentle hum that I knew was my connection to Oscar's aura talking to my own.

My body suddenly felt heavy, and my arms started to shake, so when I felt Oscar pull his canines from my neck, I rolled to my right, taking my mate with me to where he was now on top of me. He let out a squeak, which was adorable and brought a sleepy smile to my face. Seconds later, his tongue lapped at my neck, and I realized he'd not closed the bite, but when I felt the skin pull shut, my smile grew.

Oscar collapsed on top of me, and I moved my hands down his body, holding him close to me, and sighed. I used magic to cover us with a blanket and felt my body growing drowsier by the second.

"That was...give me five minutes, and I'll try to do it all over again, this time better though." I felt a sudden sharp pain in my side. "Ouch." I opened my eyes and looked at my glaring mate. "What did you pinch me for?"

"Because you're being obtuse. There was nothing wrong with that claiming, and I'll do it again if you continue saying there was something wrong with it. Not everyone needs or wants an hour-long fucking session."

An hour long? I hadn't ever really thought about it too much. Did people have sex for an hour at a time? Like, the

actual sex? I knew that the foreplay and the cuddles after could easily put things into that time frame, but the actual act?

“You’re thinking way too hard about how long people have sex for. Your thoughts are completely open to me,” Oscar said.

I looked up at him. “I have nothing to compare this to. You know that. Of course, I’d been forced to hear my parents go at it, but I never timed them. Nor did I really want to hear them. I always left the house if at all possible.”

Oscar shuddered. “Yeah, no. I don’t want to think about that either. I mean, I get it. My parents had sex. I’m now having sex with my mate. And we’ll have kids soon enough. But it’s different when it’s your parents and they were shit parents.”

I thought about that for a moment and nodded. That was very true. We both had shit parents. Unfortunately, after two intense orgasms and now talking about our parents and how horrible they were, the inevitable happened, and my cock slipped from Oscar’s body as it softened. He and I both felt it, and then he made a face seconds before I realized why. I chuckled and used a bit of magic to clean us up. The cum between us had started to cool and become an uncomfortable mess. When it was suddenly gone, as well as the other larger amount that was coming from elsewhere, Oscar sighed.

“That’s very nice. Seriously, that’s definitely the way to go. No more having to get up for a warm cloth and then a dry one.” I chuckled again. Oscar rolled off me and to my side, but he didn’t go far. His head was on my shoulder, his leg thrown over mine and his arm across my stomach. “Can we take a nap now? It’s been a crazy long day, and it’s night, right? That means we can go to sleep for a little while and then wake up and do this all over again?”

“We can if that’s what you want,” I told him. I used magic to clean up all of the battery-powered candles that were around the bedroom and bathroom, as well as drain the water from the tub. I made sure the entire house was sorted, locked up, and ready for the night.

Oscar sighed next to me again, and I couldn't help but grin. "Monroe?"

"Hmm?" His voice was sleepy and a bit muffled with how he was lying, but he was so very close, and I could hear him perfectly fine.

"Why does your bite tingle? It's not painful, but it feels almost like there's something on it that's gently vibrating."

I smiled into the darkness. "That's my aura. It will always be with you in that way. It will connect me to you, allow me to always come to you if you call out, and it will change in intensity according to my mood."

I felt Oscar lift his head a bit, and then he moved up onto his elbow. It was inky in the room, but I knew he was staring down at me.

"What do you mean?"

"If I get aroused, it'll vibrate faster, more intense. If I'm sleeping, it'll be quieter and slower."

"Oh." Oscar was quiet for a moment before he decided to lie back down. I realized that he most likely could see me in the dark, but I couldn't see him. Not that it mattered. He was touching me, and I could feel him beside me. "Will it ever hurt?" he asked, his voice once more a bit muffled because he was lying on my chest now.

I tightened my arms around him again, giving him a tight squeeze. "I, of course, have no personal experience. But I've heard that the only time it hurts is when the fae mate loses their life. It will flash painfully, but then it will essentially... die," I told him for lack of a better word.

"What do you mean die? It's not living, right?"

"No. But if the fae mate is no longer living, the bite doesn't have the connection to the fae's aura to connect to any longer. I'm told it's just a quick flash and then nothing. No more feeling from it."

Oscar was quiet for a long moment. "That's so sad. I don't want mine to stop. I know I've just gotten it only minutes ago,

but the thought of it not being there any longer, of me not having that connection to you, it makes my wolf howl in pain.”

I squeezed Oscar tightly. “I’m not going anywhere. We’re going to have a very long life together. We’ll figure everything out as we go. We’ll finish raising our siblings, make sure they are happy and are good people. We’ll raise a kid or two together, and we’ll spend our lives caring for one another.” I’d almost stumbled and said loving one another, but I didn’t want to put pressure on my mate. Did I love him? No, not yet. Not really. I was certainly incredibly attracted to him. I was falling, fast. It wouldn’t take long for me to completely fall in love with him. He was incredible, despite everything he’d been through. He’d put his siblings first, and that showed how good of a person he was. That was a lesson I’d learned the hard way. But I’d learned it, and now I had Mason and Maelie.

“Two. Maybe three. We’ll have to see.”

I grinned. “If you want fifteen, I might question your reasoning, but I know I’d not be able to tell you no.” I felt Oscar move. “Ouch,” I shouted again.

“You deserved that pinch too. Two. Maybe three,” he said, his voice getting slower as he became sleepier.

“Two. Maybe three. That’s a good number. Two is a really good number because then we’re not outnumbered.”

Oscar sighed. “We’re already outnumbered. You have two, I have two. Why not have two together?”

“Perfect.” I turned my head a bit, kissed the top of Oscar’s head, and closed my eyes. “We’ll have two.” I felt Oscar nod subtly, and then he dozed off. The noise from his mind that he’d been projecting toward me quieted, and I wondered if he even knew he had been doing it.

I lay there, holding my newly claimed mate, and wondered what tomorrow would bring for us. Would chaos ensue as soon as we brought our siblings into the fold? Would Oscar adjust to being up on the mountain and not having to work two jobs?

My mate was a shifter, and he'd even mentioned it earlier during one of our many talks. He was going to go into heat. Fae had heats as well. Ours tended to be incredibly intense. But we were highly sexual beings. Couldn't that be said for all paranormals though? It was my understanding that they all basically wanted the same thing: to find our forever mate and live a happy and fulfilling life.

I had my mate. I already had a family but would be adding to it with Oscar. I already knew that despite his mind being completely open to me, I wasn't going to peek. He could share his experiences with me if he so chose. I didn't need to know. It wouldn't change how I felt about my mate. I was going to love and care for him, despite his past. I just hoped that once he peeked into my memories and saw just how arrogant and self-centered I was, he'd find it in his heart to move past that and see me for who I was now and not then. I wasn't that person any longer. Would he realize that and give himself to me completely?

I knew I couldn't dwell on the past, so I closed my eyes and did my best to shut down my own overthinking brain and tried to fall asleep. I had a feeling that tomorrow would bring new and interesting things to our lives. I hoped to be ready for whatever it was we would be facing—together.

CHAPTER 10

OSCAR



I was warm. And there was an arm wrapped around my waist and a very warm body behind me. Monroe. I grinned at the thought of my mate being behind me. I waited a moment and felt absolutely no panic. Nothing. I glanced around the bedroom, and although the windows had blinds on them, they weren't closed, and I could tell it was early morning. We'd slept all night, and I realized that for the first time in a very long time, I felt refreshed and actually rested.

"Do you always wake up and think about how well you did or didn't sleep the night before?" Monroe asked, his voice still very sleepy.

"Only on the morning after I was claimed by my mate and I finally feel like I got enough sleep."

Monroe's arm tightened around me seconds before his lips touched my shoulder. "You should always get enough sleep. Sadly, I will say that once Mae is with us, our sleep will most likely be interrupted."

I grinned. "Mae. And then when we have our own, we won't be sleeping through the night for a while." I rolled to my back, Monroe's arm letting go enough so I could move positions and I could look at my mate. I grinned at him when he opened his eyes a bit. "Good morning, handsome."

Monroe's grin grew. "Morning. How are you feeling? You're not sore, are you?"

I shook my head. We, of course, claimed each other and then dozed off. We woke twice more in the night and had a repeat of earlier activities, and I would highly recommend each of them. Monroe might have been a virgin yesterday morning, but he no longer was, and he really knew how to move his hips. And he was incredibly talented with his hands.

“I’m feeling amazing, actually.” My stomach growled just then, and we both chuckled.

“Sounds like you need to be fed.” Monroe kissed my shoulder again, then rolled to his own back.

“I should probably empty my bladder first, but yeah, maybe we could go find something to eat?”

“We can. I will make whatever you wish.”

“You don’t have to,” I told him. “I can cook.” I sat up, and when I tossed the covers aside, I actually shivered a bit at the drastic difference between the warmth under the covers and the air in the room. Hmm, we would probably need to adjust the thermostat because Monroe was a fae, as were Mason and Maelie. They would need it to be warmer in the house than I would. Same as Joseph and Hailey. We all had our wolf halves to help keep us warmer.

I hurried to the bathroom, and when I was relieving my bladder, Monroe knocked on the door. “When you’re finished, I’ll fix breakfast.”

I looked over my shoulder and could see just part of my mate standing just outside the bathroom door. “Why are you standing out there? Do you not need to go?” I asked, seconds before flushing the toilet.

“I do, but I didn’t wish to intrude.”

I closed my eyes to keep from rolling them. “We’re mated. I would say that within a week’s time, there will be absolutely zero shyness or uncertainty left between us,” I told him. “Come on in. I’m not shy, but if you are, I hope you get over it soon,” I added.

Monroe came into the bathroom, and I watched as he hesitated behind me where I was washing my hands.

“I’m not shy. I’m...trying. It’s all new.”

I nodded. “Yes, it is. We’ve been thrown together, and we have very little time to make us work before we have to go back to being parents. It’s going to be crazy and hectic, but we’ll figure it out.”

Monroe flushed and then went to the other sink, and he, too, washed his hands. “What did you mean when you mentioned about within a week’s time.”

“Oh. That I’m most likely going to go into heat, and, well, that’s going to leave absolutely no room for either of us to be shy about anything. There is nothing even remotely fun about heats. They’re messy, intense, and without a mate, they’re really not enjoyable. You’re my mate, my alpha, essentially. I hope that you’ll take care of me during it?”

Monroe moved closer to me, and I felt a whisper move along my body and then the light weight of clothing. I glanced down and saw that I was wearing sweatpants and a shirt now. Monroe was wearing much the same, and his finger touched under my chin to raise my face to meet his.

“Of course I’ll take care of you during your heat. And any other time. Always. When you’re pregnant and are craving something, I’ll provide that for you. If you happen to get sick, I’ll take care of you during that. I’m here for everything, my mate. All of the good and the not so good.”

I smiled again and really wanted to fire my stomach because just as Monroe was leaning down to give me a kiss, my stomach growled quite loudly. Instead of my kiss, my mate stood, and I felt my protesting stomach doing flip-flops. Where we had just been standing in our bathroom, we were now down in the kitchen.

“What would you like?” Monroe asked as he moved over to the refrigerator. “There’s eggs, of course. There is bread for toast, fruit, some...” Monroe pulled out a container and held it out.

“Yogurt. It’s good with the fruit. Would you like me to make breakfast?”

Monroe shook his head.

“How about you do what you would normally do for breakfast? I usually grab a bowl of cereal and call it good. Oh, and maybe coffee if I have time. I usually try to have time, but I don’t always wake up when I should, and most mornings, I’m running late.” I cringed a bit about that. I was most likely going to lose both of my jobs. It wasn’t that I was going to really be upset. I wasn’t, and they wouldn’t really miss me. Not really.

“Eggs. Fruit, and you said the yogurt is good with it. Toast.” Monroe held up a package of sausage. “How is this cooked, and why do I feel it’s for breakfast?”

“You didn’t have pigs?”

“We had cows, goats, chickens, and there were wild boars. Which are pigs, no?”

I nodded as I moved over to Monroe. “You slice it into patties, and it’s usually fried in a pan. It’s pork sausage with spices. Sage especially, and it’s absolutely delicious.”

Monroe nodded, tossed the sausage over my head, and then closed the refrigerator. “Did you want tea?”

I nodded. “I drink tea. There’s a coffeepot here though. Did you want coffee, or are you a tea drinker?”

“I drink tea. I can do coffee for you if that’s what you prefer.”

I shook my head and reopened the door to the fridge and pulled out the carton of orange juice I’d seen in there. “This will do. You tossed the sausage. Where did it go?” I asked as I pulled down a cup. “Did you want orange juice?”

Monroe nodded. “Yes, please. And the sausage is with everything else on the table.”

I nodded absently as I grabbed another glass. When I turned toward the table, I froze. I was really expecting the ingredients to be there, but they weren’t. No, on the table were full plates of food. How had I not scented them?

“You...wow, okay. So you just toss things, and they magically make breakfast? Or whatever?”

“They can. I can actually cook, and I’m pretty good at it. We don’t have magical powers until puberty, much like you start shifting then. We all learn to cook and clean just like everyone else. I still do things the non-magical way most of the time. Sometimes, though, some mornings just call for a quick magical breakfast.”

I moaned when I moved closer and could actually scent the food. “In my experience, most mornings end up being magical breakfast mornings. Sadly, I don’t have magic like that. Which is why I grab a bowl of cereal. Or if I’m really behind, I’ll take a bagel and a cup of coffee on my way out the door.”

I could feel Monroe’s irritation through our bond and tried to give him a look that said I was sorry.

“We’ll have to work on things. Especially that.” Monroe pulled out my chair and gave me an expectant look.

I sighed and sat down. “Working two jobs, one that I don’t get home from until three or so in the morning and then having to wake up at six to get to my other job, doesn’t leave much time for sleep.” I poured two glasses of juice and placed one over near Monroe’s steaming mug of tea. It smelled nice, and I peeked at it, wondering what was so different about it.

“Would you like a tea as well?”

“Do you mind?”

Monroe shook his head. “I will never mind. And we will need to discuss your jobs sometime very soon. You know I’ve already said you can work or not. But being gone for so long during the day, and now I realize evening and into the night, I feel that I can be fair when I say one has to go, preferably the one that keeps you out half of the night.”

A mug of tea had appeared in front of my plate, and I picked it up, taking a deep breath of it and smiling. It really did smell wonderful. “I am not upset about that at all, and I am in agreement with you. I’ll also go so far as to say you don’t really have to worry about it at all because most likely I’m

going to lose both of my positions because I'm not going to be there for a week or more, and they'll just replace me. I'm not really a key person in either place."

Monroe stared at me for a moment before he gave me a somewhat sad smile. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for our mating to cause you to lose your source of income. I know how much you've stressed about that. I've not only seen it in certain memories that you've shared with me, but you've also mentioned it when discussing your siblings."

"You and our mating haven't caused me to lose my jobs." I shrugged. "They weren't exactly great ones to begin with, and the turnover is pretty high in both places." I could find another job. I'd ask around up here on the mountain. I knew that the council was hiring, and it had been mentioned to me more than once. I just hadn't wanted to work here. Circumstances had changed though. "What would you like to do today?" I asked, hoping to change the subject. We'd just claimed one another. The last thing I wanted was for Monroe to feel responsible for me losing my jobs. It was going to have to happen anyway. I was bound to end up pregnant, and, well, when you worked with humans, you didn't get to work with them when you ended up pregnant and couldn't hide that fact.

"I have nothing to do," Monroe told me. "Would you like to go for a walk? We could look around the mountain again. Maybe you could shift, and I'll follow you around? I'd love to meet your wolf."

I grinned. I would like that too. But he needed to understand that if we did that, I would be going into heat really soon. It had happened to almost everyone I knew.

"I would like for you to meet my wolf. He likes that idea as well. But you should realize that if we do that today, most likely, I'll go into heat within the next day."

Monroe nodded slowly. "I'm prepared to take care of you during that. Fae have heats as well, remember? We talked about that."

I sighed and glanced out the window that was beside the table. It looked like there was a bit more snow today than

yesterday. “If I go into heat and we...you know. I’ll likely get pregnant.”

“I understand. I can use protection. I’m sure there’s someone here we can discuss that with?” I could tell that Monroe didn’t understand what I was saying, and he was upset about what he thought I was implying. I shook my head at my mate.

“Not what I was saying. I don’t mind having a child with you right away. It’s how things happen to work for paranormals. Wolves have shorter gestations—only four months.”

Monroe smiled. “I’m all right with that. We’ll be busy. We’re already going to be busy with Mason and Maelie. Add in another little one, maybe that’s something you want to hold off on?”

I didn’t. Not really. I had a mate now, and he had been nothing but amazing to me so far. Granted, it had only been a day, but still. But I wanted to be selfish for once. I wanted to put myself first because I’d been through so much over the last several years. Didn’t I deserve to have happiness? Have the things I wanted for a change and not what someone else wanted?

“I’m ready. I’m not as old as some. But I’m thirty-four. I would like to start our family together.”

Monroe’s smile grew. “Then I say we go for a walk. We’ll find somewhere for you to shift, and then we’ll explore the mountaintop. We’ll run and play in the snow, and then when we get cold, we can come back here and find a way to warm each other up.” Monroe winked at me, and I didn’t know why, but my cheeks heated, and I looked down at the table. I knew exactly what he was implying, and I certainly wouldn’t say no to spending more time in bed with my mate. In fact, why couldn’t we just skip the running in the snow and go right back to bed? That sounded so much more appealing.

Monroe obviously knew what I was thinking about. I wasn’t trying to hide any of my thoughts, emotions, or memories from him. I wanted to be completely open and

transparent with him. I'd not yet been able to actually talk to him through our bond, but I'd not really tried either.

"We can skip going out for a walk. It's not expected that we go out as far as I understand."

I chuckled while shaking my head. "No. Most mated couples don't emerge for at least a week, sometimes more. We're not most mated couples though, and I'm not sure how long we'll have to spend together before life is going to demand we return to reality."

"True. So we should make the most of things while we still can, should we not?" Monroe stood and held out a hand. I took it, more than willing to go wherever it was that he wanted. "I only ask that you do show me your wolf. Even if we don't leave the house, I would love to meet him. It has been explained to me that if you should go into heat and things work out like fate intends, you could become pregnant, and it's possible that it will be months before I could meet him. Not that I would be upset with you if that was the way things happened. I wouldn't. But I'd like to meet him if at all possible."

Since I was still sitting while holding my mate's hand, I stood and led him to the other room. The mess from breakfast would be taken care of later, either by Monroe or me. Or both.

"I can shift for you. Did you want me to do it in the house? I'm not a large wolf. I'm an omega, and basically, I look like a juvenile wolf even though I'm full grown."

Monroe gave me a smile while he brought his hands up to my face. "I know your wolf is going to be just as beautiful as you are, no matter how large or small he is. I'm just thrilled that you are going to show him to me. That you trust me enough to share that side with me."

I reached for Monroe, pulled his face down closer to mine, and gave him a quick kiss. When he lingered, I readily opened for him because already, I couldn't get enough of his kisses. I knew I'd spend the rest of our lives together, continually wanting Monroe to kiss me. I'd never much cared for them in the past, but with Monroe, it was different.

He quickly pulled away, his lips coming back for one gentle peck before he stood up completely and moved his hands from my face to my arms. He slid them down, lacing our fingers together.

“I’m not sure what the kiss was for, but I won’t complain,” Monroe said.

“Just because I wanted to. I like kissing you,” I told him.

“That is quite mutual.” Monroe gave me a serious look. “Are you all right?”

“Yep,” I told him. I took a step back and pulled my shirt off over my head. Then I pushed down my pants and grinned. Monroe was openly looking at me, and I wasn’t going to cover up. I will admit that it made me feel good that my mate openly appreciated what he saw when he looked at me. I was an omega, but I was an incredibly slim one. I looked a lot younger than I was, and despite everything I tried, I just couldn’t seem to put on any sort of muscle mass. Not that I wanted to be incredibly ripped like some alphas. I just didn’t want to be skinny.

“You can open the door and we can go outside if you want, but my wolf isn’t large,” I told him as I knelt down. I called for my wolf, who was only too happy to come out and meet our mate. I shifted quickly, happy that although I didn’t shift daily, I did often enough that it didn’t hurt. I felt the hair on my body tingle and then my bones and muscles transforming.

The room changed, and I blinked several times before realizing that it was actually me that had changed, not the room. I stood, stretched long and leisurely, before I sat and looked up at Monroe. I knew what my wolf looked like. I’d stared at him many times in the mirror. I looked a lot like a scraggly dog, in my opinion.

Monroe dropped to his knees and then reached for me. I stood, my tail immediately wagging as I closed the small distance between us. I felt my mate’s fingers in my fur, and then his face was buried in my neck. “You’re so much softer than I would have thought. And you’re more blond than anything else.”

I was. I was a timber wolf but had very little black in my coat. And what was gray and brown on my siblings' coats was blond on mine.

"My mom," I tried to tell him through our bond.

"Your mom? What about her?"

I sat up straighter and looked at my mate. *"You heard me?"*

Monroe nodded.

"My mom. She was from the north somewhere. I'm not sure where. She was a blond wolf, much like I am. She was almost completely cream colored though. I have a little bit of black and some brown like my father. My coloring comes mostly from my mom."

"Well, you're gorgeous. Even if you looked like the traditional gray wolves I've seen pictures of at Alpha Forest's, I would still find you incredibly striking."

My wolf was proud to hear that from our mate. I moved closer, knocking Monroe back onto his backside, and crawled into his lap. He laughed while wrapping his arms around me tightly.

"Don't take this wrong. I think Mason is going to go crazy when he sees you in this form."

I sniffed Monroe's neck, locating the claiming bite under the shirt he was wearing. *"He might not see me like this for a while. But I know Joseph will shift for him. Joseph is what you'd call a traditional gray wolf."* Like Monroe had mentioned, if I ended up pregnant in the next week, I wouldn't be able to shift. It wouldn't be until next spring that I'd finally be able to shift again. But my siblings would be able to.

"He's going to love all of you." Monroe found that perfect spot behind my ears and started rubbing. I groaned until it should be embarrassing. I sighed in my wolf form and looked at my mate. I needed to be back in my other form so I could spend time with him.

I promised my wolf we'd come out more often, especially since I would have more time now. He agreed and quickly let my human half return to be with our mate.

"I'll gladly let both of them crawl all over me when I can. Later though," I said, throwing my arms around my mate's neck. He lay back, and completely seamlessly, we went from the living room to our bedroom—Monroe just as naked as I was. It was going to be amazing having a mate that knew what I wanted and desired those same things just as much as I did.

CHAPTER II

MONROE



I was nervous. I knew I had every right to be, and I definitely was. Anxious as well. I'd been mated for almost two weeks now. It had been an incredible two weeks. It truly had. The first day was, of course, life-changing. I had thought I would have to wait for some time for Oscar to agree to our claiming one another, but he hadn't. I was, of course, grateful for that.

Shortly after that first amazing night together, Oscar woke me groaning. He was burning up and covered in sweat—he was in heat. His heats, I'd discovered, would rival those of a fae. Intense didn't really describe it well. It was five very long, tiring days and nights of intense need from him. I did all I could to meet his every need: physical, sexual, mental, and emotional.

After his heat finally broke, we spent close to two days recovering. Oscar was incredibly weak, and although I recovered much quicker than he did, I wasn't going to leave my mate when he still needed me. I never would. When he finally felt strong enough to leave our bed, we simply moved from the bedroom to the living room. I often started a fire in the fireplace, and we would spend time cuddling on the couch. I could and did spend hours holding Oscar while watching the flames dance on the logs or the snow falling outside.

But we'd claimed each other twelve days ago. Oscar and I had spent as much time in our little bubble as we could. Not only was I starting to feel guilty about being away from Maelie and Mason for so long, but I also knew they were quite

a handful, and I'd basically up and left them with strangers. I knew they would be well cared for, but I was really starting to miss them. Oscar picked up on it, and he, too, had voiced concerns about leaving his sister with Alpha Forest for so long. He wasn't worried about his brother since Joseph hadn't shown any signs of rebellion at all.

Which brought us to the present. We were going through a mental checklist of all of the things we felt needed to be covered before we picked up our siblings. It was going to be an interesting day. We had to introduce the older ones to the younger ones as well as get everyone settled. I wasn't overly worried about Mason or Maelie. They were young and were quite adaptable. Oscar was anxious about Hailey though, and in turn, that made me nervous.

"We should just go, shouldn't we?" Oscar asked suddenly. He was so incredibly on edge. I closed the distance between us, but instead of just pulling him into my arms, I reached down and picked my mate up. His legs immediately wrapped around my waist, and I held on while burying my face in his neck. I gave it a few quick kisses before I sighed.

"It'll be all right, you know. We're a team, and I'd say that over the past several days, we have done an amazing job at working together on things."

I felt Oscar relax, which was exactly what I wanted. I didn't like that he was stressing about what was about to happen. Sure, I wasn't exactly unconcerned, but it would do no good to stress to the point of making himself sick.

"We'll work things out, Oscar. We have others to help, and it'll be all right. I know I keep telling you that, but that's because I truly believe it will be."

I felt Oscar nod his head against my shoulder. He had his arms wrapped around my neck and shoulders, but his face was buried in my neck now.

"Hey, look at me, please?" Oscar moved, and when his eyes met mine, I pulled him in for a quick kiss. "It'll be all right. Don't worry so much. The stress isn't good for anyone, but especially not you right now."

That brought a smile to my mate's face. It was incredibly fast, but I'd used a bit of magic yesterday morning, and, well, Oscar would make both of us daddies come April sometime. We were excited, of course, but there was certainly some worry. We were already busy. Whereas I honestly wasn't overly worried about taking care of a newborn again, I knew Oscar didn't have any experience with it. I would be there for my mate as much as possible though. Even if I happened to be at work, I would still be there for him.

"How about we go collect our siblings and bring them home? We'll see about getting everyone settled and go from there. Sound good?"

Oscar nodded again, then dropped his legs. He gave me a quick hug before stepping back and looking up at me.

"I'm ready. I really hope your siblings like me. I know Joseph will love you, but Hailey..."

I stopped his train of thought with a finger on his lips. "It's all right. I'll tell you now that with the way Mason and Maelie came up to you right away, they're going to accept you immediately. As for Hailey, I'm not worried about her liking me or not. It doesn't matter. She doesn't have to because you are my mate—not her. Sure, it would make life easier, but I'm not going to be too overly concerned about it."

Oscar nodded slowly. "You're right, of course. I've spent what's felt like forever trying to make her happy, and I just...I want to be greedy and worry about making myself happy for a change."

"As you should. You've more than earned the privilege of being selfish in this case. Let me spoil you, let my siblings love you, and we'll make a family together."

Oscar sighed as he leaned his head against my chest. "That sounds amazing and wonderful, but I'm afraid that it'll never happen."

I raised his face to look at me with a finger under his chin. "Only if you don't allow it. But it will happen. Trust me on that."

Oscar nodded again.

“Good. Now, let’s go collect Mason and Maelie. We’ll have to figure out the older two later since they’re in school.”

“I texted Joseph last night and gave him the new address. He’s going to come up here with the others after school. He said he’d bring Hailey with him.”

“Did he say anything else?” Why hadn’t Oscar told me this?

“No. He said it was best if I talked to her in person because although she’s not as bad as she was, she’s still not her old self.”

I was trying not to be frustrated. I didn’t want to argue with my mate, especially over small things. “If you want me to talk to them, I’m willing. I know I’m not really a *father figure* to most, but I’ll be the best I can.”

Oscar tugged on my waist, pulling me toward the front door. “I know you will. And I’ve seen your memories of you with Mason and Mae. You are an amazing father figure, and you’re going to continue being one. They’re young; they need us. My brother and sister though, they need good, strong, older brothers to guide them these last few years until they go off to college or wherever.”

We were at the front door now. “I can agree with that. Are you ready? I thought I’d just poof us down to the alpha’s house.”

“Oh, that’s even better. You can poof us back here with their things, right?”

I nodded while raising an eyebrow at my mate. “You mean like I did for all of your things? Yes, I can magick them back here.”

Oscar groaned. “Sorry. I’m really nervous. I want this to work, you know?”

“Oscar, my sweet, adorable mate,” I said, pulling him in for a hug. “It’ll work. If it wasn’t going to work, the fates wouldn’t have paired you with me. I understand how much

stress you've been under. I've seen the memories, seen what you were going through. That all stops here and now. It'll be all right. If there are issues, we have a community that will be helpful."

I'd had a couple of quick conversations with Alpha Forest with regards to Hailey. We both had, actually. She'd spent a few days with Alpha Forest and his mate but then had been taken by the fates elsewhere. She was back now though, and I wasn't sure what happened, but it would be interesting to see how things were going to go.

"It's just been stressful, you know. And now that we have each other, but it's a lot all at once. Most couples have just them and then their baby, but we have our siblings."

"It'll be all right. I'm just appreciative that you're willing to help with mine. You don't have to, you know. They have spots in the daycare waiting for them."

Oscar glared. He and I had discussed it several times in the past few days. He would not be going back to work. Instead, he would focus on getting back into his art, and he would be jumping in with Maelie and Mason full-time while I was at work. He knew they could be taken to the daycare if needed, but he wanted to truly become their other dad if at all possible. I was certain that wasn't going to be an issue at all.

"We are not having that discussion again. Not now. Let's go get them and spend the day with them, trying to get at least the two younger ones settled before my brother and sister are here."

"I am on board with that," I told him. Since I already had my arms wrapped around him, I simply teleported us to the side door of Alpha Forest's place. I knew it was secluded enough that we wouldn't be seen from the street, and after Oscar got his bearings, he looked up at me in surprise.

"That's really convenient."

"Always," I told him. I'd used magic more in the past two weeks than I had in the last several months. But I had discovered that it truly was the easiest way to move things

from off the mountain to it and to take care of my mate. It was a known fact that fae used magic when dealing with heats. I knew it could be done without, but I honestly wouldn't have wanted to try.

I pulled Oscar closer and moved the final few steps to the door and knocked. It opened seconds later, and although I didn't know who was standing there, Oscar apparently did.

“Rene, it's so good to see you again.”

“Oscar, come in. You don't even have a coat,” he said, pulling Oscar into the house and giving me a glare over my mate's head.

I entered behind my mate, keeping my hands on his shoulders.

“We were only outside for not even half a minute, Rene. I wasn't cold even a little.”

Another look at me over my mate's head. I wasn't sure how that was even possible, really, because the omega wolf in front of us wasn't much taller than my mate.

“Dad, leave them alone. Monroe probably poofed them here from their own house up on the mountain,” Alpha Forest said.

“I did, actually,” I said, holding out my hand to shake Alpha Forest's. “I can't tell you how much I appreciate what you and your mate have done for not only me but Oscar these past two weeks.”

“No,” Rene said. “You're here to take the babies?” Rene asked.

“Dad...” Alpha Forest said, a warning tone to his voice. “You knew they were only here temporarily and that their parents were coming for them soon.”

Rene looked to Alpha Forest. “Yes, but you said parents. I know Oscar isn't a parent.”

Alpha Forest sighed. “Excuse him. He's quite attached to little Mae. She's such a sweetheart and has won over

everyone. Mason loves his trucks and hanging out with the boys and Cora.”

“I hope he wasn’t a pest to them,” I told Alpha Forest.

“No, not at all.” Alpha Forest looked to his dad. “Dad, Monroe is raising his two youngest siblings like Oscar is. They’re going up to the mountain now because that’s where they live.”

“But...”

“No,” Alpha Forest said. “You will have to get onto one of my siblings about giving you another little grandbaby. Or maybe you should think about volunteering at the childcare center. There’s one here and one up at the council.”

That seemed to really light up Rene’s eyes. He nodded and left the room, talking to himself quietly about how he could make all the cookies for the kids. I wasn’t sure what that was about, but when I looked back to Alpha Forest, he was shaking his head.

“He’s harmless. He loves all of his grandkids, all of them. But my siblings and I seem to be at a place where we’re not having more, and he’s become a bit grumbly.”

“Did he spoil Mason with cookies the past two weeks?” Oscar asked.

“He tried. Aspen put his foot down when Mason wouldn’t eat one night. He told Rene no more cookies until all of the kids ate their meals first. Now it’s two for after-school snack and one after supper.”

“That’s a lot of cookies still,” Oscar said to me through our bond. *“Do you normally give them that many sweets?”*

“Not normally. But I wasn’t here to take care of them, and they were doing us a huge favor by watching after the children for these past two weeks.”

“Would you like to see them? They’re in the back room playing.”

“Yes, please,” I said, glancing down at Oscar, who nodded. Immediately, I felt his nerves ramp up, and I gave his hand a

squeeze before I wrapped my arm back around his shoulders and walked with him beside me. I heard the children before we could see them, and it was Mason who saw us first.

“Roe!” he shouted and came running toward us. I gave Oscar’s shoulder a quick squeeze before I let go and bent down onto my knee to be at my brother’s level. He didn’t miss a beat and threw himself into my arms. “I missed you. They said you’d come back, so I wasn’t worried you’d leave like the others.”

That absolutely broke my heart. “I’m sorry, Mason. Oscar and I were working on some things and moving our stuff into our new house.”

Mason let go of my neck and looked up at my mate. “So he really is going to be living with us?”

Oscar sat down on the floor, crossing his legs in front of him. “I really am. Is that all right with you? I’m looking forward to spending days with you and playing trucks. And we live on the mountain. We can go for a walk and see Monroe at work and play in the snow, and we might even see the enforcers around up there. Does that sound like fun?”

Mason crawled into Oscar’s lap and started pulling on the strings on his hoodie. I missed what he and Oscar started talking about because Maelie screamed and then started crying. I held out my arms, reaching for her, my heart breaking even more because she was crying so much.

“Shh...I’m right here, Mae. Do you want to go to your new daddy? Hmm? Do you want Daddy Oscar?” I asked her. I gave her a quick kiss on the top of her head and sat beside Oscar where he and Mason were talking about taking walks and looking at all of the birds and squirrels up on the mountain.

“Hey, Mae. Can I get a hug?” Oscar asked, holding out his hands. Mae snuggled into my shoulder a bit more, wiggling around a little before she launched herself at Oscar. He was taken by surprise and fell back a bit, but I was able to stop him before he and the children fell completely. Good thing we were on the floor already.

“Do I get to call you daddy too?”

“You sure can, Mason,” Oscar said. He managed to set Maelie on his other leg and held her close.

I had already been falling for Oscar up until this point, but seeing him with my siblings, just as natural as if he were the one that had given birth to them, I fell completely. I was in love with my mate. I wasn’t surprised; I knew it would happen. But I never expected it to hit me like it just had.

“They were both angels, despite Rene spoiling them,” Aspen said as he joined us. He was looking at Oscar holding the kids. I wasn’t sure what the look was about, but I would be sure to ask Oscar later, once we were home.

I stood, leaving Oscar with the kids since Mae was cuddling with him and now had her thumb in her mouth, and Mason was chatting about trucks and playing in the snow. Specifically, filling the bed of one of his trucks with snow.

“Thank you, again. I...” I glanced at my mate and kids. “We both really appreciate it.” Oscar glanced up at me and closed his eyes as he snuggled with Maelie. She was a sweetheart, and I got it. She was so easy to love. She was one, though, and had her moments where she was difficult, but all one-year-olds did.

“It was really no hardship,” Aspen said. “If you should ever want a sitter, even for just a night out...”

“Sweetheart, they have Joseph, who is already ready to fill in the fun uncle role.”

Mason suddenly wrapped his arm around my leg, and I looked over to Oscar. He was trying to stand, but with how he was sitting and Mae in his arms, he couldn’t quite stand up. I gave him a little bit of magical help, and he paid me with a huge grin. “Thank you,” he said. “She’s out. Should she be? Is it morning nap time? You mentioned she takes a morning and an afternoon one still.”

“Yes, but she’s not normally down quite this early. It’s probably just that we’re here now.”

“She’s been getting up a little early lately,” Aspen told us. “I apologize if I’ve thrown off your schedule for the children.”

I shook my head. “It’s nothing that a couple weeks at home can’t fix. Seriously. And sometimes she doesn’t even want to take her morning nap but then wants to sleep at lunchtime and then be cranky all afternoon. It’s normal for her age,” I said, hoping to reassure them.

“Here are their things,” Alpha Forest said, holding out the two bags. It wasn’t much, and I would be getting them so many more things just as soon as we got home and I was able to take stock of everything. Already, their rooms were filled with toys and some clothes, but these things that were in the bags were what we were able to bring with us. They couldn’t be replaced for the same items because they weren’t from this realm.

“We will keep you in mind if we ever should wish for a night out just the two of us. I don’t want to ask Joseph to watch them. I was forced, as were my other siblings, to raise our younger ones, and that’s not something I will ever force others to do. They’re my responsibility, but we will be getting childcare every so often for dates,” I told them. I looked over at Oscar, who nodded.

“Thank you. I have tons of questions about Hailey, but I think I should probably ask her, huh?”

Alpha Forest sighed. “She’s still upset, but she has calmed. Canyon came and collected her. He and Thomas took her somewhere, I’m not sure where, and when she came back, she was quiet. She’s still not where I would expect a normal fourteen-year-old girl to be, and she’s had a session with Dr. Swift since Dr. Bennett has been spending time with his mate.”

“Dr. Bennett is mated now?”

I only knew who Dr. Bennett was from Oscar’s memories.

“Yes. His mate ended up being the council’s new psychiatrist. They had to scramble to find a third one, and he came in late last month? Maybe it was mid-month? I’m not

exactly sure. But Hailey is seeing Dr. Swift weekly, and she seems more and more open when she returns from her sessions,” Alpha Forest told us.

“Good. I’ll make sure she continues,” Oscar said.

I picked up Mason when he tugged on my sleeve. “I hate to run, but I want to get the kids home so Mason can burn off some energy and Mae can get put down for a nap.”

“We understand completely. Believe us when we say they truly are little angels.”

“Thank you,” I told them. I wrapped my free arm around Oscar, and after a quick look at him, I had us back at our house on the mountain in a blink. Mason giggled, and Maelie wiggled in Oscar’s arms but quickly settled back down.

“I’ll take her upstairs and put her in her crib. Should I change her, you think?”

“I’ll do that,” I told him. “I think a magical diaper change is definitely warranted in this instance.” I looked at Mason, who was staring at the house with wide eyes. “Would you like to see your new room, Mason?” He nodded, and I followed Oscar up the stairs. Luckily, the house had five bedrooms, and everyone would get their own room. Well, until the baby came. Oscar went to the room we decided would be perfect for a nursery, and I took Mason over to his room, which was across the hall. He’d never had his own room before, and when I set him down, he immediately ran to the trucks that were lined up on the shelf that was in front of the window.

“Are these for me to play with?”

“They are.” Oscar came in, wrapping his arms around my waist. Two down, two to go. We spent the early afternoon playing with Mason and Maelie after lunch. They seemed to readily accept Oscar as a father figure, which was a relief to my mate.

One thing I already knew about my siblings was they were fairly easygoing and accepting. I didn’t have any doubts that he wouldn’t be accepted. Mason and Mae were both down for

their afternoon nap when there was a quiet knock on the front door, quickly followed by a voice that I'd not heard before.

“Oscar? Are we in the right house?”

I looked at my mate, who had been fidgeting on the couch for the past thirty minutes.

“That’s Joseph,” he whispered and quickly stood. He was walking toward the door, and I had to hurry to catch up with him. When I did, I saw when his brother and sister spotted Oscar. Joseph had a huge smile on his face and came up to Oscar, wrapping his arms around his older brother in a tight hug.

“Congratulations, big bro. I’m so happy for you,” Joseph said. He held Oscar for a moment and then let go, smiling at his brother. “You must be Monroe.”

I nodded once. “I am.”

“Take care of him. He deserves someone to be nice and dote on him. He’s given up a lot for us,” Joseph said. I saw Hailey flinch just behind him and wondered if Joseph had said what he did on purpose.

“I have every intention of cherishing my mate,” I said. “He’s my entire world, and I’m deeply in love with him,” I said. I hadn’t intended to tell him I loved him for the first time in front of his siblings, but we’d not really had the best opportunity until now. And I had no intention of hiding my feelings for my mate from his siblings.

“Good. He deserves it. He won’t ever admit it, but he’s put up with a lot, and he deserves someone to spoil him.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off Oscar. He was staring at me with watery eyes.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I do love you. You are so warm and caring. You are full of love, and you’ve already picked up the role of other daddy for Mae and Mason. You’re going to be a natural when it comes to our little one you’re carrying, and I can’t wait to see that. I love you, Oscar. Always will.” I leaned

down and gave him a quick kiss. He pulled away and buried his face in my shirt for a moment before he stepped back and swiped at his eyes.

“Wow, okay.” Oscar took a deep breath. “So, welcome home. Things have really changed. This is Monroe. He’s my mate. He’s from the fae realm, and we’re having a baby in the spring. That’s the quick rundown so far. Any questions?”

“Naw, I don’t have any,” Joseph said. “Except which room is mine? I have homework to do, and I wanted to know if I could go hang out with Sean later? He lives up here. He’s Alpha Maynard’s youngest.”

“Umm...sure. And your room is top of the stairs, on the left,” Oscar said.

“Cool.” Joseph took a few steps away and then stopped. “It’s great to meet you, Monroe. I can’t wait to get to know more about you.”

“Likewise,” I told him. We watched him rush up the stairs until he was out of sight. That left us with Hailey.

Oscar sighed and leaned into my side. I wrapped an arm around his shoulders, pulling him tightly to my side, trying my best to support him.

“I don’t have it in me to put up with you acting like you were, Hailey. There is a sweet one-year-old and an energetic four-year-old upstairs. You throw a fit like you have been, I’ll look into sending you elsewhere. You aren’t going to act that way around them.”

Hailey’s eyes widened, and then she immediately looked down at her hands where they were laced together in front of her.

“I understand. I wanted to say I was sorry. I have a lot to make up for, and I blamed you for taking me away from the pack. I had an eye-opening trip with the fates, and I’m sorry, Oscar. I’ll behave. I don’t expect you to forgive or forget, but I am sorry. I only wanted to fit in, and I felt that you were the reason I had to leave. I know now that isn’t the complete case. That you were only doing what was best for me.”

“I accept your apology,” Oscar said.

I could tell Hailey was surprised. She looked up at Oscar, and when a tear ran free from her eye down her cheek, Oscar held open his arms, and Hailey ran into her brother’s embrace. I stepped to the side and let them have their moment. I wasn’t sure what all the fates had shown her, but I’d seen the way she’d treated my mate, and this was drastically different. I had a feeling we were going to be just fine. There might be some bumps along the way, but in the end, we’d make it through everything as a family.

CHAPTER 12

OSCAR



April

“Come on, munchkin,” I said to Mae as I reached down for her. We were getting ready for our day, and I just wasn’t really feeling it. I was tired. My due date had come and gone, and both Monroe and I were more than ready to have our little girl. She was stubborn, though, and determined to stay inside and not join our happy family.

I lifted Mae, and a sharp pain hit my stomach, causing me to gasp. I then felt a sudden gush of fluid and looked down around my large, rounded stomach while holding on to Mae as tightly as I could.

“Daddy?” Mae said and pointed at the floor. “Go potty, Daddy?”

I couldn’t help it; I started laughing. She was about to turn two, and we had started to see if she was possibly ready to potty train. She knew what it was and where everyone in the house went to the bathroom other than her, but when you were twenty-one months old, what else were you going to think when you were suddenly standing in a puddle of fluid on the kitchen floor.

I laughed until a second sudden sharp pain hit my stomach. That one managed to bring my mate rushing toward us.

“Oscar!” he shouted from upstairs. I’d been downstairs getting Maelie her breakfast while he was helping Mason get

ready to go off to the daycare center for a few hours. We'd put him in it during the mornings, mostly because although my pregnancy had been mostly uneventful, it was a lot to keep up with a four-year-old and a one-year-old. That and they had a preschool program that was offered mornings, and we'd jumped at that opportunity. I got to spend afternoons with Mason while Mae was down for her nap, and then when she woke up, Joseph and Hailey were both here to help tire Mason out. Who knew four-year-olds were so full of energy?

"I'm all right. But it's safe to say that our little girl is ready to finally come out and join us," I told him as he rushed toward me. Immediately, he took Maelie and placed her in her high chair. I grabbed my back, which suddenly hurt, and went to take a step so I could go sit down but remembered that I was standing in a puddle. Except when I glanced down, the mess was gone. Monroe was back at my side, immediately wrapping an arm around me.

"Is it bad? Can you hold on for a few minutes? I need to call Alpha Forest and get the kids to him."

I laughed again. Well, until another contraction hit. Then I gasped and grabbed for my stomach.

"Yeah, I'm good. Can you...I don't know. Help me to the chair? And put something under me so I don't get it wet?"

Monroe winced. "Let me help with that." I felt my pants suddenly change. They were no longer wet, nor were they sticking to my legs.

"That's really very useful."

"Papa!" Mason called from the direction of the stairs. Monroe sighed.

"Of all of the mornings for Joseph and Hailey to have to go to school early. They could have taken Mason and Mae down off the mountain with them." Monroe helped me sit in a chair, and I sighed in relief. It wasn't that it hurt that much, but it was certainly uncomfortable.

"I'm good. Call Aspen, not Alpha Forest. I'm sure Aspen is home, but Alpha Forest is probably taking their kids to

school.”

“Oh, good point,” Monroe said.

“Papa! You left me!” Mason shouted again. This time, he was definitely closer. Monroe winced and seemed torn. I waved him off.

“Go,” I said with another chuckle. “I’m good for now,” I told him as I rubbed my stomach. I felt it tighten and wondered just how quickly this little girl would arrive. They had estimated my due date to be a few days ago and, up until just now, nothing. I had, of course, felt the normal movements from her, but so far, our little girl hadn’t wanted to make an appearance. Even my omega line hadn’t had much of a change. It had gone from silver to pink, but just barely.

I heard Monroe on the phone as he came back into the dining room, where I was sitting near Maelie. She was happily eating her breakfast, shoving diced fruit in as fast as she possibly could. She was going to be a complete mess when she was finished, but there wasn’t anything that could be done to help it. She was almost two; they were messy eaters.

When she reached for her yogurt with her bare fingers, I handed her the plastic spoon and watched as she dipped it in the bowl and then put it in her mouth.

“Good job, Maelie. You’re doing a good job with your spoon.”

“Yes. His water broke, so definitely for today. Maybe tonight, if at all possible?”

I smiled at Monroe’s side of the conversation. We both already knew that Alpha Forest and Aspen had volunteered to watch Mason and Mae for us for as long as we felt we needed in order to welcome our daughter into the world.

I refocused on Mae as a contraction hit me. It was fairly strong, and I rubbed my stomach as it knotted up on me. I took a few deep breaths as Mae dipped her spoon into the yogurt and then into the bowl of dry cereal. She had fallen in love with the round oat cereal, and Monroe was only too happy to let her have them whenever she wished. We would often find

little round pieces of cereal all over the house as she carried a small bowl around with her.

“Yes, their bags are packed and ready. Thank you so much, Aspen.” Monroe touched my shoulder, and I looked up at him as he set Mason down on the floor. Our little guy came directly to me and reached for me. I reached for him, wondering just how this was going to work.

“No, Mason. Sit in your chair,” Monroe said.

Mason looked up at his brother, immediately crossing his arms in a pout.

“Mason, can you sit in your chair for me? I’m not feeling very good this morning, and my tummy hurts,” I told him.

He seemed to think about it for a moment before he dropped his arms and sighed. “Fine.” He huffed as he rounded the table and sat in his chair. When fruit, yogurt, and waffles suddenly appeared in front of him, Mason’s eyes widened, and his little fit was completely forgotten. Mason immediately took the yogurt, dumped it on the waffles, and then poured the fresh fruit on top. I chuckled. He wasn’t actually my blood, but that was my boy right there. I absolutely loved waffles like that, and after he’d seen me eat mine like that the first time, that was the only way he’d eat them from now on.

“I still don’t get that combination, but if the two of you like it...” Monroe said as he bent down to kiss me. I turned my head, catching him before he made it to my cheek. There was a knock on the door, and Monroe pulled away. A contraction hit just then, and I nodded as Monroe stood.

“That’s probably Aspen. I guess Canyon and Thomas were visiting for some reason.”

“Probably because they knew what was going to happen with me this morning. Go let him in.” I took a deep breath and pushed on my side, hoping the newest contraction would relent soon. “I’ll watch these two, and then they can go stay with Aspen for a few days,” I said. That caught Mason’s attention.

“Aspen? Really?”

“Yep,” I said. “But you have to eat your breakfast first.”

Mason nodded and started eating again. Monroe gave my shoulder a pat before he went to the door. My contraction eased, and I was able to take a deep breath. I could feel a burning pain where my omega line was, and I knew that since my water had already broken, my omega line had opened in a hurry. When I heard voices returning, I was surprised that it wasn't Aspen's that I heard.

“I've been told that I'm needed this morning,” Dr. King said as he came into the house beside Monroe. I looked at my mate, and he shook his head.

Dr. King chuckled. “I was told by Master Edison that I'd be needed.” Dr. King looked over at the children and smiled. “Will they be attending the birth?”

“No,” I said, possibly a bit too quickly.

Monroe shook his head. “No, Aspen is on his way.”

“Knock-knock!”

“Aspen!” Mason shouted. He dropped his fork before he slid off his chair and took off toward one of his favorite people. Honestly, I was almost certain it was Rene more than Aspen, but Rene spent a lot of time at his son's house. Rene had spent a long time as alpha mate of the pack, and when Alpha Forest took over for his father, well, Rene still liked to help out as much as he could in an unofficial capacity. Aspen didn't seem to mind at all.

“Well, now. It seems that reinforcements have arrived,” Dr. King said. “Should we get the new daddy somewhere comfortable?”

“Yes, please,” Monroe said. “Did you want me to carry you, Oscar?”

I rolled my eyes just as Aspen entered the dining room area with Mason on his hip. I myself looked ridiculous with Mason on my hip, but I was a wolf omega and a smaller one at only five foot eight. Aspen was a bear shifter, and he was so much taller and more muscular than I was.

“I am sure I can walk,” I told everyone.

“Or, you could simply be teleported there?” Dr. King suggested.

“Before you do that,” Aspen interrupted. “Bags? And did you wish for me to take him to his morning school?”

“Bags are there,” Monroe said, pointing to the pair of bags that were on the floor by the counter. “As for school, that is your call. If that’s what you wish, then yes. If you want him to have some time off, we aren’t going to be upset.”

“All right, then,” Aspen said.

I glanced at Maelie, who was still working on eating her breakfast. The little sweetheart didn’t know what was going on at all. I stood carefully and leaned down to kiss her cheek.

“Love you, munchkin. Daddy will see you in a few days,” I told her. She looked up at me with a spoonful of yogurt. I stood, grabbed my stomach as another contraction hit, and looked to Aspen. “Maybe let her finish breakfast?”

“Would it be all right if we simply borrowed the high chair for a little while?”

I turned at the sound of the other voice. I could only nod slowly at Thomas and Canyon as they now stood there in the middle of our house. It had been Thomas who had spoken though.

“Fantastic,” he said seconds before Aspen, Mason, Maelie in her high chair, and the children’s bags all disappeared.

I looked to Monroe and then over at Dr. King. “You know, it’s nice being around those that have magic, but at times, it seems really unfair.” I grabbed my mate’s outstretched arms and held on as yet another contraction hit, this one even stronger, and I actually gasped at the intensity of it.

Monroe used magic, and although normally my stomach would flip, this time it did nothing because I was too busy being in the middle of a contraction.

“Did you know before your water broke?” Monroe asked as he helped me lie down in our bed.

“No. I had nothing. A little bit of a backache, but my back has been sore for weeks.” I looked down at my stomach. It was huge. It didn’t take much though. I wasn’t a large man.

“I’ll get everything assessed and see where you are in regards to how far along you are in the labor,” Dr. King said.

I gritted my teeth when another contraction hit.

“He’s in pain. I should take his pain away,” Monroe said.

“Let me look first. If he’s far enough along, which I assume he is since his waters have broken, I’ll give him what Constantine has dubbed *that floaty feeling*.”

I latched on to that phrase. “Oh, I’ve heard about that. Yes. I want that. Chase and Eli both mentioned that. I want to float.” I grabbed Monroe’s shirt and yanked on him. “It hurts, Roe. Make it stop,” I said, ending on a tiny sob when another pain shot through my stomach and centered on the back right on my spine.

“That certainly explains things,” Dr. King said. He gently moved Monroe closer to the headboard and met my eyes. “Your omega line is fully open and has actually torn a bit. I’ll heal that once the baby is delivered, but for the moment, let’s take some of that pain away, shall we?”

“Yes,” I said. I had been fine while sitting at the table. But now, only minutes later, I felt like I was about to split in two. Dr. King’s hand started glowing green, and as he moved it slowly down my body, I sighed in relief when that feeling of floating in the lake suddenly overcame me. “Ah...yes. That’s it. That was exactly what they described.”

Dr. King chuckled. Monroe ran his fingers through my hair before leaning down and kissing my forehead.

“What do you need me to do, Doctor?”

“Just support your mate. He’ll need help to sit up a bit when I ask him to push.” Dr. King refocused on me. He had pushed my shirt up above my rounded stomach, and I wasn’t sure if I was still wearing pants or not, but at this point, I didn’t care. I just wanted our little girl to be here already.

“I can do that,” Monroe said. He looked back at me. “Are you ready?” he asked me.

“I am,” I told the two of them.

“Very good. Now, Oscar, when you feel the next contraction, I want you to crunch up and push. The baby’s head is right here and ready to pop out, so it should be a fairly easy delivery.”

I nodded, immediately sitting up and doing as the doctor had instructed.

“Already?” Monroe said. He grabbed my left hand with his, his right arm going behind my shoulders to help me sit upward. I pushed as hard as I could, grunting as I ran out of energy, and I fell lax in Monroe’s arms.

“Good. Very good,” Dr. King said. “Rest for a few moments, and push again when you feel ready and you’re having a contraction.”

I nodded because it didn’t take long. Another contraction hit almost immediately, and I sat up with Monroe’s help and pushed. When I felt like I couldn’t push any longer, I screamed out as I gave it just a little more, and then I felt sudden relief. I collapsed backward, and then we heard it.

“Two very strong pushes and you two have a beautiful baby girl,” Dr. King said as our daughter let her displeasure be known that she was forcefully removed from her warm bedroom that she’d been in for the past four months. “And she has quite the set of lungs on her.” Dr. King looked to Monroe. “Would you like to cut the cord?” he asked.

Monroe glanced at me, and I nodded. I had no issues with him doing that if he so wished. He refocused on everything else going on with Dr. King and our daughter, who was still crying but had quieted considerably. That was, until it was obvious that Monroe had cut the cord. That made her cry out a couple of times before she suddenly quieted. I was concerned at first but was quickly put at ease when I saw Dr. King handing over a now bundled-up baby Ella to Monroe.

“She’s absolutely beautiful, Oscar,” Monroe said. I was so focused on my mate and daughter that Dr. King had to call out multiple times to get my attention.

I tore my eyes away from Monroe and looked to the doctor. “Oscar, I need you to give me one small push. We need to deliver the placenta. Then, after I make sure it’s complete, I’ll help your omega line close and heal the tear for you.”

“Thank you,” I told him. He nodded, and I gave him a little push as he’d asked and then saw a giant blob of slimy darkness come from me. It was quickly gone, and then Dr. King gave me a smile and went back to doing whatever it was he needed to do. I turned my attention back to Monroe and Ella.

“Look,” Monroe said as he held Ella down to where I could see her. Only her face was visible, but it was adorable. She had a cute squished nose and a perfect bow lip. Her eyes were closed now though, so I couldn’t see what color they were.

“Did you see her eyes?” I asked. Not that I cared too much. And I’d know soon enough because she’d be awake in a few hours at most.

“They’re blue, like yours. Her hair is brown like mine though.”

I smiled and reached out for her chubby cheek.

“All right, Oscar. I don’t mean to interrupt your time with your new baby, but your omega line is closed now. There was a tear on your left side, but it shouldn’t cause any issues going forward.”

I looked away from Ella long enough to give Dr. King my attention. “Thank you. Can I sit up? Is that allowed?”

Dr. King smiled. “Of course. I’ll lower the pain blocker, and it will eventually completely diminish. If you need anything, I will be downstairs for the next hour or so. Your little lady is quite healthy. She’s seven pounds, four ounces, and is exactly twenty inches long. She should sleep for a few hours, and then she will need normal tending.” Dr. King

looked at Monroe. “You have experience, you said at one of our appointments.”

“Yes. I’ve raised Mae since she was a few days old. Little Ella here won’t be an issue.”

“Very good. If you should need anything, just call out. And once I leave to go to the clinic at the council, all you need to do is call.”

“Thank you, Dr. King. I appreciate all of your assistance and care,” I told him.

“Yes, thank you,” Monroe echoed. He handed me our daughter and then carefully helped situate me to where I was sitting mostly up. There were several pillows behind me, and when I leaned back, I discovered they were perfectly placed. “Be right back,” Monroe whispered. I nodded and took that moment to stare at my baby girl. I was a daddy now. Not that I wasn’t before because Mason and Maelie were mine just as much as they were Monroe’s. But we’d done this, together. We created this beautiful little girl. She was absolutely perfect.

The bed beside me dipped, and I looked to my right and watched as Monroe carefully crawled onto the bed from the other side. He moved close to me, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and gently pulling me into his side.

“She’s perfect, Roe. How did I make someone so perfect and beautiful.”

“Because you did. There’s nothing wrong with you, Oscar. Don’t think you have anything wrong about you. Our little fae princess is going to grow up and be strong, just like her daddy and papa. And her older brother and sister and uncle and aunt. She will have an amazing life and will never doubt that we love her.”

I sighed. He was right. She would. “I love you, Monroe. You were right when you said we’d make it work. There have certainly been some bumps along the way, but we’re making it work.”

Monroe kissed the top of my head and then reached out and ran a finger down the side of Ella’s cheek. “I love you too.

Just as I love our little Ella, and Maelie, and Mason.” I sighed and leaned my head against Monroe’s chest. Never did I expect I’d be here. Not me. But here I was, and I wouldn’t trade it for anything.

Want more magical fae HEAs? Be sure to check out [Calum’s](#) story next!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Of course I had to reopen the fae realm! And Monroe really needed a chance to redeem himself. And of course I couldn't not give Oscar a mate! I hope you enjoyed their little novella. You'll get a glimpse of them here and there again in future stories. They will make appearances in future Council Enforcer as well as Destined Paranormals series book! I can't say thank you enough for all of your continued love and support. I truly couldn't do this without you.

xx

Taylor

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