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ALAN

Changeling Press

**Alan (Devoted Guardians MC 3)**  
*A Dixie Reapers Shifter MC Romance*  
**Harley Wylde & Jessica Coulter Smith**

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**Harley Wylde**

**Jessica Coulter Smith**

**Alan (Devoted Guardians MC 3)**

***A Dixie Reapers Shifter MC Romance***

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**Jolene — My life wasn't perfect, but I didn't have any real complaints — until something went horribly wrong and one of my potions blew up, killing my husband. Raising our son on my own hasn't been easy. Grief and guilt keep getting in my way. But a certain biker keeps stopping by to lend a helping hand. Is it wrong I'm starting to wish he'd do more than fix my porch steps?**

**Alan — I knew Jolene was mine, even when she belonged to someone else. Now that she's single, I might have a chance. I can't rush this, though. Not after what she's been through. Not till I'm sure she's ready. I'll take my time, build a friendship with her, then lay all my cards on the table. Only one problem. I didn't count on traffickers to enter our town. Everything's gone sideways. I'll do whatever it takes to keep my new family safe, even if I have to get my hands dirty.**

## Prologue

**Jolene**

**Five Months Ago**

A witch should be able to take care of things like a broken porch step, leaky faucet, or finding my son's lost pet. A normal witch at any rate. Ever since my spell had gone horribly wrong, and my husband lost his life, I hadn't been able to do more than light magick — the type that amounted to parlor tricks a toddler could do. Being a single mom was difficult enough. Add in my inability to do the simple things, and it felt like the weight of the world settled on my shoulders.

I'd sent my son, Rhett, to his friend's house while I tried to figure things out. Like the porch step. I stared at it, willing it to become whole. All I did was give myself a headache and increase my anxiety. My husband Robby had been much older than me, and he'd always taken care of these things. Even when he hadn't, I'd been able to use my magick for basic home repairs. Until the day I watched my husband die, and knew I'd been responsible. The sheriff deemed it an accident since I hadn't killed him intentionally. Even all these years later, it didn't ease my guilt.

The sound of a motorcycle approaching made me glance at the street. Every time I heard one of the Devoted Guardians drive past, I couldn't seem to stop myself from looking. Mostly to see if it was *him*. I'd noticed him last year at a town festival. He looked to be a decade older than me, which made him pretty much perfect. Something about him

caught my attention, and I'd found myself seeking him out ever since. Not that I'd ever approached him! A man like him could do far better than a broken, widowed witch with a child.

The biker got closer to my house and started to slow. My heart hammered in my chest when he stopped in front of my home and put down the kickstand on his motorcycle. He shut off the engine and got off, hanging his helmet from the handlebars. I swallowed hard and wrapped my arms around my waist as he approached.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

A shiver ran down my spine. Why did his voice have to sound so sexy? I stared, unable to form a single coherent sentence. As much as I'd loved my husband, he'd never made me feel this way. Our relationship had been comfortable, and I'd loved him in my own way, but like most, ours had been an arranged marriage. He hadn't been my choice. But this man...

"Jolene?" Alan moved in closer, and I sucked in a breath. The slight breeze blew his scent toward me, and I instinctively swayed toward him. I stopped myself before I could take a step.

"Sorry. I, uh... I was trying to think of the best way to take care of this," I said, waving at the step. The board not only split down the middle, but I'd noticed the supports didn't appear to be all that sturdy. "With my luck, someone will come to visit, the steps will give, and I'll end up being sued."

"I can fix that." He shoved his hands into his pockets. "I'm good at that kind of thing."

He looked capable of more than fixing the steps. My cheeks warmed, and I turned slightly so he might not notice.

Why did my heart start racing whenever I saw him? And the thought of him being good with his hands... I nearly fanned my face. My body temperature spiked as a vision of him flashed in my mind — naked and stretched out in bed.

“I don’t want to be a bother,” I murmured. “I should learn how to do this stuff.”

“I know you lost your husband. I’m sure he did this sort of thing for you. It can’t be easy taking on the role of both mother and father to your son, plus managing the upkeep of the house. It’s all right to ask for help, Jolene.”

“How do you know so much about me?” I asked.

“People around town talk.” He came even closer. “And when they’re talking about you, I tend to pay attention. Let me help. I’m not expecting anything in return.”

I worried at my bottom lip and stared at the porch steps. His offer tempted me. It would probably take him a lot less time to fix it, than if I were to try learning how to do it and attempt it myself. As much as I wanted to ask why he paid attention when someone mentioned me, I wasn’t brave enough. Not yet.

Since my husband died, I hadn’t been on a single date. Then again, no one had been asking either. Even if they had, I’d have turned them down. I needed to focus on too many things right now — mostly my son. And keeping the house from falling apart. I hadn’t realized how much Robby did until he was gone. I should have told him more often how much I appreciated him.

“I’ll agree as long as you let me buy any supplies you’ll need,” I said. I hoped it didn’t cost a lot since the bank



was empty more often than not these days. Ever since my magick had gone crazy, I'd had to find other ways to earn money. At the moment, it meant waiting tables at the diner part-time. Thankfully, the house was ours. Robby paid it off a year before he died.

“I think we have some leftover lumber at the clubhouse. Let me see what I already have access to and we can go from there. No point in you paying for stuff if you don't need to.” He flashed me a smile and my knees went weak. It should be illegal for a man to look this good. Not to mention he seemed really kind. “You going to be home for a bit?”

I nodded. I'd planned to tackle the steps, and the leaky kitchen faucet today. I'd noticed the bathtub had a steady drip too. At this rate, my water bill would be through the roof. Even though he'd offered to fix the step, I wasn't about to ask for anything else. I'd just have to figure it out myself. Or find a way to hire someone.

“Give me about twenty minutes. I'll load everything into my truck and be back.”

“Did you have breakfast already?” I asked, wanting to give him something in return. Other than myself. I pressed my thighs together, wondering what the hell was wrong with me.

“I did, but I wouldn't say no to coffee.” He gave me a slight wave as he hurried back to his bike. As he roared away, I gave in to the temptation to fan my face and wondered what I'd just gotten myself into.

“It's just a step, Jolene,” I muttered to myself. So why did it feel like something more?

Wishful thinking. That's all it was. Alan was being nice, and nothing more. I didn't need to read into the situation. I'd only end up disappointed and heartbroken. While I waited on him to return, I went inside to brew a pot of coffee.

## Chapter One

**Jolene**

**Present Day**

I clutched Rhett's hand and stared at Alan. "Are you sure about this? I don't really know anyone there. What if they don't want us around?"

"I asked the Pres, and he said it was fine." Alan shoved his hands into his pockets. I'd noticed he did it a lot, and wondered if it was a nervous habit or something else. "But if you don't want to go..."

"No! We want to," I assured him. "I didn't want them thinking we were trying to intrude. We aren't part of the club, and it seems like it's just the Devoted Guardians and their families."

"It's fine, Jolene. Come on. I brought the truck."

We followed him out to the driveway, and I stood back and watched as he buckled Rhett into his car seat. Alan came around so much these days, he'd bought one for his truck. I didn't know many men who would do something like that. Not when it wasn't their own child. All the little things he did for us made me like him even more.

I still remembered when I'd thought he was a decade older than me. Knowing he was over one hundred still blew my mind. Then again, shifters lived a long time, like witches. Compared to him, I was still a baby at only twenty-six. My little Rhett was only six. As far as I knew, Alan didn't have

children, and hadn't ever had a mate. Of course, none of it mattered. Our relationship wasn't the romantic sort — something I reminded myself of every single day. It didn't stop my heart from racing every time he came near, or wishing there could be more between us.

Alan helped me into the truck, then reached over for the seatbelt and buckled me in. *He's just being nice.* If I said it enough times, maybe I could make myself believe it. Not even Robby had done such a thing for me. I'd never met anyone like Alan before. Sure, I'd interacted with shifters, but none had taken care of us the way he did. He made me feel special, and I knew Rhett adored him. He constantly asked when we'd see Alan.

With Wolf Creek being so small, it didn't take long to reach the park. I noticed the motorcycles right away, and Alan pulled into a spot nearby. He helped us from the truck, and Rhett took off. He might not have played with the other kids before, but it didn't make him hesitate even a little. My hands trembled as I smoothed my clothes. Had I made the right decision? What if the women didn't want me here? Just because Axe said it was okay didn't mean I was actually welcome.

“Come on,” Alan said, holding out his hand. I took it and let him lead me over to the group. He released my hand near the women and went to join the other men in his club. He always referred to them as his brothers, even though he wasn't related to any of them. I'd asked a few questions the last couple of months, wanting to know more about him and the Devoted Guardians, but I still didn't understand everything.

I glanced at the women and gave them a smile. “Hi!

I'm Jolene."

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Emma," one of them said, holding out her hand. I shook it and retreated, still not feeling comfortable.

"I'm Raya," the other said.

"I'm so glad Alan invited us. Rhett can always use more friends," I said. "Since Cody and Tanner are older, they aren't in the same class at school. I know they've seen each other around town, but this is the first time they've been able to play."

"How do you know Alan?" Emma asked.

"He helped us not too long ago. Actually, he's been really great. Things have been hard the last few years. Alan seems to know what we need even before I do. He's fixed my porch steps, replaced an outlet that no longer worked, and done so much more." I smiled softly as I looked at the man in question. "And he's so sweet to Rhett."

"Has he asked you out on a date?" Emma asked.

"Oh, it's not like that. I'm so much younger than him."

"Axe is over one hundred fifty years old, and I'm only twenty-six," Emma said. "It can't be worse than that, can it?"

"No, it's not," I said. "Maybe it would work. I'm a little scared to find out. What if I'm wrong? Rhett already loves Alan so much. If we dated, then everything went wrong, it would devastate my little boy."

Part of me wanted to hold back and not open up to these women so much. They were strangers, yet I started to feel at ease around them. Alan had told me about Axe and

Emma, and I knew their relationship was still new. He hadn't said much about Raya, other than Henry had recently found her. At least they hadn't been with their men for years. We were all rather new when it came to the Devoted Guardians. Of course, they were actually with someone in the club. Alan and I were only friends.

“Henry hated me on sight,” Raya said. “He thought I was a dark mage. Then we had a chance to talk. He listened to what I'd been through, and when he bit me later that night, it felt... right. Sounds crazy, right?”

Emma shook her head. “Part of you sensed it. The same happened with me and Axe. Although, he was sweet from the beginning. From the moment we met, I felt drawn to him. It was unlike anything I'd experienced before, and quite honestly, I found it a little scary. Not Axe but my reaction to him.”

I couldn't help but smile. “That's how it feels when Alan is around. I want to get closer to him, and when I catch his scent, my body lights up and I want to crawl into his lap. Instead, I end up putting more space between us.”

“Maybe you're his mate,” Emma said. “Axe said I was destined to be his. I heard it was the same with Henry. Once he got past the smell of black magick, he realized Raya was his.”

Raya nodded.

“I wouldn't be opposed to it,” I said. “I'm not sure he really feels like that about me though. He's never flirted with me or asked me out. I think he just feels sorry for us and is such a sweet man he can't help but try and ease our burden a little.”

Emma snorted. “Keep telling yourself that. I have a feeling you’ll be eating those words soon enough.”

As the other women whispered to each other, my heart kicked in my chest. What they’d experienced with their men was exactly how I felt when it came to Alan. But his fated mate? Surely not. If I were, wouldn’t he have made a move by now? Apparently, in our case, it was one-sided. In all honesty, as much as I’d love more with him, I’d be content to be his friend. It would hurt when he settled down with someone, but I couldn’t be selfish. As long as he didn’t turn his back on Rhett, I’d be content. My son was more important than me having a love life.

“Looks like Mari and Rhett are getting along,” Emma said, bringing my attention back to the women.

“They’re so cute.” Raya smiled as Rhett held Mari’s hand to help her onto the tire swing. Once she sat down, he carefully climbed on across from her, then Cody and Logan gave them a push.

The way my boy looked at Mari made me wonder if he had his first crush. They were adorable. Of course, I didn’t know how Henry would react. As not only the Sergeant-at-Arms of the Devoted Guardians, but Mari’s father, he might not want Rhett staring at his daughter with complete adoration. They were so young, perhaps no one would think anything of it. I only worried Rhett would end up getting hurt as the two grew older. Mari was a beautiful girl, and I had no doubt she’d have a line of boys eager to ask her out when she was old enough.

“You look like you’re deep in thought,” I said to Raya.

She glanced around, almost as if she were judging the

distance between us and the men, who stood near the children.

“Henry found Mari’s biological father. He didn’t know she existed. Now that he does, he may want to meet her. I don’t want to keep her from him, but I don’t know if it will cause problems for the relationship Henry and Mari are building. Does that make me selfish? To wish he’d stay away for a while longer?” Raya shifted from foot to foot, and anxiousness rolled off her in waves.

Emma put her arm around Raya’s shoulders. “No, it makes you a mom and Henry’s mate. If he decides to come visit, I’m sure Henry will handle it just fine.”

“I know. Henry says I worry about things when I shouldn’t. I guess I’m partly anxious that things are going too well. The vampire issue was handled without any fuss. Then someone helped Henry find Mateo, and the guy wasn’t angry about having a daughter he knew nothing about. Understanding you’ve been placed in a situation where you might have sired a child, is different from knowing you have one. It’s all a little too perfect, you know?”

“And after living in hell every day for years, you’re scared to trust it,” Emma said. “I’ve been there.”

I hadn’t experienced the same thing these two had. Something told me they’d become close rather fast. As much as I wanted to befriend them, I wondered if it would be better for me to give them space? They clearly had a lot in common, other than being mated to members of the Devoted Guardians. They were sisters-in-law, had both lived rough lives before finding their men, and had children close to the same age. Then again, Rhett and Mari were only a year apart.

“Do you feel like you don’t deserve your new life?” I



asked in a near whisper. Maybe we weren't so different after all. "Sometimes I feel like that when Alan comes over. Like I don't deserve someone like him, or the help he gives us."

"How do you get rid of the dark thoughts circling your mind?" Raya asked.

"If you figure that out, please share with the rest of us," I said. "I struggle with it every day. I'm the reason Rhett doesn't have a father."

"How is it your fault?" Raya asked.

"Because it was my magick that killed him. I was working a spell and it went horribly wrong. I'd thought I was home alone. Robby came back early. When the potion I'd been brewing bubbled over during my incantation, it caused a burst of green flames. Robby threw me out of the way, but he got the full blast. It hit him straight in the chest, burned right through to his heart."

"I'm so sorry." Raya reached out to take my hand. "It looks like we're all broken in some way."

"Say that again and see what happens," Henry called out to her.

Her cheeks flushed. "He heard that from way over there?"

"Please tell me you're joking," I said, panic welling up inside me. "Does that mean they can *all* hear us?"

Emma laughed. "Not sure about the ones who aren't wolves, but as far as Henry goes? Yeah. Could be half a block down, and he'd pick up on it. Especially since you're his mate." She directed the last to Raya who suddenly looked

chagrined.

“Well, fuck.”

Henry grinned and winked at Raya. Within seconds, he was coming closer and didn't even stop as he lifted her into his arms.

“Watch the kids,” he called out to us and then strode away with his mate.

Emma chuckled and shook her head. Was this a normal thing when it came to shifters? I had a hard time picturing Alan being quite so... caveman-ish. Her focus switched from the retreating Raya and Henry back to the children. Watching Rhett play with the other kids warmed my heart. He'd always had trouble making friends, but it looked like things might be changing. At least, when it came to the families of the Devoted Guardians. Alan had already brought so many wonderful things to our lives. Now it seemed he'd given us another gift — friends.

Thanks to Robby being marked as a warlock, everyone considered Rhett to be one too, by association. At six, my sweet little boy couldn't even use much magick yet. It didn't seem fair. Part of me hoped the town would see Alan spending time with Rhett and decide to not paint him with the same brush as his dad. In the end, Robby had given his life for us. While he might have done bad things in the past, he'd always made sure he took care of his family.

“Are you and Raya both human?” I asked.

“I am,” Emma said. “Raya was. The dark mage experimented on her and infused her with black magick. That's why Henry assumed she was a dark mage when they first

met.”

“I’m a witch and so is Rhett, even though everyone in town refers to him as a warlock.”

Emma gave me puzzled looks and I realized she didn’t know the difference. “Um, a warlock is someone who has broken their oath. They’re considered bad news. My husband was one, even though he was good to us. So the town automatically considers Rhett one, even though he’s never done anything wrong. I’m hoping that will change as he gets older and proves he’s trustworthy.”

“I don’t understand why the town is so unaccepting of warlocks and dark mages. Why allow them in town if they’re going to turn their noses up at them?” Emma asked.

“Wolf Creek boasts that all are welcome, regardless of who they are. But if they do something to break the town’s trust, like Elias did, then things change. In the case of Robby, he was already considered a warlock when he came here. Due to the things he did in the past, he’d been forever tainted. I don’t know why the town insists on referring to Rhett as one. My sweet boy should have come into his abilities now, but he can’t do any magick.” I shrugged. “I guess as long as people are still willing to befriend him and give him a chance, it doesn’t matter what they call him. But one day, things might change, and he won’t be so agreeable to being referred to as a warlock. I don’t know what he’ll do then.”

It was something that had troubled me for a while. Rhett had never lived anywhere else, but what if the town never gave him a chance? What if things didn’t change, and he still struggled? It wasn’t fair everyone called him a warlock when he wasn’t one.

“Sometimes I worry things with Rhett will only get worse with time. It makes me worry that a day will come when we have to leave Wolf Creek.”

I swallowed hard and looked over at Alan, but he wouldn't meet my gaze. I noticed his jaw had gone tight, and something told me I'd screwed up. Thinking quickly, I tried to remember if I'd said anything I shouldn't have. Was he angry about what I'd said in regard to Rhett? Or because I'd told these women about Robby and what I'd done? Had he not heard the entire story before?

What would I do if he walked away and never came back? Rhett would be devastated. So would I! He'd come to mean so much to us... I wanted to turn around and run, but I couldn't. Not while Rhett was still playing. I'd stay, and hopefully things would turn out okay. But if Alan decided he was finished with us, then... I'd try to explain things to Rhett, make sure he knew he hadn't done anything wrong.

Tears pricked my eyes and I fought to hold them back.

*Way to go, Jolene. You've fucked up yet again.*

\* \* \*

## **Alan**

What the fuck had I just heard? She thought it was her fault her husband was dead? Didn't she realize he'd given his life to keep her safe? I'd have done the same thing if I were in his place. And everyone in town called Rhett a warlock? Since when? No one had ever said such a thing in my presence. The thought of them doing it when I wasn't around infuriated me.

I might not hear as well as the wolves, but I'd still

listened to every word the women said. Hearing the pain in Jolene's voice ripped me apart. Although, I'd enjoyed hearing how much of a help I'd been to her. I'd been working my way up to asking her out. We'd gone several places as a family, or at least that's how I'd thought about it, but now I knew she didn't see it the same way. To her, I was merely a good friend. Would I ever be able to change her mind?

It didn't mean I'd take a step back. If anything, I felt like I needed to work even harder. Maybe I hadn't been obvious enough? How could she have thought I was only doing those things to be nice? Sure, I did want to help the two of them, but it was more than that. The moment I'd caught her scent, I'd been drawn to her. She'd still been married back then, so I'd kept my distance.

The day I saw her staring at her front porch steps, I'd decided to stop and speak to her. She'd actually needed my help, which had been wonderful. Well, maybe not exactly *wonderful*, but it had given me an opening. I'd had a reason to help her, get closer to the two of them, and I'd thought things would progress naturally between us.

Of course, since then, Axe and Henry had both found their fated mates. It made me wonder if I'd been so drawn to her because she was destined to be mine. If her husband hadn't died, I'd have never had a chance to find out. I knew his death had hurt the two of them, which was why I felt like an asshole every time I thought I was lucky to get to know Rhett and Jolene.

Jolene's cheeks were tinged a soft pink as I helped her into the truck. Rhett kicked his feet and couldn't stop smiling, even after I buckled him into his car seat. It seemed they'd

both had a good time. I knew they needed more friends. Even though they'd lived in town a while, it seemed like Jolene kept them isolated, and now I understood why. If people were calling Rhett a warlock, she probably hadn't felt very welcome around everyone in town.

"I know Rhett needs to go home and take a nap, but none of us have had lunch yet," I said. "What if I grab some fried chicken on the way back? We can eat, and when he goes to bed, you and I can talk a little."

She shifted in her seat. "Talk? About what?"

"Several things," I muttered.

"You don't have to feed us. I think I know what you want to say, and maybe it's better if you just... go."

"I can't do that. I need to explain a few things to you, and I want to hear more about people calling Rhett a W-A-R-L-O-C-K."

She winced. "You heard everything, didn't you?"

"Not as well as the wolves, but enough. If I'd known people were doing that, I'd have already handled it."

Her eyes widened and she stared at me. "Why?"

"Because it's not right. I want to know who's been saying that, and I'll make sure to straighten them out. Now... what do you want me to get with the fried chicken?"

"Potatoes!" Rhett yelled from the backseat.

"Is that how you ask for things?" Jolene turned to face him. "That wasn't very polite."

"It's fine." I smiled at him in the rearview mirror. "I'll

get mashed potatoes and biscuits. Sound good?”

“Yeah!” He grinned and kicked his feet even harder. Sometimes he seemed like he was younger than six years old, and other times he acted older. I didn’t know if all kids were like that, or just Rhett. I hadn’t really been around very many of them until recently.

I stopped by the local chicken place and picked up one of the family meals, then drove to Jolene’s house. I’d always enjoyed being here. My apartment was smaller than their house, and not nearly as cozy. As a bachelor, I only had the basics. Jolene’s place felt like a home. Of course, I had a feeling it had more to do with the people who lived there than the way she’d decorated.

We went inside the house and I took the food to the kitchen, placing the containers on the counter. Jolene took down three plates. While she fixed one for Rhett, I made the other two for us. Sitting around the table made me feel like part of their family. Which only served as a reminder of how she felt about me. A friend. How the hell did I get out of the Friend Zone? The parts of the conversation I’d heard at the park had given me hope. If only my hearing was as good as the wolves, then I’d have been able to listen to everything.

“Did you have fun today, Rhett?” I asked.

“Yeah! I liked Mari.” His cheeks flushed a little, and I realized he might very well like her as a girl and not only a friend. Too fucking cute! I couldn’t remember the first time I had a crush on someone. At just a hair over one hundred years old, it had been too long since all of my firsts.

“What about you, Jolene? Did you like talking to Raya and Emma?”

“I did,” she said. She picked at her food, and I knew she had to be worrying over the conversation we’d have once Rhett went down for a nap. I couldn’t back down, though. I needed her to hear me out, and to convince her to give me a chance. I knew I could make the two of them happy.

“I’m sure Mari would like to play again sometime soon,” I said. “Would you like that, Rhett?”

“You think so?” His eyes went wide, and he bounced in his seat. “Do you think Mari had fun with me too?”

“I think so. I’ll talk to her dad later and see when she might be able to play again.”

We finished our meal, and I cleaned up the kitchen while Jolene put Rhett down for his nap. I leaned against the counter and folded my arms while I waited for her to come back. She slowly entered the kitchen, and her expression made it seem more like she was heading to the gallows than about to talk to me.

“You want to sit in here or in the living room?” I asked.

“Here is fine. Look, I get it, all right? You’ve been a great help to us. I know shifters are always eager to find their mates, and now that Henry and Axe found the ones fated to be with them, you want the same thing. She might get the wrong idea if you’re hanging around a single mom.”

“That’s...” I didn’t even know where to start. Did it not occur to her I might want *her* for my mate?

“You should go while Rhett’s asleep. I’ll think of something to tell him.” She wrapped her arms around her waist and looked down at the floor. Not before I caught her expression. Utter devastation. It seemed she liked me as much



as I liked her.

“Jolene.” She slowly lifted her head. “I’m not leaving. Unless it’s what you really want me to do. I never said anything about you and Rhett being a burden. In fact, you’re the opposite.”

“Wh-what’s that mean?”

I shook my head. What the hell was I going to do with this woman? Didn’t she realize how amazing she was? Looked like I had my work cut out for me. Better start now.

“It means I like you. Both of you. I’m not looking for a mate... because I’m pretty sure I already found her. And in case you’re still confused, she’s standing in front of me.”

She sucked in a breath and took a step back, then her knees gave way and she crumpled to the floor. I rushed to her side and pulled her into my arms. I felt the wetness of her tears and held her while she got her emotions under control again. I hadn’t expected this sort of reaction and had no idea what to do.

## Chapter Two

### **Jolene**

The moment he said he wanted me for his mate, I could no longer stand. My knees gave out and I sank to the floor. I'd been so scared he was going to leave. Hearing he wanted a life with me and Rhett made it feel like an emotional tidal wave had swept over me. I couldn't seem to stop crying, and I could tell it bothered Alan. I needed to pull myself together and let him know they were happy tears.

"You really want us?" I asked.

"Of course, I do! The day I stopped to help you fix the porch step was the first time I had hope. I've been drawn to you for a while now, Jolene. Even when you were married."

"What?" I stared up at him. I wondered if Robby had known. Had Alan been watching me? Or had he stayed as far from me as possible, knowing I belonged to someone else?

"I caught your scent one day when you were out with Rhett. It was unlike anything I'd smelled before, and I wanted to introduce myself to you right then. I can't put into words the way I felt. I'm not sure you could understand without having experienced it too."

I started to say something and stopped. Did he mean I couldn't understand because I wasn't a shifter? I'd felt a pull to him. Had it been similar to what he experienced?

"But I worried I might scare you. So I waited, and then discovered you already had a husband." His hold on me

tightened, and I realized how much it must have hurt him. I didn't remember seeing Alan before Robby died. I'd thought he'd come to town afterward. If we'd met when Robby was still alive, how would I have felt? Would I have still been attracted to Alan?

“When did you move here?” I asked.

“Not until after the accident. But I already knew Everett and Isaac, so I'd been in Wolf Creek visiting them. I stayed longer than planned, thinking I'd found my mate. Then I saw you with your husband, and I knew I needed to leave.”

“Accident. Is that how you see it?” I asked.

“Everyone does, except apparently you. Did you kill him on purpose?”

“Of course not!”

“See? Accident.” He ran his fingers through my hair. “Jolene, I don't know what happened that day. If you ever want to talk about it, I'll listen. Otherwise, I'll keep quiet and not mention it again. Just know you have my support.”

“Thank you.” I leaned into him. “What does being your mate entail? I've never dated a shifter, so I'm not sure how this works. You said you aren't a wolf, but I'm not even sure what type of shifter you are.”

He cleared his throat. “Um, most people aren't too fond of my other form.”

“Why?”

“I'm an anaconda.”

I tensed. Wasn't that a really, really big snake? Like big enough to fill my living room? Was there only one kind? I

didn't know anything about snakes. And for good reason... I'd never wanted one in my house. Except the sexy man I couldn't get off my mind happened to be one.

"I can see you trying not to freak out. I can shift for you at some point, but not here. I'm over twenty feet long and over five hundred pounds when I'm in my anaconda form. Technically, I'm a green anaconda. My animal likes to be in water, and I'm nonvenomous in case you were concerned about that."

Nope. It hadn't crossed my mind. I was still getting past the *really big snake* part. Did that mean the two men he'd mentioned were also reptiles of some sort? How had he met them? I had so many questions right now.

"Let's go to the living room and I'll tell you whatever you'd like to know." He led me to the couch and sat, pulling me down beside him.

Was it impolite to ask about his animal side? Like, did I have to worry about him eating us if he shifted? What did I want to know first? Did I want to ask more about his animal, or about the man sitting beside me? I thought I'd gotten to know him rather well over the last five months. Now I wasn't quite as certain. Never in my wildest dreams would I have pictured him as a snake.

"How did you meet Everett and Isaac?" I asked.

"They were tracking someone in South America. I was down there visiting family. The man they were after happened to get too close to the water when I was in my snake form, and..." He pressed his lips together. "Maybe I shouldn't tell you that story."

“Did you kill him? Eat him?” I asked.

“I did kill him, but I don’t eat people. Not even as an anaconda. Although, once I’d heard what he’d done, I was wishing I’d swallowed him.” He cracked his neck. “The Devoted Guardians were a good fit for me because I believe the same things they do. The club protects women and children. The asshole I killed in South America had kidnapped a young girl and raped her repeatedly for a week. I only wish he’d suffered more.”

And that was part of what I liked about Alan. He made me feel safe. Knowing he’d felt so strongly about someone hurting a little girl made me trust him even more. I’d never once worried about him physically harming me or Rhett.

“Did Everett and Isaac invite you to visit right after meeting you?” I asked.

“No. We kept in touch. I actually helped them track someone else. After knowing one another for a while, they invited me to town. The Devoted Guardians were still relatively new, and they wanted me to check it out.”

“Why didn’t you stay then?” I asked.

“Because of you.” He smiled a little. “I knew I’d met the woman I wanted to spend my life with, except she belonged to someone else. I left and traveled for a while. Tried settling down once or twice, but after a month or two in one place, I was on the road again. Until I came back here.”

“I’m glad you decided to return to Wolf Creek.”

He leaned in closer and kissed the top of my head. It felt like butterflies were flapping around in my stomach. “Me too. If I hadn’t, I’d have missed out on having a mate and

son.”

“Son?” I looked up at him. “You think of Rhett as yours?”

“Of course.” He cupped my cheek. “How could I not? I know he already had a dad, and I’ll never try to replace Robby. But I love the kid like he was my own. I can only hope one day he’ll accept me as a father figure.”

“He already has,” I told him. “If you were to disappear from our lives, Rhett would be devastated.”

“Only Rhett?”

I shook my head. “No. I would too.”

“Good.” He leaned in slowly, giving me time to pull away... but I couldn’t.

My lips tingled in anticipation, and the moment his brushed mine, it felt like I was flying. He wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me closer. Our bodies pressed together, and his scent surrounded me. I felt myself starting to get wet, and wished it wasn’t the middle of the day. Rhett would only nap for so long, but once he was asleep at night, he didn’t get up until morning.

“Later,” I murmured. “We can’t. Not right now.”

“Right. What do you want to tell Rhett? I’m willing to go as slow as you want, Jolene.”

“I don’t want to go slow.”

“But not fast either, right?”

I nodded. “Maybe somewhere in the middle?”

“I can do that. There’s still a lot we need to learn about

one another. We have all our lives together from this point forward.”

“I can’t wait.”

\* \* \*

## **Alan**

Jolene was mine, and I’d finally told her. I’d been getting shit from my brothers at the clubhouse for months. Everyone knew I liked her, even though I hadn’t said anything about her being my mate. Walking away from her hadn’t been easy. She’d wanted to explain things to Rhett on her own, so I’d gone home. Except now I found myself at the clubhouse with a mug of beer and feeling like I’d made the wrong choice. If we were going to be a family, shouldn’t I have been there too?

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Victor asked, taking a seat next to me.

“Told Jolene she’s my mate.” I took a gulp of my drink. “She didn’t reject me, but she doesn’t want to move quite as fast as Axe and Emma did.”

“Or at the speed Henry and Raya seem to be taking?” he asked.

“Right. She doesn’t want slow, but also said not to move superfast. I told her I’d go at whatever pace she needed.”

“And now you’re having doubts?” Victor asked.

“Not exactly. It just feels like I should have been there to talk to Rhett. They’re both mine. I know I’m not his dad. I understand he already had one.”

Victor grunted. “I know Jolene loved her husband, and I don’t recall hearing anything about him treating Rhett badly, but the guy fucked up enough to be labeled a warlock.”

“Jolene said the people around town call Rhett one too. The kid can’t even do magick. How the hell could they do that to him?” I asked.

“Any idea who it is?”

“I guess everyone? They haven’t done it in front of me before. If I ever hear that shit come out of their mouths around Rhett, I’m going to bash in some heads.”

“As you should.”

Victor cracked his neck, and I could feel the tension rolling off him. Something was up. Club-related? Or had yet another of us found a mate? He looked at his watch, then scanned the room.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Need to call Church, but I know Henry can’t make it right now. Not sure Axe would be happy about being called in either.”

“Anything we can resolve without them?”

“Maybe.” He drummed his fingers on the bar top. “There’s a club down in Ashton Grove. One we’ve worked with in the past. They have a... special task force, if you will.”

“All right. Consider my interest piqued.”

“They go after people who traffic female shifters and other supernatural beings. Sometimes humans get rounded up too.” He turned to face me. “They’ve been tracking someone. It’s possible the person is heading this way. They wanted me to



keep an eye out, and I'm concerned if they're not human they may be able to enter Wolf Creek."

"Which puts the town, and the club's new mates, all in danger."

"Right. Not sure Axe and Henry need this hanging over their heads right now. They both have enough to deal with. Raya already has someone after her. I don't want to shift the focus from her situation, and yet, I'm concerned the entire town could be at risk."

"So why not let me help? I'm sure Isaac and Everett would be willing too."

"Think Axe will be pissed when he finds out?" Victor asked.

"Possibly. But we can always explain we were concerned about Raya. I'm sure he'd let it slide. Besides, it's not like the Devoted Guardians are the same as the human clubs we know. Axe isn't going to throw any of us out."

"Good point."

"Any news on Raya's situation?" I asked.

"I think Henry's working on something. He's the Sergeant-at-Arms, but it's also his mate we're talking about. He wanted to take point, and Axe let him. We're only here to help as needed." Victor stood. "If I hear more from Ashton Grove, I'll let you know. In the meantime, I guess I'm going to speak with Everett and Isaac. See how they feel about this."

"Think anyone from Ashton Grove will come here? Might not hurt to have more guys around. No telling how the mess with Raya will play out."

He nodded. “I’ll talk to their President and see what he thinks about it. I know they don’t have a lot of members, much like us, so he’ll probably want them to stick close to protect their own town.”

“Isn’t there a big wolf pack there? Maybe suggest them contacting the alpha. After all, those assholes could go for his pack too.”

Victor clapped me on the back. “You’re a good man, Alan. I’ve always appreciated your willingness to help, and you come up with good ideas. Too bad we don’t have more officer positions open in the club.”

“I’m good. I don’t need anything more than I already have.”

Victor walked out and I finished off my beer. I hadn’t had a chance to discuss things with Jolene, like where we’d live. I assumed she’d want to keep her home, since it was the only one Rhett ever had. Since I only had an apartment, I was more than fine with that. Maybe some wouldn’t feel right, moving into a house her previous husband bought, but I didn’t mind. He’d clearly cared for Jolene and Rhett. It wasn’t like I wanted to erase him from their lives.

Hell, I hoped she kept out at least some of the pictures of the warlock she’d put around the house. The man had made mistakes, clearly, but it didn’t change the fact he’d helped create Rhett... and I loved that boy like he was my own. Which was why it pissed me off when I thought about people referring to him as a warlock.

I stood and went out to my bike. Since my apartment only allowed one parking space per unit, I always left my bike here if I was in the truck, or vice versa. I might not know who

had labeled Rhett a warlock, but there was one person in town who seemed to hear every bit of gossip. The witch who ran the ice cream shop.

Normally, I loved riding my bike, and found it soothed my inner beast. Today, I wanted to reach the square as soon as possible. Parking two blocks from Martha's, I stepped through the door. The bell over my head jingled, and Martha Maybright looked up with a smile on her face.

“Alan! I haven't seen you in a while. Not since you brought little Rhett in a few weeks ago.”

“He's actually the reason I'm here.” I approached the counter, thankful no one else was in the shop. It wasn't the sort of conversation I wanted to have with other people listening in. “Jolene mentioned something and it's bothering me. Quite a bit.”

Martha hummed and nodded. “About him being called a warlock?”

“You knew?” If I'd been in my anaconda form, I'd have bared my fangs and hissed. “Why the hell didn't you do anything to stop it?”

“Because it's not my job. It's yours.” She smirked. “They're your family after all, aren't they?”

“Is there anything you *don't* know?”

“Yes. However, anyone with eyes could see the way you watch Jolene and Rhett. As to who is calling that sweet boy a warlock, it started with some gossiping mothers and spread from there. Most of the town refers to him that way, even though I doubt they mean any harm. I don't think it's really sunk in that they're in the wrong.”

“He’s just a kid! Hell, he can’t even do magick. How can he be a warlock?” I asked.

“Well, I have my theories about his magick. Same for his mom. Jolene used to make quite a bit off her spells and enchantments. Until her husband died.”

“Do you think she’ll ever get her abilities back?” It didn’t matter to me, but I could tell it bothered Jolene. What was a witch without her magick? It would be like me being unable to shift. I couldn’t imagine something so horrible.

“Hard to say.” Martha scooped some vanilla ice cream and handed the cone to me. I reached for my wallet, but she waved me off. “If I had to guess, I’d say the trauma of seeing her spell backfire and kill her husband has traumatized her to the point she’s put up a mental block of sorts. Think of it like building a wall, and her magick is hiding behind it.”

In other words, she had PTSD. Couldn’t say it surprised me. I could only imagine the horror she’d felt, watching her husband die, and knowing her magick caused his death. I wasn’t sure how to help her through it.

“It’s something she’ll have to sort out on her own,” Martha said. I often wondered if she could read minds, even though she assured everyone she couldn’t. “For now, continue to give her your support, Alan. She’s needed it more than she realized.”

“I told her she’s my mate,” I admitted.

“Good. Then everything else will fall into place. Now. About your boy... Next time he goes to the park, you hide and watch. Those kids will spout off the nonsense they’ve heard from their mothers. That’s when you can make your move.”

Her eyebrows rose. “But don’t go turning into an anaconda in the middle of town. You can scare those kids straight without letting your beast loose on them.”

I wouldn’t make any promises.

## Chapter Three

### **Jolene**

I'd been stalling. Rhett woke from his nap and immediately asked about Alan. I'd told him Alan had something to do. My little boy sat at the table eating macaroni and chicken nuggets. Even though I'd made his favorite meal for dinner, he didn't appear enthusiastic about it. If anything, he sighed frequently and kept glancing at the doorway.

"Do you have a date I don't know about?" I asked.

He rolled his eyes. "Girls are icky."

"Really? Even Mari?"

"No!" His cheeks flushed. Too stinkin' cute! His first crush. "She's different."

"Uh-huh. So what's up? You don't like my cooking anymore?"

"Why did Alan have to leave?" he asked. "You could have asked him to stay for dinner."

"Alan... There's something we need to talk about, Rhett."

He slumped in his seat. "He's leaving, isn't he?"

"What? No. Why would you think that?"

"Dad left."

My throat grew tight. "Your dad didn't leave, Rhett. He died. There's a difference. It was... an accident."

“Because your spell went wrong?” he asked.

“Yeah. I guess you’re old enough to hear more about the way your dad died. You’re growing up so fast.” I ruffled his hair. “You know I used to do a lot of magick, and I used it to help people around town. They paid me to create spells or potions for them.”

“So what happened?”

“Someone asked for a healing potion. It involved an incantation, and a mix of ingredients. I had to heat the liquid while chanting the spell. And... something went wrong. The potion exploded, and your dad jumped in front of me. The goo inside the bottle hit your dad in the chest, and it killed him instantly.”

Rhett’s brow furrowed. “Why would a healing potion kill him?”

“Because I mixed up the ingredients.” I chewed my lower lip. “I grabbed the wrong herb. So, it’s my fault your dad is gone. If I’d been more careful, then maybe...”

Rhett got down off his chair and came over. He gave me the tightest hug. “It’s okay, Mom. Like you said, it was an accident. Dad wanted to protect you.”

“You’re right. He did.”

“Why couldn’t Alan stay, then? What did you need to tell me?” Rhett asked.

This was one of the moments he seemed older than his six years. “You know Alan is a shifter, right?”

“Of course. Everyone knows that.”

“Do you know what he turns into?” I asked.

“No. He’s never told me. But once I saw his eyes slit like a reptile’s. Is he some sort of lizard?”

“Um, not exactly. Alan is an anaconda.”

“What’s that?” Rhett asked.

“A really, really big snake.” I forced a smile. I wasn’t sure how I felt about being mated to an anaconda. The thought still terrified me. “He said we can see him sometime, but not here. He’s too big to shift in the house.”

“Did he have to leave because you don’t like snakes?” Rhett asked.

“No. I wouldn’t make Alan leave because of something like that. He’s always been good to us. The fact he shifts into an anaconda doesn’t change that. But he told me something important. About him, and us.”

“What?”

“Do you know about shifters having mates?” I asked.

“Sure. It’s what the shifter moms and dads call each other. Instead of husband and wife. Right?”

“Yes. Well, Alan said that I’m his mate.”

Rhett’s eyes went wide. “Really? Does that mean he can be my dad now?”

I slumped in my chair. This wasn’t going the way I’d pictured. I’d thought Rhett would have reservations or be confused. If anything, it looked like my boy was excited about Alan being his father. Perhaps I should have seen it coming. The two of them did share a special bond.

“Yeah. It means Alan will be your dad. I told him I



wanted to take things a little slow, to give all of us time to adjust to the changes in our lives.”

“Can he move in soon? Or will we have to go live at his place?”

“We haven’t discussed it yet. I only found out about being his mate while you were taking a nap. I’m sure there’s still a lot we need to work out.”

Rhett took his seat again and started eating. “You should ask him to come over. I’ll be really quiet. That way he can hurry up and be my dad.”

Was it really so simple for Rhett? Of course, he didn’t understand everything that went into becoming someone’s mate. It was more than where we’d live. Having a man in our lives twenty-four hours a day would bring a lot of changes. For one, it wouldn’t be only Alan we’d be gaining. Since he was a member of the Devoted Guardians MC, we’d also be part of his club the way Emma was for Axe, or Raya with Henry. I’d enjoyed my time meeting them at the park, and Rhett wouldn’t mind seeing more of Mari.

What concerned me was the dangerous side of the Devoted Guardians. I’d heard about what happened when someone came after Emma. Over the years, there’d been murmurs around town about the club taking out bad men and women. What happened if Alan went after someone and it endangered Rhett?

“Call him. Please,” Rhett said. “I’ll go play in my room.”

He hopped down and hurried out of the room. After I placed his dishes in the sink, I decided my son made a good

point. The sooner I talked to Alan, the faster I could get my questions answered. Except I was too chicken to call, so I sent a text instead.

*Can you come over?*

He responded in less than a minute. *On my way.*

No questions about what I needed, or could it wait. I'd asked him to drop whatever he was doing and come running, and that's exactly what he was doing. I knew there were a lot of men who wouldn't do something like that. In fact, I'd been married to one. How many times had Robby been out with his friends and told me he'd be home when he was ready?

I heard the pipes on Alan's motorcycle, and I opened the front door. He hurried up the steps, scanning me from head to toe. That's when I realized he'd been worried. Crap! I should have explained why I wanted him to stop by.

"I'm fine," I said. "So is Rhett."

"Then... you just wanted to see me?"

"I think we need to talk about the mate thing. I told Rhett. He's pretty excited about you being his dad."

Alan grinned. "Really? I am too."

"Anyway. He asked a few questions I didn't have answers to. I thought we could figure out a few basics. Is that okay?"

"More than."

"I'll make some coffee. We can sit in the kitchen. Or would you prefer the living room?" I asked.

"Whatever is most comfortable for you. Jolene, I will

always put you first. Both you and Rhett.”

I nodded. He followed me to the kitchen. While the coffee brewed, I pulled out a chair and sat. Where did I even begin? We were talking about a lifetime commitment, and yet we hadn't been intimate. What if he thought I sucked in bed? Robby hadn't been very thrilled the times we'd slept together. Then again, he'd mostly climbed on top of me, grunted for a few minutes, and then he was done. But he'd been kind to me, and even sweet at times, so I'd overlooked his faults. It wasn't like I was perfect either.

“He asked where we'd live,” I said.

“I have a small apartment. Since this has been Rhett's home his entire life, I thought I'd move in here. Only when the two of you are ready for that step.”

“You don't mind moving in here?”

He reached over and took my hand. “I'm not trying to replace Robby. I want you to keep his pictures out. Talk about him with Rhett. He was a big part of your life. We can make our own memories together, but it doesn't mean I want you to wipe out the ones you already have with the man who helped create the most special little boy in the entire world.”

“You keep saying all the right things.” I squeezed his fingers then stood so I could pour him some coffee. “You must have questions for me as well.”

“A few.”

“I'm an open book.” I smiled and reclaimed my seat. “What do you want to know?”

“For one, since both you and Robby had magick, how

likely is it that Rhett will never have magickal abilities?”

“It’s rare. Now if you and I were to have a child, then it would be a fifty-fifty chance the baby would be able to do magick, or to shift. I don’t know why Rhett can’t do magick. The doctor says there’s nothing wrong with him. He could be a late bloomer.”

“Is it possible something is blocking his abilities?” Alan asked.

“You mean like me?” I ran a hand through my hair. “I could do magick before it caused my husband’s death. I think I’m so scared something will go wrong again, it’s kept me from being able to do the simplest spells. It’s not the same for Rhett. I even asked the coven to test him for magick. If he has any, they couldn’t detect it.”

“I love him regardless of what he can or can’t do,” Alan said. “To me, he’s perfect the way he is.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” I sighed. “I do have more questions. One feels heavier than the others. What happens if your club gets into trouble?”

“I’m not sure I follow. You’ll have to be more specific.”

“You’ve taken down some bad people over the years. Right? What if you go after one, and they come for me and Rhett? How likely is that to happen?” I asked.

“I can’t say for certain. Until recently, none of us had mates or children. Now that we do, I’m sure we’ll be more careful and take on less dangerous jobs. I don’t know what the future holds, Jolene. None of us does. I can’t promise you’ll always be safe and never be in harm’s way because I’ll never

lie to you. I will only make vows I know I can keep.” He stood and tugged my hand until I joined him. Alan placed his other hand at my waist. “But I do promise to do my best to protect the two of you. Jolene, you and Rhett are my entire world. I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe. Sometimes that might mean I have to kill people. Are you okay with that?”

I nodded. I couldn’t very well tell him not to. While Alan and I still didn’t know a lot about one another, I could say with absolute certainty that he’d never hurt an innocent person.

Slowly, he lowered his head. I didn’t back away. My heart raced as his lips touched mine. I gasped and leaned into him. My lips tingled and it felt like heat surged in my veins. Was this what it meant to be someone’s mate? Was that why it felt so different from being with Robby?

I reached up and curled my arm around his neck, pulling him down more. It felt like he might devour me, and I was more than willing to let him. For the first time since I had Rhett, I wanted something for myself. A life with Alan. But more than anything, I wanted this feeling to continue, and to see where it would lead.

\* \* \*

## **Alan**

As ready as I was to claim my mate, I didn’t want Jolene to feel like I was pushing for too much too fast. Kissing her had been amazing, but I’d stopped it there. Of course, I wasn’t strong enough to walk away when she asked if I wanted to stay over. Which meant I was now lying in bed with

a sleeping Jolene pressed against my side. I'd kept on my clothes and only removed my boots, cut, and belt. Even if Rhett said he was excited about me being his new dad, I didn't want him to wander in here and catch me naked in bed with his mom.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I pulled it out. The incoming text from Victor wasn't the news I'd wanted. He'd spoken to Ghost, the President down in Ashton Grove, and it seemed their task force didn't just *think* the traffickers were in our area, they were certain of it.

*The Montez family has three men currently near Wolf Creek. Since most of their organization are supernaturals, it's quite possible they could already be in town. Without knowing their identities, I can't warn the mayor.*

I couldn't say I agreed with Victor entirely.

*You could tell her what's going on. Might make her think twice about giving anyone permission to be here.*

Then again, there were those who could slip in undetected, much like the dark mage had done not long ago. It might be time to tighten the town's security. There had to be a spell not only to keep humans away, but to remove the possibility of strangers entering without permission.

Victor answered after a few minutes. *I'll let her know, and I'll let Axe know what's up too.*

Good. I didn't like the idea of the Pres being out of the loop on all this. I knew he had a lot going on, especially with Henry's new mate being in danger, but this was bigger than just our club. The entire town could be at risk, and I didn't like that thought one bit. What if they weren't just after shifters this

time? Would they come for Jolene? So far, they didn't seem to want children. Or at least, if they did, no one had told us anything.

*Anyone from Ashton Grove coming here?* It would be nice if we had some extra help. Especially since this shit storm started in their territory.

*They're sending a grizzly and coyote shifter. One is their Secretary.*

I didn't give a fuck who they sent, as long as they weren't planning to sit on their asses while we resolved this issue. How had they found these bastards anyway? What sort of intel did they have? I didn't like the idea of us flying blind. Surely they knew more than they were saying.

*Are they sharing anything else?* I asked.

*Not yet.*

Great. So we had no idea who was here. No clue what they looked like. Or who they were after. This was an utter clusterfuck. Something told me Axe wouldn't be happy when he found out. If he came after me for keeping my mouth shut, I'd take the beating. I'd earned it. It was one thing for Victor to keep something from him, but I should have spoken up right away. Even though Victor didn't want to upset Axe and Henry, this looked like it could be bigger than either of us had expected. If this came back to bite us in the ass, I hoped Victor made Axe aware it had been his call to keep silent.

Jolene whimpered in her sleep and rolled away from me. I watched her for a moment, then got out of bed. Heading for the kitchen, I called Victor.

"Figured there was a reason you were texting," he said

when the call connected.

“Jolene was sleeping next to me. I decided to get up and call instead of messaging back and forth like a couple of teen girls.”

Victor chuckled. “Fuck you, asshole. And I’m glad things are going well with Jolene.”

“Told her we can take it slow, but she wanted me to stay over. We haven’t done more than kiss, and I’m fine with it. I’ve waited this long, so what’s a few more days, weeks, or even months?”

“That’s a good mindset to have. I know some guys wouldn’t be so understanding.”

“You think Axe is going to lose his shit when he hears about all this?” I asked. “We did lie by omission.”

“We did,” Victor agreed. “But I thought it would be one person, and they weren’t guaranteed to come to our town. In fact, I’d planned to head out tomorrow to try tracking them.”

“Uh, how the fuck were you going to do that without knowing *who* you were searching for?”

“Good point. I guess I’m restless. Something feels off about all this. There’s almost an urgency building inside me, like I need to find these fuckers right away. I can’t really explain it.”

According to what little we knew, these people gathered shifter females to sell. What if one of them was Victor’s mate? Could that be what he was feeling right now? Did he sense she might be nearby? If it was someone from



town, he would have found her by now. Did the men coming to Wolf Creek have captives with them? If they did, it might make it easier to find them.

“I think you should call the mayor and ask if a group of men, possibly with some women, asked to enter the town recently. I don’t think the guys are alone. They probably already have some shifters enslaved and ready to sell. But you and I both know there isn’t a damn soul in this town who would buy them. At least, not anymore.”

“Right, because Elias would have without any hesitation,” Victor said.

“He’s dead. Everyone else in town checks out. While we do have some more dark mages in town, none are on the same level as Elias. For the most part, they want to live peacefully in Wolf Creek.”

“I’ll call her and see if I can find out anything. But I think I should call Axe first. Keep your phone handy just in case. He may call Church if he feels this is big enough. Or he may let us handle it so he and Henry can stay focused on Raya’s situation.”

“I’m good with either scenario,” I said. “I’ll help wherever I’m needed most.”

“Enjoy the night with your mate and kid. Oh, since we do have two people heading this way from Ashton Grove, do you care if I let one of them use your room at the clubhouse?”

“I may have a better idea. For now, let’s plan on them using my apartment. I’ll talk to Jolene in the morning and see how she feels about me slowly moving in. I don’t have to bring everything at once, but I could pack most of the clothes

and everyday shit. Call it a trial run to let Rhett get used to things.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Victor said.

He ended the call without another word, and I pocketed my phone. Since this wasn't technically club business yet, did that mean I could tell Jolene about the potential threat? Or should I wait? It really depended on Axe's reaction. However, the thought of my mate and kid being in danger made my skin tingle, and I wanted to shift in the worst way. Nothing better to chase off a bunch of assholes than letting my anaconda loose. Of course, there was the chance they could piss me off bad enough I might actually eat them. Although, I always tried really hard not to do that. Sometimes it was a struggle to fight the urges of my beast, but at the end of the day, I was still a person too.

“Everything okay?”

I jolted and realized Jolene stood in the kitchen doorway. How the hell hadn't I heard her? Or felt the vibration of her steps? Something. Anything.

“Had to make a call. I didn't wake you, did I?” I asked.

“More like your absence did.” She smiled. “I know it doesn't make sense since it's only our first night sharing a bed. It's not like I'm used to you being beside me already.”

“Sounds logical to me.” I crossed the kitchen and pulled her into my arms. “Let's head back to bed. There's something I need to ask you. In the morning. We don't need to stay up all night talking.”

“Does it have to do with your phone call?”

“Yes and no. There’s two members from another club coming to visit. I thought about letting them use my apartment. Except we haven’t discussed when I would move in. Would you care if I brought some clothes and basics over and slept here a few nights? I don’t want to make too many changes right off.”

“Rhett and I would love to have you move in,” she said. Jolene went up on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to my cheek. “Get your things tomorrow. As far as I’m concerned, this is your house too. I’ll make sure you have a set of keys.”

“So much for going slow, huh?”

“I already told you I wanted to land somewhere in the middle. Not fast, but not creeping along like a tortoise either.”

I tipped her chin up and kissed her softly. “Good. Then I look forward to moving in.”

Hell, I was looking forward to a lot more than that, but I’d keep those thoughts to myself right now.

## Chapter Four

### **Jolene**

A month after Robby died, I'd packed up his belongings. I'd left our family pictures around the house, and I still couldn't bring myself to take them down. But all of his clothes and personal things were in boxes. I hadn't given anything away, in case Rhett ever wanted any of it. He had a baseball cap his dad had worn all the time, and I'd given him Robby's watch. I'd held onto his wedding band, in the event Rhett ever asked about it. Everything else, however, sat in the corner of the garage in a stack of cardboard boxes.

Which meant I had plenty of space for Alan to bring in his clothes and anything else he wanted to keep. He'd assured me he didn't need his furniture. It still felt awkward, knowing Robby and I had chosen the items in this house. Didn't it make him even the slightest bit uncomfortable? If our roles were reversed, I'd imagine I would feel like an intruder.

Once things settled a little more, maybe I'd suggest we replace a few things. Like buying new dishes or picking out bedding together. Small things. I didn't know his financial situation, and mine was less than ideal, so purchasing a new couch might not be feasible. I'd make this a home for our new family in any way I could. If that meant doing things a little at a time, then that's what I'd do.

I looked around the bedroom and realized I'd never considered repainting any of the walls. For that matter, Robby hadn't done that either. The house looked the same as it had

when we'd moved in.

“You're thinking awfully hard,” Alan said, coming up behind me.

“I realized I hadn't made any changes to this house even after we first moved in. Everything is exactly the same. Well, except the kitchen. I had no choice but to have it somewhat renovated after...” I swallowed hard. It had taken me a long time to go into that room and not immediately see my husband lying on the floor in a pool of blood.

“You know, I said we'd stay in this house because it was the only home Rhett had ever known. It never occurred to me it would be difficult for you to live here. My apartment is too small for the three of us, but if you'd like to move we can pick out a house together.”

He really was the sweetest man. I didn't know how I'd gotten so lucky. Out of all the women in the world, how had I ended up being Alan's mate? Any woman would be blessed to have him in their lives. He deserved so much more than I could ever give him.

“We can talk to Rhett about it later. I think he should be included in a decision like that,” I said. He might only be six years old, but as Alan pointed out, this was the only home Rhett had ever known. What if he didn't want to move?

“The two men staying in my apartment are shifters. One is a coyote and the other is a grizzly. It's possible I'll get called in to Church today.”

“And by that you don't mean you're going to go pray to God, right?” I asked.

He smirked. “Think of it as a meeting, except it's club

members only. If our club had any prospects, they wouldn't be permitted either."

"So Rhett and I should stay here and wait for you?" I asked.

"If I do get called in, I'll find out what Emma and Raya are doing. It's possible they may go to the clubhouse to wait for their men."

"Which means we could go too?" I asked.

"Yep. Even though I haven't marked you as my mate, it doesn't change the fact that's who you are. Which means you're technically my old lady."

"Excuse me? I'm not old!"

He snickered. "It's not about your age. Besides, I'm way older than you. I'm robbing the cradle by claiming you. Let's not forget I was born in the early nineteen hundreds."

"Then what does it mean?" I asked.

"It's a term bikers use for their women. In some clubs, they consider those women their wives, even without a legal marriage. For us, since we're all shifters, our mates are our old ladies."

"Does that mean I get one of those vest things like you wear?" I asked.

"A cut? Technically, you should. Since Emma and Raya are the first old ladies the club has ever had, we're figuring shit out as we go along. But if you want one, yours will say *Property of Alan* on the back. Doesn't sound as menacing as the clubs who use road names like the guys visiting. One is called Digger and the other is Scorch."

I shook my head. “Not sure I could keep a straight face if I had to refer to you as something like that. Nothing wrong with the name Alan.”

“If you don’t want to go to the clubhouse whenever I head that way, you could always take Rhett to the park.” He kissed the side of my neck. “I can join you later.”

It wasn’t the first time we’d gone to the park together. Except Alan was usually already there, waiting for us to arrive. What if he overheard the moms and kids talking about Rhett? I hadn’t found the courage to say anything. Part of me worried if I made a big deal out of it in front of Rhett, then it would hurt him even more. While he didn’t really understand why people called him a warlock, to him it wasn’t anything bad. Not yet. He knew his father had been one, but I couldn’t recall us ever explaining what it meant.

“I’m sure he’d love to go play,” I said. “It’s safe, right?”

“Do me a favor and be careful. I know Wolf Creek is fairly safe, but strangers do come to town on occasion. I can’t go into detail of what the club is dealing with, but I want you to be more cautious than usual. While the mayor tries to keep the people safe, she’s not perfect. Even one bad person is too many.”

“Is something going on?” I asked. This wasn’t the first time I’d felt like he was keeping something from me. It probably had to do with his club.

“There’s a chance someone could be after Raya. I don’t know anything about the vampire in question. None of us do. I think Henry is trying to resolve it without involving the rest of us too much. Either way, it doesn’t hurt to be extra vigilant.”

“All right. I mean, it’s daytime, so I doubt I have to worry about being kidnapped by a vampire. But yes, I’ll make sure to keep an eye on my surroundings.” I turned in his arms and hugged him tight. “I know I’m hopeless at being a witch these days, but I’m not entirely useless.”

“Didn’t say you were.” He ran his hand over my hair. “I think you’re rather remarkable, Jolene. Doesn’t matter to me if you can still do magick or not. However, that being said, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with your abilities. I think what you went through was so horrific it’s affected you psychologically, and in turn your magick has gone on the fritz.”

“Quite possible. I’m not sure how to overcome it. Maybe one day.”

“Even if you can’t ever do magick again, it won’t make you any less special to me, Jolene. You’re my mate. The one woman in the entire world meant to be mine. I don’t care if you can do spells or make potions. Just be... you.”

I leaned into him. If only that were enough, but who exactly was I without my magick? Being able to do the things he mentioned was what made me a witch. Could I be called one if I couldn’t do the simplest things anymore? I hadn’t only lost Robby that day. I’d also lost my sense of self. I’d felt lost all this time, and while Alan always made my day brighter, even he couldn’t fix what was wrong with me. I had a feeling he was right. It was all in my head, which meant the only one who could fix me was... me.

Only one problem. I didn’t know how.

“Come on, beautiful. Let’s watch a movie with Rhett. He’s in the living room picking out a cartoon.”



He took my hand and led me from the room. Rhett sat on the couch, kicking his feet with the remote clutched in his hand. His favorite animated movie already played on the TV. Since he'd claimed the spot in the middle, it meant Alan and I would have to sit on either side of him.

Or so I'd thought. Alan reached down to pick up Rhett, then sat and placed my boy in his lap. He held out his arm and I curled into his side. Rhett giggled before watching his movie again.

I'd always known children were resilient and were more accepting of people than most adults. He'd enjoyed being with Alan all these months. Maybe I shouldn't be surprised at how quickly he accepted a new dad into his life, since it was the one man he adored. Still... I kept waiting for something to change, for my bad luck to kick in and for everything to go wrong.

It all seemed a little too easy.

\* \* \*

## **Alan**

I'd been right about Church, except Henry was missing. I looked around the table and realized I wasn't the only one wondering why our Sergeant-at-Arms wasn't present. If the shifters from Ashton Grove weren't here, I'd have thought we were going to discuss something else. But it didn't seem likely.

“Henry is adjusting to having a new mate and kids, as well as doing whatever he can to track the vampire after Raya. In the meantime, we have other matters to handle. I'm going to

let Scorch take the floor,” Axe said.

“I don’t know if everyone has already heard but there are three men in your town who are known for trafficking shifter women. Although, we think they sometimes deviate, which means none of the females in your town are safe.” Scorch cleared his throat. “I don’t have pictures of them. I do know one is of Hispanic descent, and another has ice blond hair. The third man remains a mystery to us, but there was evidence there *are* three of them.”

“Do you know if they brought any captives with them?” Everett asked.

“We aren’t sure, but it’s quite possible.” Scorch sighed. “They’re part of a much larger group. Shifter females are disappearing across the country. We think they’re selling them overseas, or to brothels.”

“Any been found alive?” I asked.

“Yes. Although, they’re usually so broken it takes a long time for them to heal.” Digger shifted in his seat. “This isn’t the first group we’ve gone after. Our club has a special task force to handle these situations. Except this time, it’s much bigger than we anticipated.”

“We aren’t the only shifter clubs in the country,” I said. “Why not reach out to the others? If we’re all aware of what’s happening, maybe we can at least slow them down. I’m not sure it’s possible to wipe them out entirely. Take out one evil bastard and three more will spring up somewhere.”

Scorch nodded. “It’s not a bad idea. I’ll bring it up to our club President when we get back. Know of any other clubs offhand who might be interested?”

“Steel Riders. Several of them have mates and kids. They’ll want to make sure their families stay safe. There are others, but I don’t know if they’d be willing to lend a hand or not. I don’t personally know them. I’ve only heard of them.” In fact, a few were closer than they realized. I’d spotted them the times I’d left Wolf Creek. Even though I knew they’d scented me on the wind, none of them had approached. I’d decided to leave them be. Now I wondered if it had been a mistake.

“So we possibly have a vampire in town searching for Raya, and three traffickers we need to put in the ground. Anyone talk to the sheriff? How’s he feel about this?” I asked. Last thing I wanted was Sheriff Haskins coming to lock me up for stepping out of place.

“Not yet.” Axe steepled his fingers. “I’ll call him when we’re done here. If he has a problem with us handling things our way, I’ll make sure everyone is aware. Until then, do whatever is necessary to protect those we love.”

“I moved in with Jolene this morning,” I said. “I know it’s off topic, but you need to know. She’s my mate. I haven’t marked her yet because she doesn’t want to rush things. I’ve waited this long, so I don’t see the harm in giving her what she needs.”

“Congrats.” Scorch smiled. “Lucky bastard!”

“Once the dust settles, we’ll have a family night at the clubhouse,” Axe said. “I know the kids will enjoy it, and I’m sure our women will too. Just make sure you’ve officially made her yours by then. She seen your big-ass snake?”

Scorch coughed to cover up a laugh, and I rolled my eyes. “He didn’t mean my dick. I literally shift into an

anaconda.”

“No shit?” Digger leaned forward with a smile curving his lips. “That’s so fucking cool! Never met one of your kind before.”

“We aren’t exactly common in the US. For that matter, there aren’t a lot of us to begin with.” I shrugged. “And no, Axe, she hasn’t seen my other form yet. I told her about it. The look on her face clearly told me she’s freaked about being mated to a snake, much less one my size.”

“I would think a lot of women wouldn’t be thrilled about it,” Victor said. “But I saw the way she looked at you, Alan. It won’t matter what you shift into. Just show her and get it out of the way.”

I knew he was right. Didn’t make it any easier. What I had with Jolene still felt fragile. Maybe if I’d marked her I would feel differently. At the same time, I didn’t want to rush her.

“What if Digger or I find the assholes before your club does?” Scorch asked. “Is your sheriff going to come for us?”

“I’ll talk to him,” Axe said. “For now, try to detain them if you do see them in town. And if it at all possible, keep any violence away from the citizens of Wolf Creek. We have some who can hold their own, but we also have a lot of kids here.”

“And bunny shifters,” Victor muttered. “Look at them sternly and they’ll flinch and run.”

“At least your town is mostly supernaturals. We have a lot of humans in Ashton Grove,” Digger said. “And they don’t know we exist. Makes it hard to handle shifter-related issues.”

“Or fae,” Scorch said. “The local pack has recently had an influx of fae. The alpha’s new mate is part-fae.”

“Interesting.” Victor tipped his head to the side. “Never thought of bonding with a fae. Of course, we haven’t had many come through Wolf Creek.”

“If we’re done here, I’d like to take a stroll around town, see if I can sniff out the men we’re hunting,” Scorch said. “I’m sure you have things to discuss that don’t concern my club or our visit.”

“Very true,” Axe said. “All right. You and Digger may go. The rest of you stay for a moment.”

Once the other two had left, Axe sighed and leaned back in his chair. Victor eyed our President, and I had to wonder what was up. It looked like he’d aged overnight. What the hell was going on now? Was it related to Henry and Raya?

“Henry reached out to a club in Alabama. One of their brothers is the top hacker in this country,” Axe said. “And human. My dumbass brother exposed us, and our town, all in the name of protecting his mate.”

“What the fuck?” I asked.

“He swears the guy is cool and won’t out us. If anything, he seemed overly excited about shifters being real. He’s going to help Henry locate the vampire who’s after Raya. I can understand why my brother did it, but it doesn’t mean I agree.”

“So a human knows about us.” Victor folded his arms. “Well, Emma is human. So is Cody. Maybe this guy really will keep his mouth shut.”

“Does he know where the town is?” I asked.

“Not sure. I don’t think Henry told him. Honestly, he has a second chance at having a family. I’m trying to be lenient.” Axe wiped a hand down his face. “He saw his woman slaughtered; their unborn child died. I thought he’d never recover. Now he has Raya, Mari, and Logan. I understand why he’ll do whatever it takes to protect them, even if it means trusting a human.”

“If this works out, maybe the guy would be willing to help us with other things?” Everett asked. “You said he’s a hacker, right? That means he should be able to find things, or people, we can’t. Like, for instance, traffickers?”

I nodded. I saw where Everett was going with this. As much as I hated the thought of humans knowing about us and Wolf Creek, I did like the idea of having another way of protecting my new family. And yeah, I got it. If Jolene and Rhett were in trouble, I’d go to any lengths to keep them safe.

“If this blows up in our faces, we’ll go from there,” Axe said. “For now, just focus on this other shit. I’ll help Henry if he needs it.”

“I don’t mind being on standby too,” I said.

Axe nodded. “Okay. Everyone is dismissed. Let’s find the fuckers who dared enter our town with the intent to steal our females.”

“To be clear, that’s *our* as in the townspeople, right?” Isaac asked.

“Yes, the townspeople,” Axe said.

I stood and left the room before those two could start

arguing. There were times it seemed like Isaac enjoyed pushing Axe's buttons.

Well, if we were going to scout the town for traffickers, then I might as well peek in on Jolene and Rhett. They were likely still at the park. I rode my bike, but parked a few blocks away, not wanting to alert Jolene to my presence. I remembered what Martha had said. The moms and their kids called Rhett a warlock when I wasn't present, which meant if I snuck up on them, I might catch them red-handed.

I only hoped I could control my shift if I lost it. The thought of anyone hurting little Rhett pissed me the fuck off.

I walked over to the park and stuck to the trees, keeping to the shadows so no one would see me. Sure, the shifters would eventually sniff me out, but since I was downwind, it would take them longer.

Rhett was near the sandbox. Alone. I crept closer and listened intently. Two boys were on the slide.

"Stupid warlock. Why does he even come here?" one of them asked.

"Beats me."

Their mothers were on the benches a few feet from them, and even with the low murmur of their voices, I still picked up enough to hear them badmouthing not only Rhett but my mate as well.

"Some women have no taste in men," the blonde one said. "A warlock. What did she expect would happen when they had kids?"

The redhead sighed. "Really. I heard she was once

pretty powerful. She could have done so much better.”

“Did you hear one of the Devoted Guardians has been helping them?” the blonde asked.

“Are you sure? I mean, I guess it makes sense. They do tend to take care of those who are too weak to do things themselves.” The redhead laughed, and I felt my fangs sprout from my gums. My vision shifted and I knew my pupils had elongated.

I moved fast, lifting the women off the bench, one in each hand. “Say that shit again.”

The blonde squealed and thrashed. The redhead’s eyes went wide, and she dangled, fear coming off her in waves. The stench nearly made me gag.

“Mom!” One of the little brats rushed toward us.

“Tell your children that you’re wrong,” I said, giving them each a little shake. “That little boy is the sweetest, kindest kid I’ve ever met. And his mom isn’t someone weak who needs to be pitied.”

I felt a hand on my back and turned my head. Jolene stared up at me. “Alan, it’s okay. I never wanted you to hear any of this.”

“You knew they were saying this shit?” I asked.

“They’ve talked about me ever since I married Robby. It’s fine. It’s just words, Alan.”

“No, it’s far from fucking fine, Jolene.” I glared at the two women. “If either of you, or anyone else says one more bad thing about my mate and kid, I won’t hold back my shift. I’ll let my animal out, and I’ll throw all my human morals in



the trash. We'll see how much you like running your mouth when you're being squeezed to death."

The redhead whimpered and I smelled the stench of her urine. I knew Axe would rip me a new one later, but I didn't care. I dropped the women and faced their little shits.

Jolene patted my arm. "No, Alan. They're just kids who repeat what they hear."

"What they need is a spanking," I said. "Clearly their parents aren't disciplining them. Hell, their parents never learned basic manners either."

"Alan, is this what you want Rhett to learn? To answer his problems by scaring people?" she asked. All my anger drained at her words.

"No. I don't." I turned to find Rhett. He watched us intently, and I rushed to his side, scooping him up in my arms. "Sorry, little man. I lost my temper when I heard them talking about you and your mom. It was the wrong way to handle the situation."

"Mom says to use my words," Rhett said.

"That's right." I patted his back and eyed the women and kids who had been tormenting my family. I might be verbally agreeing with Rhett and Jolene, but deep down, I still wanted to scare the shit out of those four. I didn't think telling them how I felt about their actions would do a damn thing. Some people had to learn things the hard way.

"Come on. Let's go home," Jolene said.

"Ice cream?" Rhett blinked up at me. "Please?"

"What do you think, Jolene? Can we get ice cream

before we go home?” I winked at her. She shook her head and smiled. Curving my arm around her shoulders, I walked off with my family... but I still managed to cast one last glare at the four people I wouldn't be forgetting anytime soon.

## Chapter Five

### **Jolene**

I felt torn between being thrilled over Alan's need to protect Rhett, and upset he'd manhandled the other moms. I could see his point of view, and I knew shifters tended to react first and ask questions later. It didn't mean it was the right way to handle things. I didn't want Rhett to grow up thinking he could solve everything with his fists. For one, he'd never be as tough as a shifter, especially if he didn't tap into his magick. Second, I worried he'd decide it would be easier to hit someone than to try working things out. Of course, it didn't mean I thought Alan did that. Well, not all the time. Clearly, when it came to Rhett, any rational thought went out the window.

Now would be a great time to have some friends. I wondered if it would be weird for me to ask for Emma's number. I'd ask Raya, but it seemed like she had a lot going on already. They were both mated to shifters, but I felt like Emma was the better choice right now. She might be able to answer some of my questions. Or help me figure out where we should go from here. I knew Alan was all in, and I was too. And yet, taking that final step made me anxious. Mostly because I wasn't sure how Rhett would react. But more than that, I also worried about... everything in all honesty.

"You all right?" Alan asked.

"Yeah. Um, I was wondering... Do you think Emma would mind if I called her?"

“Not at all. Feel like you need some girl time?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s it exactly. Besides, she’s with Axe so I figured she could tell me what it’s like being with someone in the Devoted Guardians. You know, from a woman’s perspective.”

He pulled his phone out and unlocked it before handing it over. “She’s under my contacts. Give her a call and set up something. Bet she’d love to go meet you for coffee. If the two of you want to go to The Bean, I’ll watch Rhett.”

I took it and hurried into the other room. It only took three rings before Emma answered.

“Alan? Is everything okay?” she asked when the call connected.

“It’s actually Jolene. Are you busy right now?” I could hear Cody and Axe in the background.

“Not at all. What’s up?”

If I’d interrupted their family time, she’d have told me so, right? I could only hope. I didn’t want Axe to hate me right off. Or ever.

“Do you like coffee? Or tea?”

“That’s a bit random.” Emma laughed a little. “Yeah, I do.”

“Want to meet me over at The Bean in about twenty minutes? I need someone to talk to. A woman. You specifically.” Why the hell was I rambling like an idiot?

“I’ll be there. And coffee’s on me, so don’t buy anything if you beat me there. Just grab a table.”

Before I could say anything, she hung up. I took the phone back to Alan and handed it over. He leaned against the counter and folded his arms, staring me down. Oh yeah. Shifter hearing. I winced. He'd heard everything.

“Have fun with Emma. And Jolene...? You don't have to hide anything from me. If you have doubts or feel the slightest bit uneasy about being my mate, then just say so.”

“It's not that. Not really.” I knew Alan was a good man. He'd proven it over and over again. This had more to do with my own insecurities than anything else. Sure, I could open up to him, tell him everything weighing on me. It just didn't feel like the right thing to do. I needed to sort through a few things first, and I hoped Emma could help.

“But it's something you feel like only a woman could understand or answer?” he asked.

“Yes. Are you mad?”

He smiled faintly. “No. I'm glad you feel comfortable enough to reach out to Emma. I know she could use some more friends, and so can you. Enjoy your time with her, and come home when you're ready. Rhett and I will be fine.”

“I know you will.” I hesitated a moment, then rushed over and hugged him tight. “I've entrusted you with the most precious person in my life many times, Alan. I've never left Rhett with just anyone.”

He kissed the top of my head. “Be careful. Remember to stay aware of your surroundings.”

I went to freshen up, then nearly ran to my car so I could get to The Bean. While I did have some things to ask Emma, I had to admit it also excited me that I might have a

new friend. How long had it been since I'd had one? Seemed like forever. The ones I'd had while I was with Robby weren't women I was particularly close with. At least, not once I lost my magick.

When I stepped inside The Bean, I saw Emma already waiting at a table in the corner. She waved and smiled.

"You haven't been waiting long, have you?" I asked.

"Only about three minutes. Now, what do you want to drink? Axe shoved a bunch of cash into my hand before I left. We have plenty for drinks and even something from the bakery."

"I'll take a hot white mocha."

"Is that it?" she asked. "Not even a blueberry muffin? Or their pumpkin scones? Both are really good."

"Surprise me." I couldn't remember the last time I'd had money to come here for a drink, much less anything to eat.

She returned after placing our order and reclaimed her seat. "Now. Is this just a friendly visit, or do you need help?"

"A bit of both. I don't really have friends. Not close ones. Since you're with Axe, and I'm now with Alan, I thought..." I knew our two men being in the same motorcycle club didn't automatically make us friends. Yet it's what I wanted, more than anything.

"I'm relatively new to town still. I can use all the friends I can get." She smiled. "Technically, since Axe and Alan are brothers, it means we're family. Although, with your son being infatuated with Henry's new daughter, maybe we should only think of Raya as a friend, otherwise it might be

weird later.”

I couldn't help but laugh. With the kids only being five and six, it was entirely too early to even think of something like that. Although, I did find the two of them rather adorable.

“Feeling overwhelmed?” Emma asked.

“A little. I've lived in this town my entire life. Shifters and mates aren't exactly a new concept for me. But I never thought I'd be someone's mate. I married Robby when I wasn't even twenty yet. I'd thought we'd be together forever.” I slumped in my chair. “I know Alan has more experience than me. What if I disappoint him in the bedroom? Or in any other way?”

Emma's expression softened. “Jolene, I may not know Alan very well, but I can promise your lack of experience won't bother him. Be sure to tell him what you like and dislike. I think as long as the two of you communicate, everything will be fine.”

“Does it ever worry you, or scare you? Knowing Axe is part of a motorcycle club?”

“No. I was with a violent man before Axe came into our lives. Cody lived in fear of his father, and so did I. That big, growly wolf swept me off my feet, and literally saved us. The way he treats me, and adores Cody, nothing else matters. As long as he comes home in one piece, I don't care what he does.” She shook her head. “All right, that's not entirely true. I care, but I trust that he'll remember what he has at home and will return safely.”

“So you know about the things they do?” I asked.

“Somewhat. He said club business wasn't *my*

business... unless it directly impacted me. I can respect that.”

They called Emma’s name and she put up her hand. A barista brought our drinks and food, then quickly walked off.

“Can I ask something more personal?” I took a sip of my white mocha. “It’s about being claimed by a shifter.”

“You don’t know how it works, do you?” she asked.

“No. And I realize Alan is an anaconda and Axe is a wolf, so I’m sure there will be differences. I guess what I really want to know is whether it hurt when he marked you.”

“There was a brief flash of pain, then it quickly faded. I think it depends on *when* they bite you, and probably the location as well. Do you know if anacondas even bite their mates? It’s possible Alan won’t do that.”

“I’ll have to ask him.” I nibbled on the muffin she’d bought for me, and wondered how that conversation might go. When it came to intimate things, I felt awkward with Alan. We’d kissed, but that was all.

“Why don’t I call Raya and see if we can gather all the kids for a sleepover? I bet Victor’s nephew would enjoy it too.”

“Rhett would love that, I’m sure.”

“Then let’s plan on that for tonight. I think you and Alan need a date night,” she said.

A date? With Alan? The mere thought of it made it feel like butterflies were fluttering around inside my stomach. I couldn’t help but smile. We’d done plenty of things as a family. What would it be like to dress up and go out to eat with him tonight? Just the two of us... and then come home to an



empty house. I pressed my thighs together when I realized we might go much further than kissing if Rhett wasn't in the house.

Was I ready? Maybe. Maybe not.

Only one way to find out.

\* \* \*

## **Alan**

A date with Jolene? Why did it make me feel like a teenager? Of course, things were different back when I'd been an adolescent. For one, unemployment had still been incredibly high in the US thanks to the Great Depression, which meant my family struggled like the others. I worked when I could to help provide for us. Second, Hitler had been a dictator in Germany for several years. Dating was the furthest thing from my mind back then. It seemed like the world would turn upside down at a moment's notice. Hell, it already had.

If Jolene were a shifter, our age difference might have caused some issues. Even though she was an adult by human standards, shifter women didn't fully mature until closer to thirty. I'd known some who mated young, but it was usually with a male close to their age. While witches lived every bit as long as shifters, they played by a different set of rules. Until recent times, witches had often married by the time they were sixteen. While there were still some families who would still permit their young daughters to marry at such a young age, most wouldn't. And since Wolf Creek didn't exist to humans, we didn't have to worry about their laws impacting us.

I'd changed into a clean pair of dark wash jeans,

cleaned my Harley Davidson boots, and put on a white button-down shirt. Even though I'd rolled up the sleeves and put on my cut, I still looked better than I usually did. I fastened a black leather cuff around my right wrist. On my left, I wore my watch and two thinner leather bracelets. Only one thing was missing, but I wouldn't be putting it on just yet. Not until dinner.

I'd opted to get ready in the hall bathroom so Jolene could use the master bath. When she stepped into the hall, I nearly swallowed my tongue. I'd never seen her in a dress before. The navy material hugged her curves, and she'd put a decorative belt around her waist. The three-inch heels she'd paired with it made her legs look longer.

"You're beautiful," I said. When the hell had my voice become so husky? I cleared my throat and smiled when I saw her cheeks flush.

"You look great," she said, coming closer.

I couldn't remember ever feeling the way I did right then. The way she looked at me, the smell of her, and the sound of her voice... she was perfection. Had Axe felt this way with Emma? Or Henry with Raya? I'd dated before. Never more than a few months with the same woman, so they wouldn't get attached. None had ever felt like the sort I'd want to keep as a mate.

Then I'd gotten one look at Jolene, and I'd known she was mine. Finding out she had a husband had gutted me. Thankfully, I'd been able to return after her husband passed, and I'd finally had a chance to get to know her. I hated the fact she and Rhett suffered after losing Robby. Even if it had meant I'd never get to make her mine, I'd have spared her the pain if

I could have.

“Ready for dinner?” I asked.

She nodded and reached for me. I took her hand in mine and led her outside. Since I would now be calling this home, I’d asked Isaac to deliver my truck earlier. Good thing since I didn’t think she could ride my bike in her current outfit.

I hadn’t asked where she wanted to go. I didn’t have to. All the months I’d known her, she’d often mentioned how much she wanted to eat at Wonderland. As the most expensive place in Wolf Creek, not all of the citizens could afford to eat there. It seemed Jolene had been one of them. I understood finances had been tight after Robby died, but from what I’d heard, he’d done well enough. I didn’t know why he’d never taken her there.

The ride to the restaurant remained quiet, and I didn’t feel the need to fill the silence. Once I’d parked, I knew there was something I needed to do before we went inside. The mere thought of other men checking out Jolene made my fangs ache. I needed everyone to know she was mine. Since I hadn’t officially claimed her yet, she didn’t smell like me. Not enough to warn men away.

“Jolene, since we’re mates, there’s something I’d like to ask.”

“What is it?”

I pulled out the box from my pocket. “I want everyone to know I’m yours, and that you’re mine. As a shifter, I can make sure you smell like me. But witches...”

“I can’t mark you as mine,” she said.

“Right. Which is why I picked these up today.” I opened the lid and showed her the bands inside. Mine was a solid black steel one. Hers, however, was unique and stunning. Made from the same metal as mine, it had a delicate design with swirls around a pink diamond. Smaller white diamond chips were set on either side of the marquise cut stone.

“Alan, it’s beautiful!”

“Will you wear it?” I asked.

“Of course! I’d be honored.” She smiled widely as I slid the ring onto her finger. Then she took mine from the box and worked it over my knuckle. I knew it wasn’t going to fall off by accident since it had a snug fit.

“Now I think we’re ready for dinner.” I leaned over and kissed her. Just a quick one, so I wouldn’t smudge her lipstick. She’d taken the time to get dolled up, and I didn’t want to muss her before our date officially started.

“I can’t believe I actually get to eat here.” She clung to me as I led her inside. The hostess glanced from Jolene to me. I didn’t remember seeing her around town, but I did recognize the gleam of interest in her eyes. Too bad for her I was a taken man and wasn’t the least bit inclined to take her up on the silent offer. Fucking bitch clearly saw I was here with someone.

“Table for two,” I said. “Maybe one of the quieter ones.”

The woman pursed her lips but snatched two menus from the holder and took off. We followed along, and she waved a hand at our table. “Someone will be with you in a moment.”

“Is it just me or was she a little... frosty?” Jolene asked.

“Think she’s jealous of my beautiful mate.” I winked. “I know I’m the envy of every man in this place right now.”

She snorted. “Doubtful but thank you for the compliment.”

“You really have no idea, do you?”

“About what?” she asked.

“You’re stunning, Jolene. I’m not the only man in town who noticed you. The others just weren’t brave enough to approach you. For that, I’m grateful. I might have left town when I found out you were married, but if I’d come back and you’d been dating someone, I don’t think I’d have done the same thing.”

“In all the years you’ve been alive, you’ve never once been tempted to claim someone as your mate?” she asked.

“No. Never. You’re my one and only, Jolene.”

The way she watched me, with heat in her eyes, made me eager to finish our date and head home. When she’d told me we’d have the house to ourselves, I’d known what she wanted. I’d told her to take however long she needed before I claimed her. But if she was sending Rhett away for the night, she had to be ready now. Right?

As if the universe had heard my silent plea, dinner passed quickly. I’d barely tasted anything, even though Jolene seemed to enjoy the shrimp pasta she’d ordered. After I paid, I led her out to the truck and broke every speed limit on the way home.

*She's mine.* The thought played over and over in my mind.

Jolene must have been as eager as me, since she got out of the truck before I'd shut off the engine. She unlocked the house and went inside, with me trailing behind her. Giving me a smile over her shoulder, she took off her shoes and left them on the hall floor. Her belt dropped next. When she reached for the hem of her dress, it felt like my heart was beating hard enough to break my ribs.

The soft skin she exposed left me tongue-tied and itching to get my hands on her. I followed her to the bedroom and stared as she removed her bra and panties, then crawled onto the mattress and leaned back on her elbows. Even though I couldn't remember ever seeing such a wonderful sight, I could see the uncertainty in her eyes.

"We don't have to do this right now," I said.

"I want to. Emma said I should be honest with you. So, I'm going to admit I'm scared."

I moved closer and placed my hand on her ankle. "Jolene, you know I'd never hurt you, right?"

Her cheeks flushed. "I know. That's not what I meant."

I waited, hoping she'd explain. Instead, she stared at the wall behind me, and wouldn't meet my gaze. Was it my beast? Did she fear I'd turn into an anaconda while we were having sex?

"Jolene, I'm not going to shift in the middle of claiming you."

"Not even a little?" she asked.

“Well... My fangs will come out so I can bite you. Remember, I told you I’m not venomous. My bite isn’t going to make you sick.”

“What if... you don’t like it?” she asked. She spoke so softly I wouldn’t have heard her if I wasn’t a shifter.

“If I don’t like biting you?”

She shook her head. “Sex. I might be bad at it.”

Was she fucking kidding me? My cock was always hard around her. One touch, I’d probably detonate. I couldn’t imagine not liking anything she did to me. It did make me wonder if her previous husband had said something about her not being good in bed. In which case, I’d have knocked his teeth in if he were still alive. Of course, I wouldn’t be here with her right now if that were the case.

“Jolene.” I took a breath and leaned over her. “Honey, I can promise I’m not going to dislike having sex with you. Is there something in particular you’re concerned about?”

She looked away. “Robby never really... I mean... It was always over quick. I don’t think he liked having sex with me.”

Robby was a fucking idiot.

I removed my cut and tossed it onto the dresser before unbuttoning my shirt. She focused on my chest, and I saw her pulse flutter in her throat. After toeing off my boots, I unfastened my belt, then my pants. By the time I stood completely naked, there was a steady stream of pre-cum leaking from the head of my cock.

“Does it look like you’re going to disappoint me?” I

asked. “You could probably lightly blow on my cock, and I’d come right now. Probably shouldn’t admit that, but it should tell you how turned on I am right now.”

“Really?”

“Touch me and find out.” I was about to embarrass the hell out of myself, but if it made her worry less, then it would be worth it.

She got up on her knees and moved closer. Jolene lifted her hand and paused for a moment before wrapping her fingers around my cock. I groaned and watched as she stroked me. It only took two pumps before I came all over her hand.

Thankfully, being a shifter came with a few perks... like still being hard and ready to go.

“You weren’t kidding,” she murmured.

“Nope. Feel better?” I leaned in to kiss her. “Just don’t tell my brothers about this. They’d give me shit for decades.”

“I won’t.” Her eyes lit up and I knew I’d succeeded in alleviating her fears. Nothing else mattered.

“How slow do you want me to go? You set the pace, honey. Give me some direction, and I’ll follow your lead.”

“I... I want the shifter experience.”

I opened and shut my mouth as I processed her words. “You want what?”

“You have instincts I’ll never have. Let them guide you. Do whatever feels natural.” She reached up to cup my cheek. “This is me accepting all of you, Alan. Scales. Fangs. Everything. I won’t break, so you don’t have to be gentle.”



I felt my vision change and knew my pupils looked like a snake's. She didn't back away or look at me in revulsion. If anything, she licked her lips and pressed closer to me. Shit. She really meant what she'd said. The *shifter experience*? I'd never thought of it that way, but if it's what she wanted, I'd give it to her.

My fangs descended and hung over my bottom lips. The skin along my chest and arms turned a greenish tinge, and I could see faint scale markings. I hadn't lied. I wouldn't turn into my anaconda, but some things couldn't be helped. When it came to Jolene, I didn't have as much control as I should.

I flipped her onto her stomach and lifted her ass in the air. Flicking my tongue out, I scented the air. I hoped like hell she didn't notice it was forked right now. Closing my eyes, I basked in the moment. She smelled fucking incredible. *Felt* just as amazing. And after tonight, everyone would know she was mine.

I pushed her thighs wider apart and leaned in. Licking her clit, I committed her taste to memory. Jolene tensed and moaned as I worked the hard nub. She pushed back against me, and I gripped her hips, holding her in place. I didn't want to accidentally nick her with my fangs.

"Alan, please! I don't want to come unless you're inside me."

I teased her another moment before covering her body with mine. Pressing my cock against her slick pussy, I eased inside. The feel of her heat wrapped around my dick nearly made me come again.

"Hold on," I said. "This might be rough."

I braced one hand on the bed and held her tight with the other. Thrusting into her, I gave her everything I had, not holding back even a little. I could tell she was close, but I couldn't seem to get her there. Leaning forward a little more, it changed my angle just enough I must have hit the right spot. On the next stroke, she screamed out my name and I felt the gush of her release. It seemed my sweet Jolene was a squirter. I fucking loved it.

Hissing, I sank my fangs into her shoulder and bit down, infusing her with my pheromones. My hips slapped against her as I took her harder. Faster. When I came, her pussy squeezed me tight, and she called out my name again.

It ended all too soon, but I knew we had all night. The important part was that she was mine now. In every way possible.

I pulled my fangs free and licked the wound on her shoulder. She shuddered under me. Even though I knew she had to be tired, I needed more of her. Using slow thrusts, I fucked her again, not stopping until she'd come at least three more times, and I'd filled her with cum once more.

We collapsed onto the mattress, and she cuddled close to me. Staring up at the ceiling, I realized I finally had everything I needed. My mate. An adorable kid. And my brothers. I didn't care if we ever had more kids or not. My little family was perfect just the way it was.

I kissed her brow, and she murmured something in her sleep.

"Love you, Jolene," I whispered, not wanting to wake her. It was probably too soon for the L word, but I didn't care. It was how I felt, and I didn't want to hold back. Not anymore.

She had me. Every single cell belonged to her, just like she belonged to me. My perfect little mate.

## Chapter Six

### **Jolene**

The next two weeks passed in a bit of a blur. Alan completely moved into the house, I'd gotten closer to Emma and Raya, and things were settling down. Or so I'd thought. The issue with Raya had been resolved, but I could tell Alan was still on edge. Since he hadn't said anything, I assumed it had to do with the club, which meant I didn't ask questions.

"Mom, do you think Dad would take me to school tomorrow?" Rhett asked. Another new thing in our home. He'd started calling Alan *Dad* two days ago. Even though Alan tried to act like it was no big deal, I'd noticed the way his eyes lit up the first time Rhett referred to him that way.

"If you ask him, I bet he will. Unless he has to work," I said.

Although, we hadn't had that conversation yet. What the hell did Alan do to earn his money? I knew he had plenty. He hadn't balked at buying things we needed. Never had.

I knew how old he was, what he shifted into, that he was part of the Devoted Guardians... the rest of the details were a bit hazy. I learned something new about Alan every day. At times, it was scary. I was his official mate, and yet in a lot of ways we were still strangers.

What I *did* know was that I hadn't had to worry about going in to work lately. In fact, Alan had made me quit. All right. So made wasn't the right word. He'd said he'd prefer it if I did. Since I hadn't liked the job to begin with, it hadn't

been a hardship.

“Do you want to see if the other kids are busy? Maybe we could have a game day at the clubhouse, unless your dad and the others are using it,” I said.

Rhett grinned. “Yeah! That would be fun.”

“I’ll call Emma. For now, go play in your room.”

He raced down the hall and I pulled up Emma’s name in my contacts. Since becoming Alan’s mate, he’d not only upgraded my phone, but he’d added in everyone from the club, as well as Emma and Raya. Now I could reach them anytime I needed something, or just wanted to talk.

“Hello,” Emma said when the call connected.

“Hey, Emma. It’s Jolene. Rhett and I were wondering if the kids might like to meet at the clubhouse and have a game day. Or is it in use right now?”

“I know Axe said he’d be busy with club stuff today, but he didn’t say I couldn’t go to the clubhouse. I think it would be fine. If we get there and they say we need to leave, then everyone can come here.”

I didn’t want to make the club angry, but I couldn’t think of anywhere for the kids to meet. It didn’t seem right Emma had to have everyone at her place. Even if we all helped clean up, I knew it could be stressful to have a group of people in your home. She might be the club President’s mate, but it didn’t mean she wanted everyone in her personal space all the time. And the kids couldn’t always go to the park.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Absolutely! Head on over to the clubhouse. Cody and

I will meet you there. I'll call Raya right now, then see if Victor's nephew can join us. I've actually thought about putting a storage tub in one of the closets there and filling it with games, crayons, coloring books, and anything else the kids might like."

"That sounds great." I passed by a store on the way. I could always grab some things. "I'll bring some stuff with me. You can add it to the box whenever you get one."

"I actually have some empty ones here. I'll bring one with me. Somehow we ended up with a second copy of *Trouble* so I'll make sure to get it from the hall closet."

"See you soon." I ended the call and went to tell Rhett the good news. It seemed he'd been listening to my conversation because he'd gathered a handful of unopened Matchbox cars and was in the process of stuffing them into an empty tote. "Hey, kiddo. Want to stop on the way and get a few boxes of crayons, some coloring books, and maybe drawing paper?"

"Yeah! I'm almost ready."

I headed to my bedroom to put on my shoes and grab my purse from the closet. By the time I got to the front door, Rhett was waiting for me. We made a quick trip to the store and gathered what we needed before going to the clubhouse. When we arrived, it looked like everyone else had already arrived. I parked and unbuckled Rhett from his car seat. He took off, and I followed at a slower pace.

I'd often thought when you had a baby, someone should gift you a lifetime supply of caffeine. It was impossible to keep up with him some days. I could hear the kids before I even went inside and couldn't help but smile. Rhett had

immediately found Mari, and they were already laughing and chasing each other around the room. Logan, Cody, and Tucker were setting up a game at a table.

Emma and Raya waved me over. I set the tote down near the older boys then went to join the other mates. Emma slid a can of soda over to me the second I sat down.

“I take it Axe didn’t mind us being here,” I said.

“None of them are here right now. He said we could stay as long as we wanted.”

“Technically, Henry is nearby,” Raya said. “He still doesn’t want to leave me for very long.”

Were wolves different from other shifters? Alan didn’t seem to have the same issue. For that matter, I hadn’t seen his shifted form yet. Not being a huge fan of snakes, I had to admit to being a little leery. I knew it was only Alan, and he’d never hurt me. I’d handled his partial shift. Could I look at him in all his anaconda glory and not want to run?

“I think Henry is a little clingier than the others because of what he went through,” Emma said. “Once Axe knocked me up, he didn’t seem to have as much trouble leaving me for long periods of time. It’s like his wolf settled down afterward.”

“Are snakes different?” I asked.

“Snake?” Raya’s eyes went wide. “That’s right. I did hear that Alan turned into something scaly.”

“Anaconda,” I said.

“You’re a brave soul.” Emma winced. “Not sure I’d have handled that well. I can’t stand reptiles of any sort. If it

has scales, I don't want it in my house. Although, technically, Alan is a person who turns into a creature with scales so it's different."

"It was unexpected to say the least." I leaned back in my chair. "But he's so sweet to us. Even before he told me I was his mate, he was always there when we needed help. He was patient with Rhett and made me feel like less of a failure."

Emma smacked me on the arm. "You *aren't* a failure. Get that out of your head right now. That man clearly is head over heels for you, and he wouldn't fall for just anyone."

"Since I'm a broken witch, it's hard to have a lot of confidence in myself. Although Alan doesn't care if I can do magick or not."

"Are you worried about Rhett?" Raya asked. "You said he can't do magick either. With Mari, I'm not sure what to expect. She's a hybrid. And as for Logan, he wasn't very powerful. It's only been recently he's started mastering more advanced magick. I wasn't sure if he was behind because of our circumstances or just because every kid is different."

"At least all of your kids have the opportunity to have special gifts. This baby will too," Emma said, rubbing her belly. "But poor Cody will always be a human."

"Nothing wrong with that," I said. "Honestly, if Rhett never does magick, I'm all right with that. I only worry about how it will make him feel. I know kids can be cruel, and I don't want the other magickal people in the community to be harsh with him."

"Other than calling him a warlock?" Emma asked. "I heard Alan handled that mess already. Good for him!"



“He literally picked up two moms and shook them like rag dolls. As much as I wanted to cheer him on, I worried it would set a bad example for Rhett.”

Raya snorted. “Um, you do realize you’re mated to a shifter, right? And are now part of the Devoted Guardians family, where *all* the men are shifters. He’s going to see stuff like that all the time. Nothing wrong with the way Alan took care of the problem. In fact, I’m amazed he didn’t shift.”

“She has a point.” Emma took a swallow of her drink. “Your husband was a warlock. You’re a witch. I’m sure the people you always hung around were different from the local shifters. Am I right?”

“Yeah.” I knew where she was going with this. She didn’t even have to say anything else.

“I’m new to all this, but I can tell a difference in the men here, and the non-shifters I’ve met around town. The shifters tend to react more, and they’re definitely more aggressive. It’s just how they are, and with Rhett now being raised by Alan and being around the men of the club, he may pick up some of those traits.”

“You’re right. I probably was overthinking it.” Rhett and Mari had settled at a table and were both coloring while they talked. I had to admit they were really adorable together. Part of me hoped they would stay close like this forever. “I might not have agreed with how he handled it, but I have to admit, I haven’t heard anyone call Rhett a warlock since then. I think word spread.”

Emma laughed. “I can guarantee it did. Everyone’s worried if they utter that word in relation to Rhett, Alan might rip their heads off.”

“I think it’s sweet. Not only the way he protects Rhett, but the way he is with you too,” Raya said. “When Henry first brought me here, Alan was one of the men who watched my kids. He was gentle with them. It’s different, though, from the way he is with Rhett. The moment he knew you were his mate, I think it made Rhett his son, even when you weren’t together.”

“She’s not wrong.” Emma pointed to Cody. “When Axe claimed me, he said Cody was his too. I’m sure Alan said the same about Rhett. Those men don’t care if they were the sperm donor or not. Our kids are their kids, and it’s as simple as that.”

“Alan didn’t want to push Rhett into accepting him as his father. The day Rhett called him Dad, you should have seen the look in Alan’s eyes. He might have said he didn’t care if Rhett ever thought of him as his parent, but I could tell it had been a lie.”

“Have they had any bonding time?” Emma asked.

“They spent some time together, just the two of them, when I met you for coffee. Aside from that, they haven’t really done anything while I’m not around. I mean, not since Alan said I was his mate. Since then, we’ve been spending a lot of family time together.”

“Instead of a date night for you and Alan, maybe you could suggest he takes Rhett out somewhere for the day?” Raya asked. “My situation was a little different. Logan wasn’t ready to accept Henry right away. After everything we suffered, he was leery, and we all understood. Henry gave him the space he wanted.”

“I’ll mention it to Alan. I’m sure he’d love to do

something like that. He adores Rhett.”

\* \* \*

## **Alan**

“Follow the men, he said. It will be easy, he said.” I snorted. “Thanks, Axe. Now we’re all fucked.”

Mumbling to myself wasn’t getting me anywhere. We’d found the traffickers this morning and gone after them. So far, we’d lost contact with Scorch and Dagger, which made me wonder if they’d been captured, or were waiting and watching. Axe and Victor were both out cold. I couldn’t find Everett or Isaac. And Henry... I had a feeling he was near the clubhouse, probably watching over his family from the shadows. We’d all received a text from Axe letting us know the mates and kids would be there. I rather liked the fact they were all in one place. Especially since these fuckers weren’t anywhere near them.

“Think that was all of them?” one of the men asked.

“Not likely.” He sniffed the air. “Think there’s a lion in the area.”

Everett? How the hell could he smell him and I couldn’t? What the fuck kind of shifter was this bastard? Or was he one? There were other supernaturals who had a good sense of smell.

If Everett was nearby, then Isaac probably was too. I partially shifted and flicked my tongue out, scenting the air. I still couldn’t locate the two big cats. Circling the group of men, I tried to figure out their weakest point. They’d already captured two shifter women and had them bound and gagged.

One looked barely out of her teens. The moment Axe and Victor saw them, they'd charged the men. Except they hadn't counted on one of them being a dark mage.

The black orb he'd thrown had knocked out both Axe and Victor in one blow. I'd fallen back, glad I'd stuck to the shadows. The one who'd sniffed out the lion tensed. He slowly turned his head to look somewhere off to my left. Before I could blink, he vanished, only to return with the lion tossed over his shoulder. He dropped Everett to the ground, and I realized he'd already knocked him out. The dark mage lobbed a few black orbs in the same direction, and I heard a *thud*. A moment later, the third man dragged Isaac out of hiding.

I was the last man standing, and at this point, I wasn't sure I could take them down. Not like this. Since we were in the woods on the outer edge of town, I had plenty of space. Stripping out of my clothes, I shifted, taking on my anaconda form. Slithering out of hiding, I undulated along the ground, heading for the men.

The dark mage saw me first and tossed one of his orbs at me. It hit my scaly hide but didn't affect me. The one who'd vanished earlier, who I'd deemed to be at least half vampire, came for me. I couldn't see him, but the bastard tried to bite me. I hissed and wrapped my body around his, tightening my coils. He struggled until his face began to change color. As I squeezed, his eyes popped, and blood ran from his nose and mouth. He opened his mouth on a silent scream. I felt his bones break, and I didn't let up until I'd completely crushed him. Dropping his corpse, I went for the mage.

"You asshole!" He threw more orbs at me, but my scales protected me. I opened my mouth to show him my

fangs right before I latched onto his legs, biting down hard. I pierced not only his skin, but the bone as well. He screamed and fell to the ground. Throwing orb after orb, he did his best to get away, but I refused to let go. I wrapped my body around him, and crushed him to death, just like the other one.

That only left one more. I scanned the area, trying to find him. Something pierced my tail, and I shrieked before turning toward the source. The third man grinned as he shoved the blade deeper, pinning me in place.

“It’s a spelled blade, fucker. Shift and you’ll be short a leg, or whatever this part of you transforms into when you’re human.” He moved farther up my body and shoved another blade through me. “Or this one. I bet this is your stomach, right? Too bad I’ve missed your heart, wherever that might be.”

I couldn’t move. Couldn’t attack. And whatever magick coated his blades, if he used it on my head, I’d be dead. I lay still, hoping he’d leave me be. I had a mate and child at home. Jolene and Rhett needed me. I couldn’t let this man kill me.

“Not so feisty now, are you?” he asked. “Don’t worry. I have more men coming. Once they’re here, and we’ve taken the women, I’m sure your friends will wake up and free you.”

I wanted to tell him he’d fucked up. By leaving us alive, it meant he’d never be safe. We’d all be going after him. Where the fuck were Scorch and Digger? They were the ones who’d told us about these men. Why weren’t they here? I looked around the area again, hoping they were only hiding. They wouldn’t have let my club be taken down, would they? It made me think they weren’t close enough to have any idea

what was happening right now.

The man smirked. “Are you looking for those other shifters from down in Ashton Grove? You won’t find them here.”

I focused on him. What the hell did that mean? Had they been in on it? No. I didn’t think they would do something like that. Had he killed them? Harmed them in some way?

“I can see you’re curious. It won’t hurt to tell you. I sent them each a little gift.” Gift? I didn’t like the sound of that. I could only imagine what he’d have sent them. “A piece of their loved ones. Of course, they’ll never find the rest of those women. I already sold them. But they don’t know that.”

So they’d left? They’d fallen for the bait, and now we were on our own? I had some choice words for their President when this was over.

I didn’t know how long we waited. I heard his friends approaching, and soon there were five men, and three more women.

“What’s with the big-ass snake?” one of them asked.

“He killed Marcus and Zeb. No great loss except we’re shorthanded now. Think we can move all the women with just the five of us?”

“Don’t see why not. We’ll wait until closer to midnight then make our move. Those other fuckers dead?” the same guy asked.

“Only knocked out, but Zeb hit them with his black magick. They won’t be getting up until the morning. Sure hope the snake stays alive that long.” He flashed a set of fangs at

me. “It would be a shame for him to die, wouldn’t it?”

“It actually would.” The largest of the group came closer and kneeled down a few feet away. “Green anaconda shifters aren’t exactly common.”

“I’m not hauling his ass out of here, so don’t even think of taking him with us.”

The man in front of me smiled and reached out like he might pet me, then thought better of it. Good idea. I’d have taken a bite out of his hand.

The air grew colder, and I knew time was slipping by. The women had to be worried by now. They wouldn’t have been able to reach any of us, and the entire club hadn’t returned home. Unless Henry was keeping guard still. I hadn’t seen him anywhere around here. What the fuck was he doing while we were all out of commission? Of course, I didn’t think the wolf could take out all these men on his own either. He might have taken out Elias, but this was different. He had something to lose now. So did Axe and I.

“Three more hours and we’re out of here,” one of the men muttered. “Can’t wait to get away from this place. Something feels off about it.”

“He’s not wrong,” another one said. “Makes my skin crawl.”

Static filled the air, and I flicked out my tongue, tasting the air. Electrical magick? I twisted my head one way then the other, trying to find the source. Under the magick there was something familiar. Jolene?

I hoped like fuck I was wrong, but something told me I wasn’t.

My mate stepped into the moonlight, and I hissed, wanting to warn her away. Her eyes filled with tears when she saw me. She lifted her chin and stared at the men.

“You fucked up,” she said. “No one hurts my mate!”

“Which of these sorry bastards is yours?” The only man I hadn’t killed of the original three came closer. “They’re only knocked out, except the snake. Tough bastard wouldn’t back off.”

“Anaconda,” she said and tugged the neck of her shirt aside, showing off my fang marks, “and he’s mine!”

Hers? I liked the sound of that. If I’d been able to, I’d have been grinning like an idiot. Except I was a little worried. I thought I’d smelled magick, but Jolene couldn’t do any spells. What was going on? Why was she here? *How* had she even found me?

Henry stepped out beside her, which answered part of my questions. He snarled, his eyes flashing amber, right before he shifted. The wolf attacked at the same time my beautiful mate gathered what looked like lightning in the palm of her hand and shot it at the man I’d been unable to kill earlier.

It looked like my witch had found her magick again.

And she was a total badass. If I hadn’t already been in love with her, I would be now.



## Chapter Seven

**Jolene**

**Two Hours Earlier**

“What do you mean everyone’s in trouble?” I asked as Henry held his mate and children. “Where’s Alan?”

“The club and the two men from Ashton Grove went after some traffickers. They’ve been selling shifter females. Enslaving them or sending them to brothels. Something went wrong. They should have been back by now. I tried to track them, but I heard Alan shrieking and came right back.”

“What?” I stood so fast my chair fell over. “What the hell, Henry?”

“If he made that sound then he was in his anaconda form. He’s impossible to beat when he’s shifted. For him to shriek like that, it means they got the upper hand. If I’d have stepped in, they would have possibly killed me, and everyone here would be defenseless against them.” He lowered his voice. “Jolene, you know Alan wouldn’t want you or Rhett to be in danger. Same for Axe with Emma and Cody. I did what I knew the club would want.”

“Fine, but I’m not leaving him there.”

“How are you going to do anything? You can’t do magick anymore.”

His words hurt. They weren’t entirely true though. I could do magick, it just went horribly wrong ever since I’d killed Robby. But if Alan was in trouble, did I really have a

choice? Besides, a little wild magick might be exactly what we needed.

*Holy shit! That's it. My magick isn't on the fritz... it's wild magick.* Knowing that made all the difference in how I viewed things, and it gave me the confidence I needed to save my mate. I wasn't about to let Rhett lose another father. Not now, not ever. I might have taken one from him by accident, but I'd make damn sure to do everything I could to bring Alan back home.

"Go get him, Mom," Rhett said, coming over to take my hand. "You can do it."

I kneeled down and hugged him. "I will. I want you to stay here with everyone, all right?"

"I'll lock us in," Emma said.

"Before we go, because I'm not letting you go after him alone, I'm going to stock this place with some food and drinks. Need to make sure everyone will be all right for the rest of the night, in case it takes us until morning to return." Henry kissed Raya and hugged his kids. "Wait here and I'll be back soon."

I squeezed Rhett's hand. "I'm going to go home and change. I'll come back and tell you bye before I leave with Henry. Make sure you listen to Emma and Raya."

"I will, Mom. Love you."

"Love you too, sweetheart. And you know Alan loves you as well."

He nodded. "I know. I'll give Dad a big hug when you bring him back."

My throat grew tight with unshed tears. I hoped like hell I really could bring him home. I'd give it my all. No matter what it took, even if it used up every bit of magick I possessed, I would keep my promise to Rhett.

\* \* \*

## **Jolene**

I followed Henry through the woods, my skin humming. I could feel my magick building, and the more anxious I became, the more it crackled at my fingertips. Little sparks danced along my hands. Finally accepting my magick hadn't gone away, or become defective but had merely changed, allowed me to embrace my witchy self once more.

"We're getting closer. And, Jolene, I don't know what we'll find. You have to hold it together. If you fall apart or start crying, those men might get their hands on you. If they do, you'll never see Rhett again, and you'll be begging for death to claim you."

"I get it, Henry." I knew he was trying to prepare me. Sadly, he was only pissing me off.

"Wait here. I'm going to scout things out and I'll come right back. Don't move from this spot, Jolene. I mean it!"

I nodded and leaned against a tree, waiting for him to return. When he did, I could tell the news wasn't good. He seemed to be struggling over what to say. Had the men died? What about Alan? My chest ached at the thought of never seeing him again.

"Everyone is knocked out except Alan. He shifted into his anaconda." Henry cleared his throat. "It's not good, Jolene."

He's alive, but he's badly injured. Can you handle it?"

"How many are there?" I asked.

"Five men, and a group of female captives."

"How many can you take down?" I asked.

"At least two. Maybe three. Depends on what they are. Looks like someone already took down two of them. My money is on Alan. Both guys looked like they were crushed."

I winced. Not a pretty picture, but as long as Alan would be okay, I'd deal with the fact my mate was a constrictor. I nodded for Henry to lead the way. Gathering as much as I could along my palms and fingers, when we stepped into the clearing, I saw my mate pinned down with what looked like small swords.

His head turned to face me, and I fought back my tears. I didn't want him to see me cry, and I certainly didn't want these men to. I lifted my hand, letting more of my magick build.

"You fucked up," I said. "No one hurts my mate!"

"Which of these sorry bastards is yours?" One of them asked. "They're only knocked out, except the snake. Tough bastard wouldn't back off."

"Anaconda," I said and tugged the neck of my shirt aside, showing off the fang marks, "and he's mine! You hurt my mate. Hurt my friends' mates." I stared at the man closest to Alan, and somehow just knew he'd been the one to hurt him. "Now you're going to pay."

Henry shifted and attacked one of the others. I shot lightning at the man by my beautiful anaconda and watched as

he screamed and his skin turned black. Smoke rose from him as he cooked. His skin split and as he fell to the ground, part of his body turned to ash.

Two more rushed me, and I shot more lightning from my hands. Fury filled me. They'd hurt my Alan. My mate. They'd tried to harm his club. Wanted to hurt the women tied up nearby. Why did people like these exist? I hated them. I despised them with every fiber of my being.

Something inside me twisted, and my vision changed. I opened my mouth and a hiss escaped me. The ground shook, and the wind blew so hard, one of the men fell over. No matter how many times he tried to stand, he couldn't. I increased the voltage on the lightning and fried the man still standing. Henry finished off the one he'd attacked and went for the one on the ground. While he took care of him, I focused on Alan.

He shook his head and glanced at the women. I took the hint and went to free them. Once they were untied, and I'd removed their gags, they clung to one another, crying and thanking me.

Pointing back the way we'd come, I chanted a spell, and a handful of yellow orbs floated in the air. "Follow them back to town. Go to the sheriff and tell him what happened to you."

They rushed off, stumbling along the way. Now that they were free, and would be safe, I went over to Alan. Eyeing the swords piercing his body, I held back the cry that rose to my lips. He needed me to be strong, and I would be.

I placed my hand on his tail first and gripped the sword. Chanting a healing spell, I yanked it free and closed my eyes, pouring everything I had into sealing the wound. The

second one proved more difficult. I managed to slow the bleeding, but I couldn't heal it completely.

“Alan, I don't know if it's safe for you to shift.” I went closer to his head and watched him carefully. His eyes didn't appear cloudy. They were clear and if he was feeling any pain, it didn't show. “You're beautiful. I never thought I'd say that about a snake, but you are.”

He booped my hand with his nose and I smiled before running my hand over his smooth scales. His body contorted and twisted. When he shifted back to his human form, an extremely naked one, I noticed the wound I hadn't been able to heal was on his abdomen. It didn't look quite as bad as I'd feared, or perhaps it had partially healed with his shift.

“Do you know that your eyes look like mine right now?” he asked, his voice a little rougher than usual. “That's so fucking hot. So was watching you roast those men.”

I smiled and something felt off. I flicked my tongue out and discovered my canines were more pointed than before. What the hell?

“Yeah, baby. You have fangs right now. Baby ones.” He leaned in and kissed my cheek. “Looks like when I bit you, you absorbed some of my traits. I knew I'd transferred some pheromones to you, but I never expected this. Must be due to you being a witch.”

Huh. So I had snake eyes and fangs? I didn't exactly hate it. Of course, I was still hyped up from taking down those men. Once my heart calmed, and I had time to process everything, I might feel a little different about it. Then again, it just gave me a way to bond with Alan even more.

“You ready to go see our son?” I asked. “I promised I’d bring his daddy home.”

“I don’t suppose anyone has an extra pair of pants?” Henry asked from several feet away. I looked over and saw him covering himself. It made me realize I’d never seen a shifter change forms until today. How did we not have naked people running all over town? Or did they only shift around their own kind so the non-shifters, like me, wouldn’t have to see them?

Alan snickered. “That’s what you get for shifting before you undressed. And no, I don’t have a spare set of clothes lying around the woods. Shift back and go home as a wolf.”

Henry growled but did exactly that. He disappeared into the woods, leaving me alone with Alan — and a lot of dead bodies. But... where was everyone else?

“Axe, Everett, Victor, and Isaac are all knocked out. They’ll wake up by morning. I can’t haul them home on my own.”

“I might be able to float them,” I said, wondering if I really could or not. Wouldn’t hurt to try.

“All right. Just don’t exhaust yourself, honey.”

“Your clothes are still here, right? Because I think the town might notice a giant anaconda slithering home.”

He smirked. “Yeah. Unlike Henry, I undressed before I shifted. Give me a second. I’ll at least put on some pants and boots. Shirt probably isn’t a good idea right now.”

“You’re going to be fine, right?” I asked. Now that the

adrenaline was wearing off, my hands shook and my knees felt a little weak. I could have lost him. Or died myself. Then Rhett would have been alone in the world.

“Thanks to you.”

I managed to summon enough magick to levitate the bodies, and we drifted closer to town. When I couldn't maintain the spell any longer, the bodies hit the ground with a *thud*.

“Leave them. I'll have someone from the club pick them up,” Alan said. He took my hand, leading me the rest of way into town. As much as I wanted to take him home, I'd left Rhett at the clubhouse. He paused when I started to head that direction. “Jolene, Rhett will be fine a little longer. Let's get me patched up first, and we need to figure out how to get you to change back. You might freak him out right now.”

He made a good point. “Fine. Home, then the clubhouse.”

As much as I'd have preferred to drive to the house, it looked like we'd be walking. I only hoped Alan didn't open up his wound even more. All this exercise couldn't be good for him. Not right now anyway. By the time we reached the house, my legs ached and my head hurt. I'd used entirely too much magick after not doing any spells in a while.

Alan went straight back to our bathroom and stripped out of his pants and boots. I started the shower and he stepped under the spray. Dirt swirled down the drain as he rinsed off, but I noticed the tension around his mouth every time the water hit the wound.

“That's enough. We need to put something on that and



wrap you in bandages. Unless you want to go see the doctor?" I asked.

"No. Patch me up here."

He got out and dried off. While he stood, still naked, I put ointment on the stab wound and covered it with some non-stick gauze before wrapping his abdomen. When I'd finished, he leaned down to kiss me. I sighed and placed my hands on his shoulders.

"I love you, Jolene," he murmured.

I felt my heart kick against my ribs, and I stared up at him. "What?"

"You heard me." A smile curved his lips. "I love you."

"I love you too. So much!" I wanted to hug him but worried it would cause him pain. Instead, I pressed my lips to his in a soft kiss.

"By the way, you're back to normal," he said. "Did you notice any changes in your vision when it happened?"

"Yeah, but I didn't know why."

"What were you feeling then?" he asked.

"Anger. I was pissed as hell they'd hurt you. I wanted to... kill them."

He nodded. "Then that's your trigger. I don't think it will happen again unless you experience that same level of fury again. Just in case, we should prepare Rhett. As long as he knows it could happen, I don't think it would scare him."

"Hmm. How about you take him out for pizza tomorrow? The two of you can talk about what it's like to be a

shifter, and you can explain about my eyes and fangs then?”

“You mean like a father-son thing?” he asked.

I could see how much the idea pleased him. “Exactly!”

“All right. For now, let’s go get our boy. I don’t know about you, but I think I could sleep for a week. Shifting always takes a lot out of me, and I know using all that magick had to leave you exhausted.”

“It did.” I leaned against him, careful not to hurt him. “I could honestly shower and go to sleep right this second.”

“I’ll call Henry. He can drop Rhett off on his way home. We’ll go get your car tomorrow.”

“All right. I won’t argue.” While Alan made his call, I got into the shower and washed quickly. By the time I got out and put on my nightgown, Rhett was home and I found him curled up on the couch with Alan.

My mate’s head slumped to one side, and it looked like he’d fallen asleep. Rhett kept still, only turning his head when I entered the room. He pressed his finger to his lips.

“Daddy is sleeping,” he whispered.

Daddy. He always tried to be grown up and called Alan Dad, but he must have been terrified earlier. So now, Alan was Daddy. Too bad the anaconda wasn’t awake to hear him say that.

“You can sit with him a little longer, then off to bed with you. And be careful. Your dad got hurt earlier so he’s going to be a little sore.”

Rhett nodded. “I know. Go to sleep, Mom. We’re okay.”

When did he get so big? I sighed and watched them another minute before heading to the bedroom. I crawled into bed, and I didn't even remember my head hitting the pillow before I fell asleep.

## Chapter Eight

**Alan**

I'd taken Jolene's advice and now I was out with Rhett getting pizza in town. Our little boy had begged his mom to come too, but Jolene insisted she wanted to stay home and read. It hadn't taken much coaxing to get him into the truck and away from the house. I think he secretly had liked the idea of having some one-on-one time with me.

Rhett bit into a slice of pepperoni and I reached over to wipe the grease off his chin. He grinned at me and kicked his feet. He'd already eaten two slices, and I wasn't sure where he was putting all the food. As small as he was, it always amazed me when he ate as well as he was right now.

“Did Mom really save you?” he asked.

“She sure did. Saved all of us. She and Henry showed up at the perfect time.”

He paused for a minute. “What about her magick? She kept saying she couldn't do it anymore. Not since she killed my first dad.”

I reached over and placed my hand on Rhett's. “She didn't kill him, Rhett. It was an accident. He chose to protect her, much like I'll always protect her and you.”

“I know. People talk. They say she's useless now, but they're lying.”

“How do you know they're lying?” I asked. There was something going on. He had a look in his eyes that wasn't

typical of the little boy.

“There’s a reason I can’t do magick,” Rhett said. “You can’t tell Mom. It would upset her.”

“You can talk to me about anything, Rhett. You know that, right?”

He nodded. “My other dad wasn’t a good man. I think he liked Mom, but he didn’t love her. He’s... he’s not dead.”

I froze. “What?”

We were mated. I’d claimed her. Was Rhett telling me Jolene was still married? What the fuck?

“My other dad did a spell when I was a baby. He extracted my magick. Almost all of it. I have a tiny amount. Enough I can sense magick in others, but I’ll never be able to do spells.”

“Why the hell didn’t you tell your mom? And what does it have to do with Robby? You said he’s alive?” My chest felt tight. Did that mean I had to give up Jolene and Rhett?

“The body he had is gone. As far as Mom, and everyone else here is concerned, the warlock named Robby died. But he used my stolen magick to transfer his energy. I saw the talisman on his body at the funeral. The stone had changed color.”

“Back up, kiddo. Talisman?” I asked.

“He put my magick in it. The stone was a bright blue with swirls of green. At the funeral, the stone had turned a dark gray. Mom thought it was because of what happened. It wasn’t. It meant the magick had been used.”

“Rhett, weren’t you too small to understand all that?” I

asked. Hell, I was having a hard time wrapping my brain around it and I was over a hundred years old.

He sighed and looked away before facing me again. “Yes and no. If I’d been a typical baby, then I wouldn’t have known what was going on. But this isn’t my first life.”

I had a feeling I needed something stronger than pizza and soda for this conversation. I waved our waitress over and ordered a beer. I’d walk home if I needed to, but I needed something stronger right now. First life? Did that mean he’d reincarnated? How the hell did he even know?

“Sorry, Dad. I didn’t mean to burden you with all this.”

The longer I looked at him, the more I noticed the changes. He wasn’t acting like his usual six-year-old self. Right now, it felt like I was staring at an adult in a tiny body.

“First life. Tell me more about that,” I said.

“Witches reincarnate. Until we get things right. We sometimes remember our past lives. This is my fourth reincarnation.”

“Why do I feel like I just fell into a fantasy novel or a comic book?” I asked.

He smiled. “Dad, you shift into a big snake. Mom does magick. Is it really hard to believe in past lives?”

“Guess not.”

“Anyway, I’m not sure where my other dad went. He has a new body, new name. Probably a new family. He didn’t step in front of Mom to save her that day. He was simply ready to go. In fact, I think he messed up her potion.”

“So Robby did all this on purpose so he could start

over?” I asked.

Rhett shrugged. “Don’t know. But I can’t do magick this time because of what he did. I’ll never be able to.”

“Your mom tapped into some powerful magick last night. She saved my life, and she was absolutely amazing.” I smiled. “You’d have been proud of her, Rhett. Although, she’s gone through some changes from being mated to me.”

“What kind?” he asked.

“Her eyes changed to that of a snake’s, and she grew small fangs when she was really pissed off. We were worried it might scare you to see her that way.”

“Will my sibling be able to shift into a snake?” he asked.

“Sibling?” I leaned back in my seat. “Not sure we’ll ever have more kids, Rhett. It’s not really up to us. My kind aren’t like wolves or the big cats. Hell, even the bears have a drive to procreate. Anaconda shifters have a low birth rate. Some never have children, which is why there aren’t a lot of us.”

Rhett didn’t say anything more, but I suddenly felt uneasy. Did he know something we didn’t? He’d said he could sense magick. Did he also have the ability to see the future? Or was he merely hoping for a little brother or sister?

I wasn’t sure I was brave enough to ask. I drained my beer and watched as he ate two more slices of pizza. My newfound knowledge left me reeling. My six-year-old had lived multiple lives and remembered at least some of it. It was hard to think of him as a little boy right now.

“Dad.” He reached out his hand, and I grasped it with mine. “I’m still Rhett. Still your little boy. This doesn’t change anything, does it?”

“Of course not. I’ll always love you, Rhett. You’re my son, no matter whether you remember your past lives or know the future. I don’t care if you ever do magick. You’re perfect exactly as you are.”

“Thanks. Just promise not to tell Mom. She might blame herself or go searching for my other dad. I don’t think either of us wants that.”

No, we certainly didn’t.

“Finished with your pizza?” I asked.

“Yeah. Can we go to the arcade before we go home?”

“Sure.” I stood up and ruffled his hair. “Let’s go play some games. I’m sure your mom wouldn’t mind more time with whatever book she’s reading.”

“Let’s stop by the bakery and take home some pie. I bet she’d really love that,” Rhett said.

“We can do that.”

We spent the next hour playing games at the arcade, then picked up an apple pie, which Rhett said was his mother’s favorite. I’d seen her devour just about any fruit pie someone placed in front of her, so it was good to know she liked one better than the others.

Jolene sat up when we entered the house. She still gripped her book in her hand, and my eyebrows shot up when I saw the cover.

“Not sure how I feel about you reading things with



half-naked men,” I said.

She smirked and I knew that man got all the way undressed in whatever story she was reading, she just didn’t want to say so in front of Rhett. I’d spank her ass for that later. Unless she wanted to try some of the scenes she’d read about. It could be fun.

“We brought pie home,” Rhett said, carrying the bakery box to the kitchen.

“Apple,” I said. “He assured me it’s your favorite.”

She leaned in closer to whisper. “Actually, it’s Rhett’s favorite, but I always pretended to love it the most too. I’ll eat anything with sugar in it.”

I snickered. “Of course, you will.”

She stuck her tongue out at me and I smacked her on the ass as we followed Rhett to the kitchen. I couldn’t think of a better way to spend time than with my family around the kitchen table. We had pie with ice cream, and Rhett jabbered about the arcade and eating pizza. After he finished his dessert, he ran off to his room, leaving me alone with Jolene.

“Did the two of you have a good time?” she asked. “He seemed to enjoy himself.”

“Yeah, it was good. I think I learned a lot about him today, and we got closer. He’s a great kid, Jolene. You’ve done a good job raising him.”

“Now we get to do that job together.” She leaned in and kissed me. “We’re so lucky to have you, Alan. I never knew what I was missing until you started spending time with us. Every day with you is amazing, and I can’t wait to spend

the rest of my life with you.”

“Same here, honey. And since you’re a witch, and I’m a shifter, those lives will be really long. Think you’ll be sick of me in a hundred years or so?”

“Not a chance.” She kissed me again, and I wished we had the house to ourselves. I’d have loved nothing more than to bend her over the table right then. Thankfully, I controlled myself and pulled away.

“Mom, I’m going out back,” Rhett yelled out right before the door slammed.

Hmm. Now I was really wondering about what that kid could and couldn’t sense. How had he known I wanted some alone time with Jolene?

“What on earth?” she mumbled.

“Since it seems we’re alone for the moment...” I stood and helped her up from her chair. Before she had a chance to guess at my intentions, I had her leggings down around her knees and nudged her down over the table. She gripped the other side and looked at me over her shoulder. “Better keep quiet.”

She narrowed her eyes at me, but the look on her face quickly changed to one of pure bliss as I sank into her. My little mate was already wet, and I slid right in. My fangs popped out and the skin on my arms started to change colors. The green scale print was more vibrant than the last time this happened. I didn’t understand why I lost control like this with Jolene, but as long as she didn’t mind, it didn’t bother me.

“Hold on tight, Jolene. This is going to be quick.”

She pressed back against me, and I gripped her hips. I took her hard and fast. As I pumped my hips, I felt a tingle under my skin. My scales brightened even more, and I couldn't hold back from marking her again. I leaned down, my body curving over hers, and bit her shoulder. I heard her cries getting loud and clamped my hand over her mouth to quiet her.

Pounding into her pussy, I didn't stop even after I came. It felt like I was on fire, the flames licking at me from the inside out. Sparks danced along Jolene's skin as my hips slapped against her. My cock swelled and as her inner muscles clenched, I came again. I pumped load after load of cum into her, feeling like a savage beast. She took everything I had to give and begged for more.

When I'd finally emptied every drop of cum from my balls, I sagged over her a moment, trying to catch my breath.

"Holy crap," she mumbled. "What was what?"

I removed my fangs from her shoulder and licked at the wound. "Not sure, but it was hot as fuck."

She giggled. "Yeah, it was. But I think we should move before Rhett decides to come back inside. We aren't exactly behind a closed bedroom door."

Shit. She was right. I pulled out and lifted her into my arms. Even though my jeans had fallen around my ankles, I managed to get us to the bedroom and quickly shut the door. Tossing Jolene onto the bed, I followed her down and kissed the hell out of her.

"You're my heart. My soul. My everything," I said. "Always remember that."

"From now until forever, you're the only man I want

by my side.” She cupped my cheek. “Love you, Alan.”

I couldn't imagine our lives getting any more perfect than they were right now. We had a great kid, a happy mating, and supportive friends. It felt like I had everything I'd ever wanted.

## Epilogue

**Jolene**

**Six Months Later**

I rubbed my belly as I finished making dinner. Alan had insisted on bringing something home, but I'd told him the food was already in the oven. I hadn't technically lied. I really had put something in the oven. But now I needed to make some rice and carrots to go with it. I added honey to the carrots and gave them a stir.

"You okay, Mom?" Rhett asked.

"Never better. What about you?" I asked.

"I wondered if Mari could come over." He shifted from one foot to the other. "She said Logan hasn't been paying attention to her since Ezekiel was born, and Cody is always watching over his little sister."

I pointed to my stomach. "You have a sibling on the way too. You don't think it will bother Mari?"

He shook his head. "No. Please, Mom? We have enough food for her to have dinner here, right?"

"Okay. I'll call Raya. But make sure your room is clean!"

He ran off to check his room while I made the call. Raya answered right away and sounded out of breath.

"Everything all right?" I asked.

"Yeah. I literally ran after the postman to give him a

package. Just got back in the house. What's up?"

I couldn't imagine running after having recently given birth, but maybe she healed faster than the average person. I felt a little jealous.

"Rhett would like for Mari to come have dinner with us. Are you okay with that?"

"Sure. Mari would probably love that. Want me to get Henry to drop her off?" Raya asked.

"That's okay. Alan isn't home yet, so I can ask him to pick her up. And thanks, Raya."

"Actually, would you mind if she stayed the night? I think she could really use a sleepover right now. She's still adjusting to Ezekiel."

"We'd love to have her over for the night."

I ended the call and sent a text to Alan, asking him to pick up Mari on his way home. Then I gave Rhett the good news. He whooped with excitement. I had a feeling Alan would be prepping the living room after dinner. We could put down a few quilts for the kids to sleep on and let them camp out while they watched TV.

The baby in my stomach rolled and I lifted my shirt. After Alan pinned me to the kitchen table, we'd noticed something strange about my body. Or rather my belly. A faint scale pattern covered the area. We'd quickly learned I was pregnant, and it seemed our baby was trying to make their presence known.

"So much for anacondas not always reproducing," I said with a smile. I couldn't wait to meet our little one. Of

course, when I'd first discovered I was pregnant, I'd freaked out and asked Alan if I'd lay an egg.

Once he'd finished laughing, he'd assured me that even snake shifters had live births. Which had only prompted me to freak out and ask if it would be born in its snake form. He'd laughed a good twenty minutes after that, and I'd given up on asking questions.

“Just a few more months, little one,” I murmured.

I'd gone from feeling lost and alone, trying to juggle being a single parent and taking care of everything that broke around the house, to having the sweetest most protective mate ever, and a baby on the way.

When Robby blocked me the day my potion blew up, he'd saved me in more ways than one. I hadn't realized it then. Now that I had Alan, and knew I was his destined mate, I had to appreciate Robby's sacrifice even more. I tipped my head up, about to thank him, then realized he likely wasn't in heaven. If there even was such a place.

“Thanks, Robby. For everything.”

Somehow, I felt he heard me... and even if he didn't, I still felt like I finally had the closure I'd needed.

Only good things were to come.

## Author Notes

Dear Reader,

Thank you for purchasing a copy of *Alan (Devoted Guardians MC)*. I hope you enjoyed it! If you have a moment to leave a rating or review at the bookseller of your choice, or over at Goodreads or BookBub, I'd really appreciate it. I love seeing what my readers liked or didn't like about each story.

While there are parts of this series I've tried to keep somewhat realistic, it's 100% fantasy. That comes with both benefits and challenges. For one, I get to create everything from the town itself to the rules the people live by. It's been fun, and I hope you've enjoyed this world as much as I have. It's been fun combining a motorcycle club with a supernatural town.

The hacker mentioned is Wire from the Dixie Reapers series. If you're curious about the two men mentioned from Ashton Grove, Scorch and Digger, they are part of the Ashton Grove MC. You'll find that series under Jessica Coulter Smith at your favorite booksellers. It's a spinoff series from the very first Jessica Coulter Smith series called the Ashton Grove Werewolves. Who'd have thought that first book, published back in 2008, would bring us to this point?

Thank you for your support!

Harley/Jessica



## Dedication and Acknowledgments

Have you ever had someone tell you not to chase your dream? Maybe you wanted to sing, dance, or write, and they said it wasn't a realistic job goal. Well... I hope you didn't listen. This one is for you — the dreamer! Never give up on what makes you happy.

Thank you to my super patient editor, Crystal, my fabulous cover artist, Bryan, and all the staff at Changeling Press for making each book the best it can be. You guys are amazing and I'm so happy to be part of the Changeling Press family.

Thank you to my Wyldlings! When Fabiola first asked if I'd thought of making a fan group, I thought *who on earth would want to join?* Well... apparently, quite a few people. Thank you for your support, and I treasure all the laughs and fun we have in there.

Thank you to my Support Team! You guys rock! I can't tell you how much I appreciate all the shares and words of encouragement.

Thanks to my daughter, who took it upon herself to start our home renovations when I kept saying I'd get to it — right after I finished the next book. Except then there was another book, and another... She really put in some effort, and I'm super proud of her. It was one less thing to stress over while creating this story.

A big (sarcastic) thanks to Merlin, the Great Dane... I can't tell you how much I appreciate you barking all night

while I was trying to write, or eating the couch when I couldn't give you the attention you wanted right that second. I realize as a dog you couldn't understand what "deadline" meant, but I think that was taking things a tad too far. It's a good thing you're cute!

And last but not least, thanks to the folks at Tapas, Manta, and TappyToon... your web comics were a wonderful, and much needed, way to relax when I needed to rest my hands between chapters. I know you'll never see this, but you really saved my sanity (whatever is left of it).

## Playlist

In the case of Alan's book, this playlist is not a reflection of the characters or story. These are the songs that kept me going even when I just wanted to hide under the blankets.

- *Cheap Thrills* by Sia
- *Whistle* by Flo Rida
- *Just a Dream* by Nelly
- *Whatever You Like* by T.I.
- *You're Gonna Go Far, Kid* by The Offspring
- *Blood Mary (Dance With My Hands)* by Arankai
- *Don't Matter* by Akon
- *Déjà Vu* by No Silence
- *To the Bone* by J.T. Machinima
- *Party Up* by DMX
- *My House* by Flo Rida
- *When We Stand Together* by Nickelback
- *Snakes on a Plane (Bring It)* by Cobra Starship

## [Harley Wylde](#)

Harley Wylde is the International Bestselling Author of the Dixie Reapers MC, Devil's Boneyard MC, and Hades Abyss MC series. When Harley's writing, her motto is the hotter the better — off-the-charts sex, commanding men, and the women who can't deny them. If you want men who talk dirty, are sexy as hell, and take what they want, then you've come to the right place. She doesn't shy away from the dangers and nastiness in the world, bringing those realities to the pages of her books, but always gives her characters a happily-ever-after and makes sure the bad guys get what they deserve.

The times Harley isn't writing, she's thinking up naughty things to do to her husband, drinking copious amounts of Starbucks, and reading. She loves to read and devours a book a day, sometimes more. She's also fond of TV shows and movies from the 1980s, as well as paranormal shows from the 1990s to today, even though she'd much rather be reading or writing. You can find out more about Harley or enter her monthly giveaway on her website. Be sure to join her newsletter while you're there to learn more about discounts, signing events, and other goodies!

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[Bad Boys](#) Multiverse

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[Devil's Boneyard MC](#)

[Hades Abyss MC](#)

[Devil's Fury MC](#)

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Other Books by [Harley Wylde](#)

## [Jessica Coulter Smith](#)

Award-winning author Jessica Coulter Smith has been in love with the written word since she was a child writing her first stories in crayon. Today she's a multi-published author of over seventy-five novellas and novels. Romance is an integral part of her world, and she firmly believes that love will find you at the right time, even if Mr. Right is literally out of this world.

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