

The background of the book cover is a composite image. On the left, a dragon's head is shown in profile, facing right. It has dark, scaly skin, large horns, and glowing orange eyes. The dragon's mouth is slightly open, showing sharp teeth. On the right, a man's bare torso is visible, showing his muscles. He has a large, intricate blue tattoo on his right side, featuring swirling, flame-like patterns. The overall color scheme is dark, with shades of blue, black, and brown, accented by the dragon's orange eyes and the man's blue tattoo.

BEEN THERE DRAGON THAT

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Wrath and Rylee's story evaded me for quite some time, but I'm happy to say it landed in an amazing place. I'm so proud of this story and how it came together. I hadn't been able to write for quite some time and this book lifted me closer to myself. It helped me find my joy again and it showed me that I always need to write what I love. And what I love is "adrenaline filled action" mixed with "heart and commitment". And action packed adventure mixed with small town charm.

Thank you to everyone who helped me on this journey. My husband for supporting me and pushing me just the right amount. To my kids who had to take extra days off from school so I could work, LOL. My assistant Kate Tilton. My whole business works because of you. My editor Dawn. I couldn't have done this without you. And to Net and Karen who were patient and supportive during the process and dying to have those draft chapters a lot faster than I gave them. Thank you for being such amazing fans.

Go forth and fall in love with Wrath and Rylee!

—Krystal

CHAPTER
ONE

OCTOBER IN DALLAS, TEXAS...

RYLEE FLORENCE

Rylee Florence smoothed the lacy dress over her hips and held her breath. She looked into the bridal shop mirror, and all the stress she'd been carrying on her shoulders since last night melted away.

It was gorgeous.

The alterations made it like a second skin. Her breasts were perfectly accented by the sweetheart neckline. The dress nipped in above her hips and flared out beautifully into a short train covered in lace and pearls. It was flawless, but she hated the niggling thought in the back of her mind warning her it might all be a waste.

"If it wasn't for that Sweetie Belle pony's hair, I'd say you were picture perfect." Her mother's voice purred a soft Texan lilt from the couch behind her.

Rylee tipped her head and caught her mother's gaze in the mirror. No judgment. Just a tease. Rylee's room at her parent's home was filled with collections of My Little Pony. And Rylee's hair had been various shades of pink and purple for the last twelve years—since she was sixteen years old.

Up until then, Rylee and her mom had been a matching pair. Champagne blonde hair. Ice-blue eyes. And the prettiest cowboy boots money could buy.

“You like my purple hair.”

“You know I do, my Sweetie Belle.”

“Will it be too much for Grandmother? I could always have it dyed out and then put back later.” Concern crept into Rylee’s voice.

“Heavens no, your grandmother loves your hair too. She’d be furious if you changed it.”

A chuckle rolled up through Rylee’s chest. Grandmother Agatha was ninety-six, but she still lived alone in her own house and liked to brag to everyone that she could do everything she’d always been able to do.

“Do you think Jeff will like the dress?”

“Oh, sweetie. He’ll love it.” Her mother got up from the couch and approached the raised dais. “What about your name?”

“What do you mean?”

“Mrs. Jeffrey Douglass Harrington the third. Don’t you want to keep your name too? I’d consider hyphenating.”

“Mrs. Jeffrey Florence hyphen Harrington the third. Or Mrs. Jeffrey Harrington the third hyphen Florence.” Something shivered and twisted in the pit of Rylee’s stomach. Neither were right. Nothing had been quite right since she’d accidentally overheard her fiancé of nine months on the phone in the middle of the night, last night, ordering some guy *taken care of*.

Ordering someone hurt?

Ordering someone's death?

His words and his tone had left her feeling scared.

And what about the other middle-of-the-night calls? The ones he'd given stupid excuses for when she'd asked.

But telling her parents she thought her soon-to-be-husband might be mixed up in criminal activity or *be* a criminal himself... How did a person do that? A week before one of the biggest weddings in Dallas society circles. The media had dubbed them the sweetheart couple of the year.

SHE'D KNOWN Jeff for years. Their families had vacationed together every summer since she and Jeff were in college. They'd seemed like decent people.

Jeff had always been sweet and kind and romantic, and she still couldn't believe he'd said those words. As a couple, they had good chemistry. Plus, he had goals of being in the senate. Maybe more. They were a true power couple.

She could be wrong, maybe she heard wrong.

She could be ruining their lives and their future over a misunderstanding.

Sometimes it really sucked being rich and having the public so invested in her private life.

"Rylee, you look worried. What's wrong?" Her mother was wearing the same what's-really-going-on look that she'd worn the night Rylee had punched her sweet-sixteen-party escort for sexual harassment. She hadn't been mad at Rylee for punching the guy, only for trying to hide why she'd done it.

Rylee shrugged and tried to force her doubts about Jeff away. “Just nerves. One week. It’s so close. It’s hard to believe.”

She should ask her mother’s advice, shouldn’t she?

She really should. Just ... not right now.

Rylee looked back at her reflection in the mirror. The dress was everything she’d ever dreamed it would be. And her mother’s face was filled with so much joy.

Ruining this perfect moment wasn’t an option.

“Well, the wedding planner has a few more things on our list to approve today.” Her mother pushed a stray lock of hair from Rylee’s cheek and tucked it behind her ear. “Why don’t you take a few more moments to soak in the splendor of that dress, and then we can finish up. Your dad has that dinner gala tonight with clients and potential investors. Are you still up for that?”

Shit.

Rylee had completely forgotten about the gala. How was she going to act like everything was fine? What if Jeffrey kissed her and she flinched? If she broke up with him, it was going to be a scandal, and her parents would be humiliated.

She didn’t care what people thought of her. But ruining her parents’ reputation or putting a stain on her family name, that thought made her blood freeze over.

“Mom.” This was it. She was going to pull a full stop on the wedding. It was the better choice.

“Honey?”

Nope, can’t do it. Rylee forced out an I’m-okay smile.

“Nothing. I’m good. I’m looking forward to the gala and seeing dad. He’s been gone for weeks.”

Her mother cupped Rylee’s face and stared deep into her eyes.

Rylee could feel her mom peeling away the steel façade Rylee had erected around her emotions like it was no more than tissue paper.

“Rylee Agatha Florence, if something’s wrong, you can tell me. You know that. Anything. No matter what. Even if it means this wedding doesn’t happen. Do you hear me?”

Tears burned from behind Rylee’s eyes, but she didn’t let them fall. She nodded. And pulled away. “It’s just nerves, Mom. I promise.”

That had been the moment.

Her mom had given her an opening, and she’d let it float away like a kid watching their balloon sail up into the sky.

Suck it up, Ry. Make this work. It was nothing. It had to be a misunderstanding. He can’t be what you’re thinking. You heard wrong.

Rylee took a careful step off the dais in front of the mirror. “Can you undo me, please?”

Her mother took another extra-long pause and then helped get all the laces and hooks undone on the back of the dress. It slipped to the floor. A puddle of white and lace and dreams.

Her mother gathered it up and marched it over to the door of the large fitting room.

The boutique attendant took the dress, and then another young woman—this one in her thirties with bright blonde hair and an Elle Woods powder pink suit and matching pink

stilettos—popped her head in. “Can I come in and go over the rest of our agenda for today?”

It was a lot of pink. Even for a My Little Pony fanatic.

Her mom stepped back and coughed to cover a laugh. Almost made it.

Margaret Florence had been raised on one of the largest cattle ranches in Texas. Stilettos and pink suits weren’t in her wardrobe. Never had been. And even now, after years of being married to a real estate mogul, she still preferred jeans and boots. Designer jeans and boots, but still. Her mom always kept it simple, classy, and western. And other than her bleached blonde hair color, Rylee favored her mom’s rustic fashion sense.

“Of course, Sarah. What’s on the agenda?”

Rylee yanked her jeans back on, tucked in her white button down top, and buckled the thick western leather belt. Then she sat on the low couch where her mom had been sitting and shoved her feet into her well-worn turquoise and brown Lucchese boots.

“What’s first?” Rylee inhaled deeply. She could do this. Everything would work out. If she said it enough, maybe she could convince herself.

“Your fiancé’s lawyer is outside. I told him to wait. Something about a beneficiary paper that didn’t get signed a few weeks ago. Then I have a car to take us to see the ballroom and chapel set up for final approval.”

Rylee slapped her thighs and stood. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Sarah tapped her iPad. “Everything is ready, Ms. Florence. All the way down to the purple napkins

with the My Little Pony outline embossed in silver. They came out really cute.”

“Excellent. Shall we?” Her mother held out a hand, beckoning, and Rylee grabbed hold.

“We shall.”

The second they stepped outside into the cool overcast October afternoon, a large man in a dark gray suit stepped forward. He was familiar. Rylee remembered meeting him, but she couldn’t recall his name.

“Forgive me, ladies. I do apologize. I promise I only need a couple signatures, and I’ll be out of your hair forever.”

“What did we miss?” Rylee asked.

“A couple of the beneficiary pages from the will. When my assistant proofread the full document, they were blank. Nothing out of the ordinary.” He held out a heavy leather folder and handed her a pen. Then he pointed. “Here.”

She signed the blank line.

Then he pulled up the top page and revealed another signature line. “And here, Ms. Florence.”

Rylee signed the second line and handed him back the pen. “Anything else?”

“No, ma’am. Enjoy your wedding and honeymoon, Ms. Florence. I hear Jeff is planning to fly you himself to a cabin in the mountains.”

Rylee gave the lawyer a polite smile and then dismissed him with a nod.

She and her mom got into the waiting black town car. Her mother looked out the window at the lawyer, her lips flattening

into a disappointed thin line. “Jeff needs to hire your father’s lawyer.”

“Mom?”

“I don’t like him.” Her mom said and turned her head away from the window to meet Rylee’s gaze. “You shouldn’t work with him again. There’s something about him I don’t trust.”

“Done.” Rylee didn’t particularly care for the lawyer either, but she hadn’t been willing to argue with Jeff. The two men had known each other for years. Her mother’s opinion, though, was a stamp of approval or dismissal. She trusted her judgment explicitly.

Her mom’s face relaxed, and a smile of victory curved on her lips. “Good.”

THE REST of the day went off without a hitch. The ballroom was beautiful. The chapel looked like a dream. The purple napkins with the outline of Sweetie Belle were amazing.

Rylee had taken one and folded it up and tucked it into her pocket. Even if her marriage would not be exactly as she’d envisioned, the wedding would be perfect and beautiful.

She fidgeted with her phone in the car. Typing out a text to Jeff and then deleting it three times. She needed to see him. She needed him to look at her and smile and kiss her, and all this worry and doubt would fade away.

“Can you stop at Jeff’s office on our way back. I want to remind him about the gala tonight. Tell him I’m going over to your place to get ready and that I’ll meet him there.”

“Of course, sweetie.”

The town car pulled to a stop in front of a contemporary glass office building. It was the senator’s campaign office. Jeff was the campaign director. He knew everyone. And while his goal was to get Mitchell Hollins elected this year, he’d already begun planning out how to follow in his footsteps and ultimately supersede him in the future.

Jeff was ambitious, and he worked hard and possibly ... ordered people’s murders?

Rylee mentally cleared the worry from her mind and climbed the steps. *You have to stop thinking about it. You have to move past it. You are strong and capable, and telling your parents that you think Jeff might be a criminal isn’t an option. There’s no proof. You’re ruining a good thing.*

She punched in her code and pushed open the door, surprised to find the main area empty. The lights buzzed annoyingly above her head, making the silence all that more profound. She walked across the still office, her footsteps muffled on the carpeted floor.

Except there wasn’t complete silence.

There were noises. Muffled groans she recognized. And moaning. And flesh slapping against flesh.

It couldn’t...

Could it?

Her heart didn’t know whether to be broken or relieved. A cheating asshole story would solve everything. Except could she handle seeing the betrayal live and in color? Who was he fucking? Did it matter? How long had he been sleeping with her and another?

Nausea welled in the pit of her stomach.

Nope.

She had to hold it together. She could stave off the hurt and brokenness and betrayal and deal with it later in the safety of her parents' home where Jeff couldn't get to her.

Rylee took a deep breath, put her hand on his office door, and pressed down the lever handle. The door swung open, and she was met with a view of Jeff, bare-assed and balls-deep in the office secretary.

"What the fuck, Aaron. I told you—" His words trailed off when he saw it wasn't his assistant. "Fuck. Ry. It's not what it looks like." He turned to face her. Full frontal.

She'd never been so disgusted by a penis in her life. Or a man. She didn't want to see either of them ever again.

"What would you call this?" She waved a hand at his flopping penis and the naked secretary bent over the back of his couch. "It certainly seems like you're fucking the office secretary to me."

His face reddened. His gaze blackened, and Rylee had to fight every urge not to take a step backward. That look. How dare he be angry at her. She had done nothing wrong.

But that look. That look carried a threat that made Rylee think of the overheard phone call from the night before, and a coldness like ice crept up her spine.

He grabbed his pants from the floor and yanked them on, tucking his still-erect penis out of sight.

The naked secretary grabbed her clothes and fled out the side door.

“Rylee. She means nothing. I love you. We will be fine. We’re going to be a powerful force together, Rylee. A Harrington and a Florence.”

Hold back the pain.

Hold back the tears.

Channel the anger.

Hate him for this. You would if you hadn’t heard that phone call.

“How dare you? How dare you think that *this* is something I would be okay with? I’m not, and we’re done.”

“The wedding is next week, Ry!”

“Thank-fucking-god!” Rylee yelled. “Better I know you’re a lying cheat now than after we exchanged vows that obviously mean nothing to you. Less paperwork.” Each word brought her wrath closer to the surface, like a bubbling volcano preparing to spew molten lava. “I’m worth more than this. I deserve someone who cares about me. Who wants to truly be with me. We were good together. We could’ve been happy.” Tears burned in her eyes.

No. He didn’t deserve to see her tears.

She sucked back the rising sob and grit her teeth. “Goodbye, Jeff. Enjoy her, and don’t you even dare show your face at my father’s gala tonight. Is that clear?”

“You belong to me, Rylee.” His voice carried anger and sharp derision all in the same breath. He took an aggressive step toward her, and Rylee mirrored his movements, backing out of the office.

She shook her head. “No. I do not.”

He stopped advancing, and the tightness in her chest released slightly.

“Ry. I love you.” This time his tone was soft and smooth like a devil luring a soul into hell with promises of overwhelming pleasure.

Her heart sped in her chest. How had she missed this manipulative behavior? How had she not noticed? How had she not felt his insincerity? How had she been this blind? How often had he used that voice on her before?

“Goodbye, Jeffrey.” She spun on her heel and marched out of the office and to the town car waiting at the curb for her. Their driver was waiting for her with a pleasant smile.

The chauffeur opened the door for her, and she slipped into the back seat with her mother and the wedding planner.

“The wedding is off, Mother. I’m sorry.”

CHAPTER
TWO
MYSTERY, ALASKA

WRATH DI'LASHA

Wrath's radio buzzed with static, and then Patsy's pleasant voice broke through the grinding white noise. "Liam is calling for some help over at the Watering Hole, Deputy Di'Lasha. Some rowdy drunks won't leave."

His dragon rumbled inside his chest. He didn't want to leave his patrol yet, but Wrath picked up the radio from the dashboard anyway. Aarav wasn't on duty. Just him. "On my way. Let him know I'll be there in five." He wasn't far, just on the other side of the river patrolling a neighborhood where yet another break-in had occurred last night.

He'd spent the better part of his morning comforting and assuring a family that'd been scared to wake up and find their entire house trashed. Even after he'd left them, he hadn't been able to leave the neighborhood. He'd kept circling around, hoping to catch something he'd missed the time before.

He was angry.

This town was his home.

These people were his responsibility now.

Three break-ins in the last two weeks, and this last one they'd hit an occupied house. The previous two had been

empty vacation homes.

Wrath took several concurrent lefts in the police cruiser and crossed the river that ran along the west side of the little town of Mystery, Alaska. He'd lived here a couple of months now and had been appointed the deputy position only a week or two after relocating from Seattle.

He'd left his tribe. His alpha. All on the word of one of the magick-benders he'd met up here back during the summer. She'd said he'd find his mate, but only if he stayed in Mystery.

So he had.

He'd pledged his loyalty to the Li'Vhram alpha and his mate. The tribe here had been welcoming, but it was strange. Col and Naomi were the only other dragons. There were lions and bears and wolves and a tiger here in this town. And they all had made this tribe together in this little town tucked against the side of a giant mountain.

Two months and still no mate. He'd scoured the town. Done his best to systematically introduce himself to everyone as the new deputy, but he'd been looking for *her*.

He hadn't found her. She wasn't here. And his dragon was restless.

When the bar came into view, he couldn't help the smile that curved his lips. Four guys were coming at Liam and his cousin Sean. The two burly men were built like Reyleans, and if there hadn't been four assholes, he knew they wouldn't have called for help.

He shoved the cruiser into park and unfolded himself from the vehicle.

"I heard you were having some fun this morning, Liam."

“Fuck you, Di’Lasha.” The burly man grinned, dodged a punch, and then landed a hit on one of the belligerent drunks hard in the gut. The man bent over double to catch his breath. The guy didn’t go down which impressed Wrath. “Figured you needed a workout this morning.”

“Didn’t want to wake up Tor? Where’s Ryder?” Wrath scanned the parking lot again. Still only four guys and one had found a hunk of a two-by-four and was creeping up on Sean.

“Sean.” Wrath bellowed the man’s name and tipped him off. Sean easily pivoted and charged the guy, knocking him down before he could use the board as a weapon.

“Tor took Dawn on vacation. Ryder and his woman are with them. Just me and Sean and these idiots this morning. They came banging on the door, mad we weren’t open yet.”

Wrath stalked toward one aggressor, letting his dragon get excited about what was coming next. “I’m officially warning you not to hit me. I’m the deputy sheriff. You have one chance to leave peaceably.”

The drunk stilled for a moment, eyes glazed over from the excessive alcohol. Wrath could smell the stench of cheap whiskey on his breath. Then he charged and swung.

Wrath ducked the punch and swung an uppercut, knocking the human male off the ground and probably breaking his jaw. The yowl from the asshole made his blood warm.

His dragon growled in his chest, and he charged toward the next man still standing. “I appreciate you calling me,” he shouted toward Liam.

Liam chuckled and took a couple steps backward, removing himself from the immediate view of the soon-to-be-unconscious men.

Wrath flashed a pleased smile at the bartender and drove into the next idiot charging straight at him. They collided, and Wrath sent him hurtling through the air a good ten feet.

Another assailant punched Wrath hard in the side before he could spin around.

Wrath opened his mouth and roared right in the man's face.

"Fuck's w-wrong with you?" The human male's eyes were also dilated and glassy, but Wrath hadn't been very careful, and some of his dragon's fire had probably shown in his eyes. It was something he worked hard to avoid. At least these men were so drunk they wouldn't remember anything.

The human male took an unsteady step backward.

Sean had joined his cousin on the steps leading into the bar. They were both leaning against the doors watching the show. Sean had a black eye and a split lip. Liam was also sporting a split lip, but they both looked fine. And both enjoyed a good brawl, but they'd kindly left the fight so he could work out his frustrations on the poor drunk bastards who had all foolishly attacked him first.

"Nothing wrong with me, you're drunk, you're seeing things. You shouldn't be here. You shouldn't have harassed my people." His menacing tone made the human's heart beat faster.

"You're just a fucking cop. Bars are supposed to serve customers."

"Do you live in Mystery?" Wrath asked, sniffing the air. He let his gaze drift around the parking lot again, looking for any new threats. Two men were on the ground out cold, but

the fourth was coming up behind him. He could hear his footsteps and smell his fear.

“No.”

“Then you’re not my people.”

“What does that matter? You’re a cop. You can’t do anything. Lock me up, and I’ll sleep it off.”

“Since when do you get to tell me what to do?”

Wrath feinted to the right and then leapt forward, throwing a punch that flattened the guy. He collapsed to the muddy gravel. His friend charged from behind, but Wrath had never lost track. He sidestepped the charge and kicked the man in the chest, cracking at least one rib.

“I heard that break from here.” The bartender chuckled loudly. He and his brother stepped off the porch, big grins on both their faces. “Feel better?”

Wrath rolled his shoulders and frowned. All four men lay motionless on the ground in various places around the parking lot. “They didn’t last very long.”

“We’d already softened them up for you,” Sean said, his tone jovial.

A snort of laughter rolled up from his chest. “Sure, you did.”

“Want help putting them in the cruiser?”

“They have a car here?”

Liam nodded toward a big tan pickup truck parked in front of the bar. “That’s theirs.”

“Let’s toss them in the bed. They can sleep it off and leave themselves after they sober up. I don’t want to deal with them.

Aarav is pissed about the break-ins. He's likely to work them over worse than me."

"Still haven't figured out who's doing it?" Liam's face was solemn. "You don't think they could have anything to do with it?"

Wrath shook his head. "Whoever is doing this ... they are careful not to leave a trace. The scents are all human as far as we can tell. The neighborhood is near the school. There's a lot of traffic through it. No signs stand out from the rest."

"Everyone was okay?"

Wrath nodded. "No one's been hurt ... yet, but the last break-in was in the middle of the night. The family was sleeping. They're getting bolder."

The behavior was escalating. Someone was bound to get hurt soon. He and Aarav were doing everything they could to track the invaders, but even with help from other tribemates, they were failing miserably.

Wrath and the two bartenders worked together to move the unconscious men to the bed of their parked truck.

"You sure it wasn't these hooligans?" Sean asked.

"No," Wrath answered. "Their scent is unfamiliar to me. They weren't in the house."

Sean shook his head. "Still floors me how your people can do that. Smelling a person like a bloodhound."

"There was no blood."

Sean chuckled. "Bloodhound is a tracking breed of dog. They use them to track escaped prisoners, lost children. They've got the best noses."

“But there are none of them here in Mystery?” Perhaps he and Aarav should’ve consulted others about this crime and should be looking for these bloodhounds.

“Bloodhounds? They might have some up at the prison west of Fairfield, but they wouldn’t share.”

“If we could shift openly, we would be able to use our abilities better. They’re not as strong in these forms.” Wrath’s shoulders fell with his exhale.

“Pretty sure your dragon walking down the street would be more traumatizing than a break-in.” Wrath and Sean tossed the last guy into the bed of the truck.

“I’m sure that’s true.” Wrath let a slightly relaxed laugh roll up through his chest. He wouldn’t even fit on the neighborhood street as his dragon. His claws would wreck the asphalt. It’d look like a scene from that dinosaur movie Kann’s wife, Penny, was obsessed with. “Knox said he was nervous someone would take a shot at him if he walked through the neighborhood as his wolf. He said he would try to sneak through tonight and see if he could catch anything I might’ve missed.”

“Good,” Sean answered. “You’re doing your best. That’s all the town can expect.”

Wrath slammed the tailgate closed on the unconscious pile of men.

Liam leaned over the side of the truck and looked at them. “It’s supposed to get up to about sixty-five today, they’ll be fine, other than the aches and pains they’ll wake up with.”

“You need to go change, Wrath. Got blood on your uniform. You’ll scare the civies if you get more calls.”

Wrath looked down at his khaki shirt and pants. Blood spattered from the fight had gotten on both. Then moving the men, more had smeared on his hands and sleeves. “Well, fuck.”

Liam put a hand on his shoulder. “You’re doing good, Wrath. Give yourself a break. It’ll come together.”

“It needs to come together before someone gets hurt,” Wrath bit out, anger sharpening each word. “Call me if you have any more trouble with them.”

The bartender nodded, his gaze steady and solemn. “I’ll see you at Col’s for dinner tonight.”

Wrath nodded and left quickly. He’d completely forgotten the *family* tribe dinner was tonight. Naomi, Col’s mate, insisted they all eat together regularly.

He headed for his cabin after radioing Patsy.

His cabin was like the others the tribe had built already. One of the women, Penny, was in charge of the construction and organization. She’d called extra crews over the summer and had several extra cabins built. He’d been grateful they’d allowed him to have one. Sharing a room with Aarav’s brothers in a community-style cabin hadn’t been appealing.

His cabin was the furthest south from Col and Naomi’s. They stretched in a line up and down the bank of the river that wound its way around the base of the mountain and eventually joined the other river that bordered Mystery.

He parked in front of his cabin and got out of the car, slammed the door of the cruiser, and immediately yanked his bloodied shirt over his head.

He was failing.

At everything.

He couldn't protect the town. He couldn't find his mate.

He walked into the empty living room. He didn't have a single piece of furniture. He couldn't bring himself to buy anything. His mate should get to pick out things. It would be hers. It didn't feel like his, even though the entire tribe of mated women told him his future mate wouldn't mind if he purchased a few things.

He stared out the back wall of windows. The view was stunning. He loved this place—Alaska. The mountains. The trees. It was beautiful.

But a beautiful home and countryside couldn't make up for the empty aching place in his heart.

He let his dragon rise in his chest, and he roared. The cry echoed through the empty cabin. Pain and frustration reverberated back and forth off the bare walls.

He knew she was out there, somewhere.

His soul sought the completion she would bring.

The magick-bender had promised him she would be here.

Except she still wasn't, and his need for her grew each day.

CHAPTER THREE

RYLEE

Rylee sipped her latte, trying to enjoy the smell of fresh baked goods and roasted coffee beans. Sugar and caffeine. Legal drugs that make the world go round. Neither was really working well for her today.

She glanced out the window to the busy sidewalk full of people on their way to work or school or some other activity. Then checked her phone again for a text from Ayla, her best friend since she was twelve. Surviving junior high, high school, and college together as roommates creates a strong bond. She was more a sister than a friend, and Rylee could really use a sister's input at this point.

She'd woken up this morning to a disturbing news article about a woman being killed in a hit and run. Normally, it wouldn't have really caught her attention, but the woman who'd died was the secretary she'd caught her ex-fiancé fucking in his office.

Poor woman.

Was it a coincidence?

Was it not?

Was Jeff really mixed up in something shady?

Dangerous?

The coffee shop door swung open, and Ayla Randall walked in. Her shiny black hair was pulled back into a tight high ponytail, and she was wearing black blinged-out flip-flops, a long flowy red skirt, a wide black leather belt, and a white tank top. It was October, but it was Texas. The temperature outside was still averaging eighty-five to ninety degrees.

“All you’re missing is something blue, and you’d be rocking Snow White’s colors today.” Rylee stood up and greeted her best friend with a tight hug.

Ayla laughed and gave her a tight squeeze. “Good deflection, but tell me what’s going on. You don’t seem broken up enough for the he-cheated-on-me story to be the only one in play.”

They sat down, and Rylee pushed the extra latte she’d already ordered across the table to her friend.

“Ooooh, you are the best.” Ayla took a long sip and then sighed.

“I overheard Jeff say some things that made me wonder if he was involved in something shady. Something dangerous. This was the night before I walked in on him and Michelle in the office.” Rylee ran her finger along the handle of her mug, tracing the edge over and over and over. “I was already concerned I had made a mistake. Missed something.”

“But it wasn’t enough to call it off? You would’ve still married him, even worried about stuff like that? Rylee.” Ayla put her hand out and laid it across Rylee’s on the table.

“The cheating story was much more convenient than trying to explain to my parents I was concerned I might be marrying

a criminal.”

“What exactly did you hear?”

“He was talking about *taking care of someone*. Like ... getting rid of them.”

Ayla’s big blue eyes widened. Her already pale skin, blanched even more. She pulled her hand back and dug into her big boho purse. “The news this morning.” Ayla had her phone out in a second and had pulled up the news coverage about Michelle-the-secretary’s death. “Do you think this was on purpose?”

Rylee continued to fidget with her coffee mug’s handle and didn’t look up. “I’m worried. And scared. Then I was hurt when I saw what he was doing with her, and I realized he never really cared about me. Then I was angry, but still hurt. I was preparing to build a life with this man.”

Ayla grabbed Rylee’s hand again and squeezed.

“I feel so mixed up inside. I’m relieved he was cheating on me. But I’m still a mess over it. And now there’s this.” Rylee pointed back to the news photo on Ayla’s phone. “I don’t think this was an accident, Ayla.”

“The news says the witness they have says the car ran a red light. White man. Dark glasses. Dark hair and bearded. The traffic cam recorded the woman trying to jump out of the way, and the car turned toward her.”

“I know, it was on the news this morning when I was getting dressed.”

“They’re calling for anyone with information to call in to a hotline. There were no plates on the vehicle in the footage.”

“I can’t say anything. It wasn’t Jeff in the car. The description isn’t even close. And if he is involved, he might come after my family.”

Ayla nodded. “And what are people going to call in and say? My neighbor drives a black charger like the one in the video, and he has dark hair and a beard. Am I going to report him? Pretty much they have nothing.”

“What I don’t get is why he would target her? It’s not like she knew anything. She was just his—you know.” Rylee sipped her latte, finding a moment of solace in the perfect mixture of sweet milk and bitter coffee, and then finally looked up at her friend.

“Umm, she knew she was fucking your ex-fiance, and you know he’s pissed about it. If we’re tallying points in the I’m-not-sure-what-Jeff-is-capable-of column—”

“Assassination is still a leap. And there’s no proof.” Another sip of the latte.

“Only what you heard.”

“It could’ve been taken out of context. And that conversation was about a guy, not a woman.” Rylee’s pulse raced, churned, and then tripped and tumbled like white water crashing through rocks in a raging river. And she couldn’t blame it on the latte. She drank them every day.

She was lying to herself, and Ayla knew it. “Coincidence proves nothing.” Even as she said the words, she didn’t believe them. And Ayla would never let her weak argument stand either.

Her friend shook her head slowly and put her phone down on the table. “Coincidence is enough to make me nervous, Rylee.”

Rylee sighed. She leaned back in her chair and did her best impression of an aggravated man-growl.

“That was cute. Not sure it’s going to scare off a hit-and-run assassin.”

“Ayla, why do I have to attract the insane men? First, there was Luthor who secretly thought he was King Arthur reincarnated.”

“He was amusing, but don’t forget Toby, with the secret bungee jumping habit. If you’d said yes to that trip to South America, you’d probably have spent weeks in the hospital with him in suspension while your bones mended.”

Rylee shuddered. She’d only been with Toby a few weeks before the accident that put him in the hospital with twenty broken bones. And she *had* considered going on the trip. It sounded fun for a few minutes. But after watching a few YouTube videos, she’d told him to go have a good time all by himself.

She lifted her mug. “To Toby. You know he started jumping again not too long ago.”

Ayla’s eyes widened. “He still texts you?”

Rylee shook her head. “I follow his YouTube channel.”

“I can’t, Rylee. You have to stop.” Ayla said, clinking her mug gently to Rylee’s. “Now you’ve attracted a dirty politician. The next guy you date, I get to pick.”

“Says the woman who won’t date anyone.”

Ayla tilted her head back and let out a snort of laughter. “Whatever it takes to keep the crazy at bay, girl. Whatever it takes.”

“Fair enough.” She pulled her phone out and put it on the table. The screen showed Jeff’s name.

“Does he leave messages?”

Rylee pressed the “ignore” button on the phone and looked at Ayla. The edges of her mouth tightened, and she wished she was back at home, curled in her bed with a soft blanket and soothing violin music lulling her into a fantasy of safety.

She wasn’t though. She was in a public coffee shop with her best friend contemplating whether or not her ex-fiancé was capable of sending someone to murder the senator’s secretary.

“Would you come back to the house with me? Hang out for a while.”

Ayla nodded. “Have you listened to any of the messages?”

“No.”

Ayla stood up first. “Have you deleted them?”

“No. I have this weird guilt about wanting to listen and cry about what he did. Then I get angry and think about how he would’ve ruined my life if I hadn’t found out about Michelle. A part of me really wants him to be sorry. And then there’s this other part of me that knows he’ll never be genuinely sorry.”

Rylee took Ayla’s outstretched hand and let her friend pull her to her feet.

“I will come back to the house. We’ll listen to them all together, no regrets, and delete them after. Then you block his number. Deal?”

“Deal.” Rylee tucked her phone into her pocket and trailed through the coffee shop behind her friend to the door.

They stepped out into the warm summer morning air. The breeze carried the scent of pine from the park across the street, but it couldn't block out the rancid smell of the contents in the trashcan on the edge of the sidewalk. Or the sticky sweet residue on the brick sidewalk where someone had dropped a jelly donut. And the acrid smell of oil and asphalt drifted up from the street.

Nature didn't have a chance in a city this big.

"I'm parked across the street." Rylee pointed to the parking lot. "You?"

"Yep," Ayla said, checking the street again. The light changed, and the white "safe to walk" symbol flashed on the square display. They stepped off the curb and crossed.

The screech of tires from the other side of the intersection made Rylee cringe. She hated that sound.

"Hey! Watch out!" A female voice called from behind Rylee. "Lady!"

The roar of an engine was right behind her. Rylee turned and was face to face with an oncoming big black car. A car that wasn't slowing. Except everything around her seemed to be in slow motion.

Yelling people.

Ayla screamed something.

Rylee stared for a moment at the man in the car. He was unfamiliar, bearded, and wearing dark sunglasses and a white shirt.

He was so close.

Rylee shoved Ayla toward the sidewalk before the breath-stealing pain of impact shot through her like a lightning strike.

Then more pain. Crunching glass. The engine of the car roared in her ears. She bounced and twisted around the passenger side and then down to the asphalt.

The whistle of wheels peeling out rang through her head. The car wasn't stopping.

People were rushing to their side.

A few moments later Rylee couldn't see anything but strange people. And she couldn't hear anything. Then she couldn't really see either. Something wet and warm dripped down in her eye, blinding her.

"Ayla?" She looked for her friend through the red haze.

A large hand touched her shoulder, and she winced.

"Sorry. Your friend is okay. I think she may have broken her wrist, but otherwise she looks good." The voice was male. Unfamiliar. The words were garbled together with all the other sounds, but he was close enough she could understand him.

"I need to call ... my dad." She'd almost thought to call Jeff, but Jeff wasn't a part of her life anymore. He would never be someone she would call ever again.

"Rylee! Rylee!" Ayla's voice carried through the noise.

There were sirens in the distance now. She could hear the strange male voice still talking next to her, but she couldn't distinguish what he was saying.

Her vision, what she could make out, was blurry or doubled. She tried to move, and it felt like her body was drunk. And the light hurt her eyes.

Everything hurt. Her arms. Her legs. Her ribs.

Damn. Her ribs and her hips hurt a lot.

The sirens were really close now. People were shouting even louder, and Rylee closed her eyes tight and wished she could plug her ears. All the noise hurt like butcher knives stabbing her brain. Everything throbbed like her pulse had been put on steroids and couldn't fit inside her body anymore. Like her veins would explode.

There were hands on her body again.

Strangers' hands.

Touching her. Moving her.

Then she was lying flat and being strapped down. Her head was wrapped in something soft. Pressure was applied to her throat to check for a pulse. It was a female's touch this time. Lighter. Gentler.

"Can you tell me your name, miss?" A female voice cut through the noise this time. Like she was speaking right into her ear.

"Rylee-ee," she answered, lengthening the end. It didn't sound right. Her tongue felt odd.

"That's good, Rylee. I'm Lisa. We're gonna get you loaded up in the ambulance now, okay. You stick with me, you hear."

Rylee attempted a nod, but her head was stuck in place.

"What's your last name Rylee?"

"Flor..." Pain flared again at a sharp jolt of the bed they'd put her on. Or gurney. That's what they called it. It was really hard to focus. Her vision was so blurry. Everything looked like fuzzy shapes and shadows.

"Her last name is Florence. What hospital? I have her mom on the phone." Ayla's voice came through bright and strong, sending a note of assurance through Rylee's scrambled mind.

“Medical City.”

“Thank you.”

“Ayla?”

“I’m good, Ry. I’ll be in the ambulance right behind you, okay.” Her friend shouted and then doors slammed shut, cutting out all the noise. It was better, but now she was alone, and the fear crept in even more as she replayed the scene in her mind over and over.

A similar car.

A similar description of the man.

Whoever had killed Michelle had just tried to kill her too.

CHAPTER FOUR

RYLEE

R ylee glanced up at the clear sky one more time. It was hard to believe they thought a storm was coming when it looked this pristine right now. But weather could be unpredictable; she'd learned that growing up in Texas. Some days the Lone Star State would dish out all four seasons in one twenty-four-hour period. Alaska could be the same. Who was she to judge?

If the meteorologist said a winter storm was brewing on the other side of Denali, she'd prepare for it just to be safe. Her GPS said Mystery was only a few more miles up the road. She was glad for the quiet. Glad for the open and peaceful road.

Ten days at the hospital with two extremely freaked-out parents fussing over her every breath and groan was almost too much. Her doctors had informed her she was very lucky to have come out of such an accident with only some cracked ribs, bruises, and a concussion from hell itself.

The police had been to see her multiple times. The similarities between her accident and Michelle's murder wasn't lost on them. Unfortunately, she could not provide

them with any more details about the man than anyone at the scene of the previous hit-and-run.

She'd refused to mention Jeff or anything she knew about his relationship with Michelle. The last thing she needed was her daddy finding out and saddling her with bodyguards. Cause he would.

Thankfully, Ayla had kept her lips sealed too. Although she'd given her a couple of stern talking-tos in private once Rylee had gotten back to her parents' house.

Then she'd told her parents she wanted to recuperate somewhere else. That she'd needed some time to herself. Alone. Away from Dallas. Away from the city Jeff lived in.

That's how she'd finally ended up on her parent's private jet to Alaska two weeks later—the second she'd been cleared by her doctors. And now was driving up from Anchorage to some picturesque little town called Mystery where her father had bought a vacation home last year.

When she'd asked where was the furthest she could go away from Dallas, he'd laughed and said he had a house in Alaska. Then he'd laughed a bit more when she'd said that sounded perfect. But he'd still made all the arrangements. And now she was driving through some of the most beautiful countryside she'd ever seen.

The trees were vast carpets of red and gold and brown. The skies were open and cloudless for miles. The blueness reminded her of Texas. Of home.

The cold wasn't overbearing yet, but she could smell it in the air. Texas didn't really even know the meaning of winter.

She'd made a couple of pit stops on her way out of Anchorage to get some Alaska-winter-proof clothing and

footwear. And a heavy coat since the news station had predicted bad weather rolling in by late this evening. She would be prepared, just in case.

Rylee stared through her driver's side window again at the picturesque white mountain peaks of Denali. She'd been to the Rocky Mountains, but this one looked so much bigger.

A large brown animal loped across the road maybe a quarter mile ahead. The antlers were massive. The body was even bigger. But what really made her tap the brakes on the 4Runner was the gigantic lion that leaped across the road after it.

She pulled the vehicle to the shoulder, parked, and took a deep breath.

That was a fucking Lion King lion.

"What the hell?" The words slipped between her lips like a prayer. She watched the trees where the animals had disappeared.

She pulled out her phone and googled 'lions in Alaska'. The only references she could find were occasional sightings of mountain lions. And those were still really rare. Like one every ten years rare.

Bears lived in Alaska.

Lots of bears. Maybe her eyes had played a trick on her? Maybe it was leftover weirdness from the concussion?

She checked for traffic and started driving again.

"It had to be a bear." It was the only logical explanation. "Note to self. No hiking in the woods alone, Rylee. If the moose doesn't take you down, whatever is hunting that moose might."

A few minutes later, a green sign with the name Mystery came into view. Then a blue sign that read ‘all services next 2 miles’. The signs didn’t distract her from watching the trees on either side of the road for long. She kept expecting something else to dart across the two-lane highway in front of her. Maybe a tiger this time?

She scoffed and shook her head.

She passed a gas station and a mechanic shop. A parking lot full of RVs. A small neighborhood of mobile homes, and then went a bit farther before coming on a group of red cabins, signs for rentals, and some very rustic-looking offices on her right. A big sign for Jenkins was on the left. That was what she’d been watching for.

She pulled into the mostly empty parking lot.

No need to go get settled into the house without any food to eat, especially if bad weather coming tonight might mean she couldn’t get out for a day or so. Her dad had made sure she had a 4-wheel drive waiting when she got to Anchorage, but that didn’t mean she *knew* how to drive in snow.

She parked to the right of the door into Jenkins Hardware and Grocery—the only general store in this little town according to her research. Rylee reached over to grab her purse, and when she looked back up, a man was staring at her from the doorway of the store.

But not a normal man. Not an average Joe from small-town Alaska.

This guy was different. Something about him instantly sucked all the oxygen from her lungs.

Golden brown eyes burned from beneath a brooding brow. His massive shoulders bunched like the connection of her

looking at him hit his body physically. A wide-brimmed brown hat barely held wild dark hair in place.

Rylee's heart skipped more than one beat.

Neither of them blinked.

No man had ever looked at her the way this one had, and the intensity burned deep into her chest, lighting her blood on fire.

As quickly as the connection had formed, it broke, and Rylee could've sworn she felt something snap painfully in her chest.

The man got into a police SUV and then drove off, leaving her still sitting in her car trying to remember how to breathe without conscious effort.

"You don't need this, Ry. You certainly don't need a man like that." Although her imploding ovaries would beg to differ. She was not a good judge of men. Jeff had proven that once and for all. And a man as beautiful as the dark-haired-burning-hot stranger would be more than used to women throwing themselves at him. She wasn't about to be his next headboard notch.

Intense golden-brown eyes or not.

She marched into the store, grabbing a basket from the stack right inside. Snacks were right ahead on a small display. Chocolate was in order, for sure.

"I swear one of these days I will get that man to say yes."

"Oh, sweetie, you'd have an easier time asking a grizzly bear to attend church service." The second voice belonged to an older woman.

“You say that like you know something, Henrietta.” The younger woman’s voice sharpened.

“I’m saying I’ve been alive long enough to judge whether or not a man is interested in a woman, and you’re not on his list, Carrie Brady. You should stop embarrassing yourself.”

Rylee’s eyebrows climbed her forehead like a couple of cats jumping out of a full bathtub, and she bit her lip to keep from snorting out a laugh. *Damn*. This Henrietta wasn’t pulling any punches for poor Carrie.

“That hurts, Henrietta.”

“Don’t whine, child; it’s unbecoming. You’ve been breaking boys’ hearts since you were five. All I’m saying is that you don’t have a chance with that one. Move on.”

“He’s not seeing anyone. Eventually, a man needs a woman. It’s just about timing.”

“Well, don’t say I didn’t try.”

Rylee walked down the aisle and up the next one, stealing a quick glance at the two women near the register. One was short, bright pink glasses, and steel-gray short curls. The other was tall, with legs and boobs that would make a Victoria Secret supermodel jealous. Her perfectly styled wavy blonde hair made her look like she’d just left a country-western saloon. Tight jeans. Cute boots. A low-cut sweater that hugged in all the right places.

“Afternoon miss, can I help you find anything?” The woman Rylee now knew was Henrietta called out.

Rylee shook her head. “Grabbing a few things before the storm. Thanks.” The last thing she wanted was to draw the supermodel’s attention to her oversized Guns N’ Roses sweatshirt, ragged jean shorts barely peeking beneath the hem,

thick black leggings, and high-top hiking boots. Her bright purple and pink hair was twisted into a messy bun on top of her head with a bright orange velvet scrunchie.

Good grief. That was probably why the man had stared at her so intensely. She was a hot mess of lazy I-don't-give-a-shit-what-you-think with a healthy dose of punk rock bite-me attitude.

Which was the entire point. She wasn't trying to impress anyone. Especially not a man who probably prided himself in how many women lost their ability to think in his presence.

Still. An unwelcome mixture of tension, excitement, and fear fluttered inside her chest.

She grabbed a few boxes of pasta, some sauce and several cans of diced chicken. A bag of rice also found its way into her basket along with some pre-cooked bacon and beef jerky. When there were no more aisles to peruse, she wandered over to the register where the holds-nothing-back Henrietta stood looking at her phone screen and smiling every few seconds.

"Did you find everything you need, hon?" Her tone was genuine.

Rylee didn't feel any judgment either. "I did. Thanks."

"You're new in town, right? Staying out at the Florence house on the other side of the river?"

Worry crept up Rylee's spine like skeletal hands climbing out of a grave. "I—how, um."

"Sorry, sweetie. Small town. Gossip travels faster in Mystery than Grandma Sampson's knitting needles. Maria cleaned the house a few days ago to prep for your arrival."

“So if I want to know what’s going on, I come to the store?”

Henrietta met Rylee’s gaze with a soft laugh. “Now you’re getting it.” The older woman put all the groceries into a paper bag and then handed her a small black and white pamphlet.

“This is our little town activity list. Katherine and Knox run the MCC, Mystery Community Center, we have game night, meals, fun clubs, etc. And then if you’re looking for a mite of alcoholic entertainment, the Watering Hole down the road is the best local bar. Liam is the bartender there, sweet beast of a man. Tor and Dawn own the place, but Liam is usually the first face you see or his cousin Sean. Then the best food and breakfast in town is Lily’s Café, and she’s catty-corner to the bar.”

Rylee took the bag from Henrietta and gave her the best smile she could muster. People were not why she’d come to Mystery. But she didn’t want the town gossip to think she was a rude, terribly dressed bitch. “I promise once I get a little more settled in to check some of this out. Thanks. Right now, I need some time to decompress. Not really looking for entertainment of any type.”

“Well, welcome to Mystery...”

“Rylee Florence,” Rylee filled in the blank. Apparently, the whole town knew she was coming. Jeff didn’t know she was here. And it was Alaska. She was four thousand miles away.

“Getting away from someone?”

“You could say that,” Rylee answered, her tone flat and pained. The car ride had been long. Her ribs hurt. Her bruises had bruises. She was ready for a hot bath and a nice bed.

“Sorry, I need to get out to the house and get settled before the storm hits.”

“Of course, dear. I will say this, as someone with a bit more life experience. Sometimes it’s quicker to get over a man if you distract yourself with another. I could point you in a couple of good directions, if you like.”

Like the man trying to escape Carrie Brady?

Rylee couldn’t help the snort that escaped through her mouth. “Pretty sure *I’m* not what men are looking for. My ex sunk that point in pretty firmly when I discovered he was cheating on me a week before our wedding. Another man is the last thing on my To-do list.”

Except maybe that one I saw outside on the sidewalk. He could probably crook his finger, and my ovaries would make sure I sat up and paid attention.

Henrietta’s gasp of horror brought Rylee out of her momentary distraction.

“Oh, sweetie. I’m so sorry you were hurt that way, but I can say I’m glad you found out *before* rather than *after* the wedding.”

“Painful truth.” Rylee’s shoulders sagged a little. Not only had Jeff cheated on her, he’d potentially tried to have her killed. For what? Revenge? She couldn’t understand the motive. Sure, canceling the wedding had been social suicide for them both, but Rylee didn’t care about that stuff like Jeff did. It was certainly hard to imagine being angry enough to try and murder the other person.

Henrietta pursed her lips a second, like she had something else to add, but then moved back into the chipper shopkeeper role instead. “You let me know if you need anything specific

for the house. We do special orders all the time. Karl flies down to Anchorage about once a week.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate that.”

“Not at all. And if something happens at the house, Deputy Di’Lasha will always come help. He can be a little intimidating, but he’s a sweetheart deep down. He lives out a bit farther than your house, closer to the mountain. They’re saying this will be a nasty storm like the one we had a couple months ago. So keep inside once you get home.”

“Oh. Well, um ... thank you.”

“You know you just missed him.”

“Who?”

“Deputy Di’Lasha. He left a minute or so before you came in.”

Rylee’s heart did another long pause. Broody, burning, golden-eyed guy was the deputy sheriff, and he was a sweet, helpful guy.

Well damn.

CHAPTER FIVE

WRATH

She was the most beautiful creature he'd ever laid eyes on. Stunning didn't begin to describe her.

Her skin was luminescent with the soul glow. Her hair had been twisted on top of her head, and it had been shiny and purple, and he couldn't wait to touch it. He wanted to pull it loose and run his fingers deep into the roots and...

Damn.

Men spoke about how overcome they felt once the soul call had been recognized. His dragon hadn't been able to think about anything else the entire day.

He'd felt his heart stop on that sidewalk. And since then, his entire body had felt as though he'd swallowed a live electric cable.

She was here.

He'd been waiting, and she was finally here.

And now he didn't have a damn clue what to do next. She was human. He'd expected his mate to be a human, but that didn't mean he'd figured out how to tell her he could transform into a dragon.

His day of patrolling Mystery couldn't have moved any slower. But he was thankful, it'd been a couple of days since the last break-in. And there were still no new leads on who was causing the trouble.

He'd had to chase a couple of kids out of Leif's junkyard and arrest them for vandalism. Their mothers had tried to flirt with him to get them out. Wrath couldn't have been less interested.

He'd finally let the boys go after they'd agreed to work for Leif every single day after school for the next thirty days cleaning up the mess they'd made. The mothers had left with their children and disappointed expressions on their faces.

He hadn't humored any of the interested women of Mystery with a date. He'd moved here to look for his mate, and he'd refused to get caught in anything that would distract him from his goal.

Mate. His dragon rumbled deep in his chest. He input his report and glanced around the office. *Go to her.*

That was his intention.

Mrs. Lewis, up at the front desk, caught his gaze and threw him a smile. "You doing okay, Deputy?"

"Yes, Ms. Lewis. Thank you. I'm trying to wrap up today's paperwork."

"Sheriff called in and asked if you could be sure to keep your radio on tonight."

"Of course. Is he coming back to the office?"

She shook her head. "He already headed out for the day. Oh, and Henrietta said the woman renting the Florence place arrived."

Rath's eyebrows raised, but he kept silent.

"She's Florence's daughter and said her name was Rylee. She said the girl seemed shy, but she had purple hair, so she can't really be that shy. People don't dye their hair purple unless they want attention, don't you think, Deputy?"

Purple hair. There couldn't be two women in Mystery with purple hair. Rylee had to be his mate's name.

Wrath stood and walked over to Patsy's desk. "It's not our place to judge why someone chooses to dye their hair. Don't stay too late, Ms. Lewis. Remember the storm is coming."

"Let me know if you see her."

"I'll not be spying on anyone in Mystery for you, Ms. Lewis. I'll leave the town gossip to you and Ms. Jenkins and the knitting circle grandmothers." He tipped his hat and tried to hide the elation he felt lighting up everything inside him.

He knew where his mate lived.

He didn't have a reason to march up to her door and introduce himself, but that didn't mean he couldn't casually patrol her neighborhood and watch for an opportunity.

"You know you can call me Patsy."

"Perhaps in time. Have a good evening, Ms. Lewis."

"Night, Deputy."

WRATH DROVE and parked the squad vehicle across the street from the Florence home. The curtains were closed. The vehicle she'd been driving earlier today wasn't in view. But it was likely parked in the garage.

The house was large, picturesque, and a likely target for the thieves hitting up places around town. The big picture-frame windows on the bottom floor allowed anyone to look right inside. She was vulnerable here by herself, and it made a knot form in the bottom of his stomach.

He focused on the house and allowed his dragon to come forward. His vision changed, and he looked for a heat signature.

He found her upstairs. She was standing, and her hands were in her hair. He watched a few seconds longer.

Heat signatures weren't clearly defined, but he knew she was in the shower and the image of her wet and naked body seared into his mind permanently.

Desire burned deep in his chest. Raw. Animal. Need.

It took every ounce of willpower not to get out of the squad car and go straight to her door.

He wanted nothing more than to walk over to her house. Pull her from her shower. Worship her naked body. And make her scream his name as she came on his mouth.

His hand went to the handle of the door. He could knock on the door and welcome her to town. That was acceptable in human social circles, right?

He needed to talk to her, see her, touch her.

The radio in his car crackled to life. "Deputy Di'Lasha?" It wasn't Mrs. Lewis's voice. Rachel had taken over for dispatch for the night shift.

"Here, Rachel." He spoke clearly, attempting not to growl the words.

“There’s been another break-in, Wrath. 453 Tree Line. The owner, Mr. Berkley was shot, but it was only a graze on his arm. He said he got a round off and is pretty sure he clipped one of the guys before they got back in a black SUV.”

Fuck. “Tell them I’ll be there in ten. Did you already call Connie?”

“Yes, sir. She and Aarav are en route as well.”

He put the squad vehicle in gear and took off. Mr. Berkley’s neighborhood was north of town. North of the river. Another neighborhood like this one. Bigger houses. Vacation homes. Wealthy people owned them, and they didn’t live in them very often.

The other break-ins had also targeted larger homes. Homes that should be emptying out for the winter.

He would have to go back and get her ... or sit outside her house all night watching to make sure she was safe. She might think he was crazy, but he would protect her no matter what.

By the time he got over to the address Rachel had given him, the wind had picked up significantly. The storm was coming. He could smell the snow and ice in the air. He needed to get back to Rylee’s house, but honor wouldn’t let him leave Mr. Berkley. At least not until Aarav and Connie got here.

He parked the big SUV in the driveway and inhaled deeply. Nothing but storm. The wind was strong. Dirt was blowing everywhere. They weren’t going to get a scent from this crime scene either.

“Deputy?” A male voice called from the front porch of the house.

Wrath looked toward the man. “Mr. Berkley?”

The male nodded. "Ryan Berkley." He was wearing an unbuttoned blue plaid shirt over a white tee. The sleeve of the plaid was dark and bloodstained. Smears of bright crimson were all over the white tee as well. He looked in good spirits, considering he'd recently dealt with home invaders and had been shot.

"How are you?"

"Fine. It's not bad." The male nodded his chin at his wounded shoulder.

"Anything you can tell me about the suspects? Aarav is on his way with Connie. She'll be able to take a better look at your arm. Maybe you won't have to go all the way up to see a doctor in Fairfield."

"I've had worse scrapes than this before."

"Soldier?" Wrath walked the front of the house, looking for signs of the crew they were hunting.

"Yep. Four tours before I finally retired to stay home with the wife and kid and then she decided I wasn't good for her or him."

Wrath's very soul winced at the thought of a mate leaving. Though, unlike Mr. Berkley, he would've chased his mate to the ends of the earth. Not give up and let them go. Nothing could keep a Reylean male from his mate, except death. Humans seemed to not always have as deep of attachments.

"How long have they been gone?"

"She left with our son a few years ago. I let her have a few weeks, then I followed her to her mom's place in Colorado, but I was too late. They'd died in a car accident the day before I got there."

“Fuck.” Wrath’s voice embodied the pain he felt for the man. “I’m so sorry.” He knew the pain of loss. Neither of his parents had made it through the portal. They’d forced their alpha, Novik, to take him, and then they’d gone to fetch his sister and her mate from the mountains. They didn’t make it through before the portal closed. “I lost my parents and a sister. I can’t imagine the pain of losing a mate and a child.”

“This is all I have left.” Berkley waved behind him at the house. “All my memories are here. And these bastards think they can waltz in and take what they want. That’s not gonna happen. I clipped one of them good. He collapsed on the way out, but they picked him up and took him with them. Climbed into a big black SUV right over there.” He pointed to a small grove of pine trees a bit off the main road. This far from town, there were dirt roads crisscrossing the countryside leading to hunting cabins or fishing spots.

“Anything you can tell me about them?”

“They worked together pretty well. Not military style, though maybe some of them served. They didn’t move like a unit. Not like they would if they were all military.”

Wrath kept scanning the landscape and digging through the growing wind for any type of scent. “Any distinguishing features?”

“At least a couple of them are white, not sure about all. I saw flashes of skin here and there. I think the one I hit had blue eyes. They wore black ski masks. Gloves. Dark clothes. One of them did have long hair, I remember seeing from the back coming from under the material of his mask.”

“Weapons?”

“Small guns. Didn’t see anything big. No rifles. But the one that shot me had a pretty decent aim or got damn lucky.” Ryan walked down the porch steps, his shotgun held loosely in his hand, barrel pointed at the ground. His wounded arm hung at his side like he didn’t even care. Blood dripped slowly from the tips of his fingers. The bright metallic scent was strong and fresh.

“Can you show me where the one you hit collapsed?”

Ryan raised the shotgun and pointed toward the trees he’d indicated previously. “A bit this way. There’s some blood on the rocks.”

“Leave the shotgun on the porch. Connie will be here in a few minutes.”

Ryan hesitated for a few seconds, but then leaned the weapon against the porch railing and then led Wrath toward the trees.

Wrath smelled the blood before he saw it. Only a few drops, but it was enough to set the scent in his dragon’s mind. He squatted down and got closer.

“Only a few drops. I figured it would be more. Maybe I didn’t hit him as bad as I thought.”

“Likely his clothes absorbed a lot. If they were as covered as you say, perhaps there wasn’t much spray.” Wrath inhaled deeply. He tipped his head toward the road, Aarav’s SUV was close. He recognized the unique rumble of the other squad vehicle’s engine.

“Someone’s coming.” Ryan said, turning toward the road.

“It’s the sheriff.”

“You can’t possibly see them yet.” The look of bafflement on the man’s face reminded Wrath he needed to be more careful with what he allowed people to see. His abilities were far beyond a typical human.

“I recognize the clank in the engine. Nothing more.” He stood and shrugged, trying to make his claim seem anything more than human.

The vehicle came around the corner and up the hill into sight.

The wind was also starting to pick up. The unique smell of mountain air and snow on its way filled his lungs. Except instead of being able to focus on the case, his mind was drawn back to Rylee in her house all alone and unprotected. His mate shouldn’t be alone. There were men lurking in this town. Her house could easily be targeted.

“I’m going to take a look at where you said their vehicle was parked.”

Ryan nodded and Wrath walked toward the grove of trees the man had pointed out a few minutes ago. Wrath could see where the tire treads had torn through the brush and soft earth. He could easily see where the SUV or truck had turned around and fled up the rocky dirt road leading into the park.

The crunch of Aarav’s footsteps behind him, made him turn.

“Berkley should be fine. Lucky human. The bullet went straight through his arm. Connie said it was a clean wound and should heal without too much fuss. She’s trying to convince him to go to the hospital in Fairbanks.” Aarav’s chest shook with a small chuckle. “He told her to sew it up or put some woundseal on it.”

“He’s not a lucky human, Aarav.”

“He’s alive. They shot him.”

“He lost his family a couple years ago. A wife and child. He’ll hunt them. I could hear it in his voice. He has no purpose. These thieves gave him one.”

“Fuck.”

“He doesn’t know about us.” Wrath wasn’t asking a question. He knew Ryan Berkley wasn’t one of the townspeople on the *inside*. “This could be dangerous. He’s a soldier. He’ll hunt carefully and thoroughly.”

“I’ll let the others know to watch for him. We can’t do anything about it right now. We have to find these assholes. I don’t like that they think they can creep around my town and take what they please or hurt my people.” Aarav’s voice deepened and sharpened with anger. “I got some information from Fairbanks and several surrounding towns. They said it sounds like a group that’s been operating for a while.”

“I have a scent. There’s blood on that rock.” Wrath turned and pointed.

Aarav glanced over his shoulder and nodded. “Good. Then the hunt begins for real. We’ll inform Col tonight at dinner and proceed as he wishes.”

Wrath grunted his acquiesce. He had no desire to hunt anyone tonight. The only place he *needed* to be was watching over his mate. He needed his woman close. He needed to know she wouldn’t be harmed or targeted by these men who sought to hurt their town.

“I’ll finish up here with Connie if you want to head out. I know you were supposed to already be off. I appreciate you answering the call, though.” Aarav put a hand on Wrath’s

shoulder and pulled it back quickly. “You’re hotter than normal.”

“I’m fine. I’ll stay until you two are finished.”

Aarav regarded him quietly another moment or two before dropping his gaze and following him back to where Connie and Ryan were on the house’s front porch.

“My love, how is Mr. Berkley’s arm?” He and Wrath climbed the steps.

Connie put some supplies back in her pack. “Stubborn as hell, but he’ll be fine.”

Ryan laughed, but the merriment didn’t reach his eyes. All Wrath saw there was pain and the spark of determination.

“You need to let us look for them.” Aarav spoke directly at the wounded angry man.

“If they come back around my house, I’ll kill them.” Ryan’s expression was dark, and his voice could’ve cut like sharpened steel.

“You have my word, Mr. Berkley. We will catch them, and that will be the end of it.” Aarav’s words were ominous enough to catch Ryan’s attention.

The man stared hard at the sheriff like he was trying to suss out if Aarav was saying what it sounded like he was saying. That he would end the problem by ending the men.

“Let me know if you need any help when you are out there. The storm will hide them for a couple of days, but they’ll either be back for me ... or they’ll come after another house. Another family.”

“Let us know immediately if you see anything suspicious.” Aarav handed Ryan a card and took Connie’s heavy bag from

her, slinging it over his shoulder. “We take protecting this town very seriously. I’ll not stand for anyone thinking they can come in here and attack, steal from, or hurt people in Mystery.”

Ryan tipped his head, acknowledging Aarav’s statement, but probably still not believing it. Wrath watched the man’s gaze flick to the forest and then back to them.

“Don’t go out in the storm.” Wrath’s voice was deep and threatening. “I’d rather not have to hunt for your body.”

Ryan raised an eyebrow, amusement curling his lips upward. “Speak soon, Sheriff. Deputy,” he said, his tone polite but dismissive.

The fool was going to do whatever the hell he wanted.

Aarav knew it too. But the storm was coming. Neither of them had time for this man’s foolishness. Wrath knew Aarav was grinding his teeth to get Connie back safely to their home before the brunt of the storm hit. And he wasn’t going ten feet from Rylee’s house all night, even if it meant he was sleeping outside in his SUV.

He wouldn’t freeze.

“I’m out.” He left Aarav and Connie and halfway jogged to his vehicle.

By the time he made it out of Ryan’s neighborhood, along the river a few miles and back into the neighborhood where his mate’s house was, the snow was coming down in sheets. The wind was horizontal. And visibility was almost at zero.

He inched the SUV slowly along the road, careful to listen for anyone and anything that might be moving around or driving in this howling mess besides him. Nobody native to

Mystery would try it, but visitors didn't always have the best instincts.

A sharp crack, loud enough to cut through the wind, caught his attention. He threw the vehicle into park and leapt out of the car into the wind and snow. The Florence house was only two doors further up the street. Except the house now had a tree laying against it and through an exterior wall. A gaping hole stretched from the second story all the way to the bottom level. Between flurries of snow riding the wind, he could see inside the bathroom where she'd been showering an hour ago.

He lunged forward, fear driving him through the wind like it wasn't pushing him backward at fifty miles an hour.

She could be hurt.

She could be dead.

CHAPTER SIX

RYLEE

F*uck. Fuck. Fuck.*

The whole house had shaken. The roar of the wind from the storm. Then something had hit the house and shaken it like what she imagined a bomb would feel like.

Had Jeff sent someone all the way to Alaska? Was he that desperate to punish her for ruining his perfectly laid out future with her? Nausea climbed up her esophagus and grew roots in the back of her throat.

Wind whistled through the halls, and snapping and cracking beams had sent her diving for the storage closet beneath the stairwell. She'd pushed herself as deep into the closet as she could manage. The floor was cold. The closet was dark and empty.

She breathed softly on her hands, trying to warm them.

More cracking. More thumps.

Then heavy footsteps.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Her heart stopped beating for at least several seconds. She couldn't breathe. Someone was here. Someone was in the

house. Someone big with heavy boots.

A man.

There was a man in the house.

The noose of fear tightened around her neck. She thought she'd slipped it by coming to Alaska. She'd thought she'd gone far enough.

Tears leaked down her cheeks, and she fought to keep her breathing even and silent. Maybe whoever it was wouldn't find her. She tapped the screen of her cell again.

No signal.

She shoved the phone back into her front hoodie pocket.

Keep it together, Ry. You've come this far. He doesn't have you yet.

The heavy footsteps were coming closer. Each step inched the proverbial stool further from beneath her. The noose continued to tighten. *How was he going to kill her? Would it be quick? Was it Jeff himself? Was it the man from the car again? Was it someone else?*

The closet door opened, and she couldn't stop the scream that left her lips. Big arms were around her in an instant. Male arms. Strong arms.

"No! No! No!"

She screamed and flailed and tried to scratch at the man's face, and he only hugged her tighter.

He was going to suffocate her!

"Rylee. Rylee Florence."

The big chest she was being held against rumbled and vibrated with a deep voice. A voice saying her name. The arms

holding her loosened the second she stopped fighting.

“Rylee, *shuarra*, please.”

Shush? He was shushing her? “Put me down!” Her voice came out ragged and broken and not nearly as angry as she’d imagined it would be. Her ribs ached from his firm hold on her. She might’ve been cleared for travel and past the worst of her concussion, but her whole body was one giant bruise.

He set her gently on her feet. “You’re safe now, *shuarra*.”

She took a deep breath and looked up at the deep voice that strangely made her insides melt a little, even through all the panic. Then her gaze met his. Those burning brown eyes. The same ones she’d seen outside the store.

This man wasn’t with Jeff. This was the deputy sheriff. The man Henrietta had gone on and on about.

This was the man that’d made her ovaries dance with one glance after she’d sworn off being a notch in his headboard.

His hands went to her shoulders again. “I need to get you out of the house.”

“Did someone break in? What’s wrong?” She winced and pulled away. His hand had grazed the healing wound on her shoulder and back.

“Forgive me, I didn’t realize you were injured. Did the tree hit you?”

She scrunched her face and peered around him down the hallway. “The tree?”

“Yes, the storm knocked the large tree beside the house *into* your house.”

“There’s no one else here?”

The large man stared down at her, a hint of confusion in his whiskey brown eyes. “Did you see someone else?”

She shook her head and let her muscles relax slightly. *It wasn't an attack.* Jeff wasn't here. No one was here for her.

Except ... she looked up at the deputy again. What had Henrietta called him? His name had been kinda strange sounding.

“We need to go. Now.” His body language said he was about to grab her again, and she was trying to decide if that was a bad thing or not. He didn't give her time to decide before scooping her up into his arms and hurrying through the house, out the open front door, and across the lawn.

The wind bit into her face. It was so much colder than it'd been a few hours ago. Except he was warm. Like toasty sitting-next-to-a-fireside warm.

“I can't just—”

“This is only the start of the storm. It's not safe. The house and the tree are unstable. If there's a ruptured gas line it could start a fire or worse.” He tucked her into a waiting vehicle. Placed her in the passenger seat like she was no more than a child, snapped her buckle into place and then went around, got in, and started the vehicle.

“Where did you come from?”

“I was patrolling.”

She waved her hand at the swirling snow. “In this?”

“Yes.”

That was it. Just yes.

“Where are you taking me?”

“My place isn’t far. It is built much better. You will be safe.”

Rylee’s chest constricted a little. He was taking her to *his* home. Just like that. No choice in the matter. She didn’t know him from Adam.

Stop overthinking this Ry. He’s a deputy. Everyone loves him. It’s not like Jeff could’ve gotten to him. And if he’d wanted me dead, then why wouldn’t he have left me in the other house to freeze to death?

Rylee’s hand went into the pocket on the front of her hoodie, but the phone was gone.

“My phone. I need my phone. When you grabbed me, I dropped it.”

He kept driving. Kept staring into the swirling white.

“You can use mine.” He pulled a cell from his front jacket pocket and held it out to her. “But there’s likely no signal in this storm.”

She already knew that. Her phone had stopped working in the closet. Still, she took his phone and held it like a lifeline. She touched the screen. It opened. No password.

She didn’t think she’d met a man her whole life who was willing to hand her his phone. And this man was a stranger.

The vehicle bumped along on the road. The wind howled. The once clear blue sky was white and gray and darkly ominous. She’d never been in a snowstorm. Texas wasn’t really known for them. She’d traveled, but her parents weren’t fans of skiing, and they’d avoided winter for most of her life.

As cold as it was outside, the heater in his SUV was amazing. She was sitting in a hoodie and leggings and fuzzy

slippers and not even shivering.

“What’s your name?”

“Wrath Di’Lasha.” He took a sharp turn and slammed on the breaks. “*Dalmeck!*”

“Dal-what?” Rylee peered ahead on the road but couldn’t see anything specific. The word he’d said hadn’t sounded English. Maybe it was something from Alaska?

“I have to move some debris off the road. I’ll be right back.” He opened his door. “Stay here.” The wind bit at her face, and she closed her eyes, the temperature shock rolled through her like an icy tidal wave.

He was gone and out of the vehicle before she recovered. The second he was gone, a bone-chilling cold settled around her like a damp blanket. The heater was still blowing into the car. She held her hands to the vent. Warm air was coming out, but it was about the equivalent of a hair dryer trying to melt a glacier.

Rylee stared out into the white swirling snow. Every so often she could catch a glimpse of his dark form moving around.

Seconds ticked by, turning into even longer minutes. Maybe it would go quicker if she offered to help? But he’d said to stay in the vehicle.

She wasn’t dressed to be in this weather. She wasn’t even wearing real shoes. And apparently, body heat was a real thing, because her toes were numb and her fingers were numb and her nose felt like a block of ice.

All she wanted was to be up against Wrath’s chest again. Bad choice or not. She hadn’t been cold when he’d been holding her.

The truck stalled, and the lights inside dimmed. She'd only imagined that the heater wasn't doing anything. Now, without that steady stream of slightly warmed air, she might as well be sitting in a restaurant walk-in freezer. "Deputy Di'Lasha? Wrath?"

His first name was Wrath? Like wrath of the gods? Like anger and wrath? Who would name their kid with a synonym for anger?

Although she couldn't help but wonder what those golden-brown eyes would look like filled with anger. Perhaps there was a tiny bit of a brat living inside her. Or she had a death wish. No, it was probably the brat.

Whatever it was, her insides did a tiny leap, and for a few seconds, she forgot that her teeth were knocking together like an old man's knees.

She wrapped her fingers around the handle on the door only to have it open suddenly, yanking her forward. If she hadn't still been belted into the seat, she would've face-planted in the snow.

There was a lot of snow. It was up to his knees.

"It's too cold. The car won't start again without a jump."

"W-what a-are—"

He leaned in, unbuckled her, stripped off his coat, wrapped it around her, and lifted her into his arms yet again. And yet again, an amazing amount of warmth seeped into her wherever she touched him. It was almost like he was made of flame. His jacket smelled like pine trees and campfires.

"*Shuarra*, forgive me."

“Shoo-what? What did you do?” Rylee snuggled deeper into his arms. The cold was everywhere. Her face hurt. Her eyes hurt. She closed them and turned her face into his coat and against his chest.

“We’re almost to my cabin. I will care for you there.”

“Wait!” She wriggled, trying to take off the jacket, but he didn’t budge his grip on her. “I can’t take your coat. You’ll die. I have a sweater on. I’ll make it.”

He looked down at her, disapproval curving his beautiful mouth into a frown. “I’m perfectly fine.” He wasn’t angry, but he wasn’t pleased either. Those golden-brown eyes burned with an intensity she couldn’t understand. It was like she could *feel* a connection to him so deeply it was all the way down into her bones.

Her body warmed even more under his glare. She wanted to touch his face.

“You will keep the coat on. And I will carry you to the cabin.”

“I mean, I’m practically wearing house shoes. I can’t feel my feet at all. I probably wouldn’t be able to walk even if you put me down.”

“Fuck.” His gaze drifted away from her into the snow and then back to her. This time it wasn’t disapproval she saw in his expression, but sorrow and fear. Also, she recognized that cuss word. It was universally understood.

“Oh no. How far is it?” She glanced around at the swirling snow and thick cover of trees. How could he even tell if he was still on the road? “Should we get back in the car?”

“Promise me you’ll give me a chance to explain later.” He turned her in his arms and lifted and moved her to his back.

“Wrap your legs around me. I’ll be able to run faster. Your legs will be warmer this way. I can put my hands on your feet.”

“Your hands are going to be—”

A gasp of shock hissed between her teeth. His hands were like a damn electric blanket. Her toes burned under his touch. “How? How are you not freezing right now?”

He didn’t answer.

The wind and snow bit at her cheeks like thousands of tiny fangs. She buried her face in his neck, breathing a sigh of relief at the instant warmth. Rylee felt his body give a slight shudder and then they were moving.

Fast.

He wasn’t walking through the snow like a normal person. He was running. His arms were threaded beneath her knees, holding her solidly. His hands were wrapped around her feet, keeping her toes toasty and comfortable. Maybe she wouldn’t have any frostbite after all.

Every time she tried to look around, her heart climbed into her throat, threatening to choke off all her bravery. It was a fog of swirling white and trees that all looked the same. How did he know where they were going? How could he tell if they were even still on the road?

Getting lost in the woods with the deputy wasn’t the only thing she was focused on. She also couldn’t stop thinking about how close she was to him. How she was plastered against his body. Her legs were wrapped around him. Her face was against his neck, and his scent filled her lungs with each and every breath.

Every nerve inside her was keyed into each movement he made. Each breath. Each heartbeat.

Why did she feel so safe and content riding piggyback on a stranger? But she did—feel safe. She'd never felt safer in her life.

She was reading too much into his behavior. He was being responsible. He happened to be patrolling when a tree fell on the house. He would've helped anyone.

But would he be taking anyone to *his* house?

She snuggled deeper into the jacket, tightened her grip around his neck, trying to be careful not to choke him.

"You won't hurt me, *shuarra*. Hold as tightly as you need." His voice rumbled pleasantly, and her body hummed, wishing for more than being held against his hard body.

"How can you see where to go?" Rylee spoke into the wind. He probably couldn't hear her.

"I can see the signs on the trees. Our path is marked. The cabin is close."

"What signs? I can barely see the trees?" She squinted into the snow, making out trunks of trees here and there. Mostly it seemed to be a mix of evergreens and some other white-trunked trees she couldn't remember the name of right now. Whatever marks he was watching for, she couldn't spot.

"Look up to the right," he said, his tone deep and clear even through the noise of the wind.

She followed directions and peered up to her right. For a minute all she saw was green branches and snow swirling, but then a flutter of red up in an evergreen caught her eye. "I see it!"

She felt a chuckle roll through his body. "There are scent marks too, but in this type of weather they're useless."

“Scent marks? Do you have dogs, or something?”

She felt his body tense slightly.

“Or something.” His tone was tight again, guarded. The muscles in his shoulders had tightened also.

Like magick, a cabin appeared in front of them. Giant logs. Beautiful picture-frame windows. The roof was a sharp A-line and covered with a thin layer of snow. For a few seconds the wind let up, and it was a magazine-worthy view.

A pickup truck was parked beneath a carport on the left side alongside a covered-up motorcycle.

All her previous questions were forgotten. “This is where you live?”

“Yes, the tribe owns land up and down the river bordering the national park. The cabins are about a quarter mile apart. Mine is the farthest south.”

Tribe? Was he Native American?

He put his thumb on the deadbolt then turned the lock and opened the large heavy wooden door.

Rylee tapped his shoulder, and he released her slowly, letting her body drag along his as he let her slip gently to the floor. She walked around his massive form, distracted by the beautiful view ahead of her.

The entire back wall of the cabin was glass. The picturesque view distracted her from the worries swarming around in her head like an angry hive of bees.

She walked to the window and stared out at the winter wonderland. Every so often, the wind would break, and the river and mountains would come into view. Magestic. Grand.

Breathtaking. She couldn't decide on a description that really did the landscape justice.

"Why are you doing this? You don't know me."

"My soul does." His answer was immediate and absolute.

His soul? What kind of crap was this guy spewing? He had to be joking. "Is that a line? Does that really work with girls?" Rylee didn't turn around. She kept staring out the window.

She wasn't sure she could handle looking at him and hearing his answer. She needed to focus on his tone, not how attractive he was and how much she wished he wasn't like every other beautiful man used to getting anything and everything they ever wanted out of life.

"Rylee, your soul glows for me, there has never been and will never be any other woman in my life for as long as I draw breath." His voice was steady and soothing and so damn close. She could smell him again. Feel the heat radiating from his body.

Then his hands were on her shoulders. He turned her from the window. It wasn't real. Real men didn't talk that way. There was something wrong with him. It was the only explanation. She stared at the floor. At his boots.

His feet were big. The boots were black and scuffed from use. The floor was beautiful and smooth and polished, and she could almost see her reflection in it.

A large, calloused hand cupped her chin and tipped it up. "Please look at me, Rylee."

When had she closed her eyes? Her emotions were all over the place. She couldn't tell what she was feeling from what he was feeling. It was all a jumble of angst and arousal and need

—fire-in-the-blood burning desire like she'd never felt in all her life.

She opened her eyes and met his golden fiery gaze.

The connection was intense and deep, and her stomach flip-flopped. She wasn't afraid of him. Instinctively, she knew he wouldn't hurt her, but she was afraid of her judgment.

What if he was another mistake? Another Mr. Wrong on her long list of bad boyfriend choices.

"I'm asking for a chance to prove all those doubts in your head wrong."

She squared her shoulders. "How could you possibly know what I'm thinking?"

His mouth curved into a smile that made every female hormone in her body sing. "The same way you study me. It's in your breath. Your facial expressions. The way you listen to my tone of voice. Also, I can hear your heartbeat speed and slow and smell your arousal right now."

Heat flooded through Rylee's body. Her cheeks burned. But he was right. About her watching him, studying reactions, and about her arousal.

Except she still didn't trust herself. The miscalculation about Jeff's character was still an open wound.

She tried to take a step to the side, but Wrath crowded her closer to the window instead. His hand dropped from her chin, and he moved to box her in on either side of her body. She pressed her back against the cold glass, a stark contrast to the heat blazing through her body.

He didn't give her any space.

In fact, he stepped even closer. With each breath, his chest came so very close to touching hers.

He bent his massive frame and put his mouth next to her ear. “Fate brought you to Mystery, Rylee. To me. I’ll do anything it takes to earn your trust and prove I’m worthy of your favor.”

The heat from his breath sent chills down her spine. The confidence in his tone made butterflies swarm in her stomach. And the desire burning at the core of his words spelled her surrender.

The man was talking about Fate like it was real. Like it was an entity with actual power. Which was ridiculous.

“Fate isn’t real. It’s just a thing people say to make themselves feel better about choices they’re making.” Even as she said the words, she didn’t believe them. She’d never wanted to be wrong so badly in her whole life, but relationships were not her strength. She always picked wrong.

Here she was standing in some stranger’s isolated empty cabin. She should be freaking out. Legitimately scared to death. And she was nervous, but mostly she was struggling to think logically with this man’s scent filling her lungs.

He nuzzled her ear with his lips and whispered, “I look forward to proving you wrong, *shuarra*.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

WRATH

She smelled like heaven. Sweet and sexy and he wanted to lick her from her pulsing and perfectly white neck down to her core where he could smell her arousal. The scent of her attraction to him was almost more than he and his dragon could handle.

His mate was strong. She questioned him. She pushed back against his claim. She wanted to be chased. She wanted him to earn her trust, and he fully accepted the challenge.

She ducked under one of his arms, and he didn't move to stop her. Her heart was warring with her head. His woman had been mistreated, and he needed to be sure he gave her enough space to feel safe while still pursuing their mate bond.

Rylee was his. The magick of Reylea glowed bright from within, making her luminescent only to him.

He would've glowed for her if she had Reylean blood, but she was human. But she felt a pull. He'd seen it in her body language. The way she'd bitten her lip or taken quick breaths when he pressed closer. The way her scent and arousal had filled the air when he'd all but nipped at her ear.

He turned and watched Rylee walk through his empty living space and into the kitchen area.

“It’s so empty. Did you just move in?”

“I left it empty on purpose.”

Her gaze flicked to meet his, surprise etched in her expression. “Why?”

“So my mate could make it her own.”

Rylee’s mouth opened and then snapped shut. “I—you—can’t be serious.”

Wrath shrugged and strolled toward the kitchen counter. He leaned his hip against the edge and watched her look through the cabinets.

She was trying to hide her thoughts, distracting herself with the movement and exploration of the very empty kitchen. But he could see her mind churning through unasked questions. She licked her lips every few seconds. She kept stealing glances toward the front door.

He didn’t feel fear from her. Nervousness. Yes. Maybe she was watching her exits. It was smart ... or she was worried about something. She’d thought he was someone else when he’d pulled her out of the stairway closet.

She’d been in a full panic.

But she had him now, and she would never have to feel such terror again. Whatever was hunting her, he would end it without a single regret.

Destroy. His dragon’s anger rumbled. Vengeance would be his on all her enemies.

Wrath rolled his shoulders and took a calming deep breath, shifting his focus back to Rylee. To the present. What did she need right now, and how was he going to explain to her that he was much more than the man she saw standing in the room with her?

She was standing still, staring at him, like she was trying to figure out what to say next. Her body was relaxed and leaning against the cabinets. But she'd kept the kitchen peninsula between them. Still, she was calm and thinking too much.

Not for long.

He rounded the counter, blocking her into the kitchen with his body. Then reached around her to the cabinet behind her head. "Thirsty?"

The only thing she could do was step toward him and duck her head. And she did, barely avoiding touching his chest.

"Um, yes. Please." She licked her lips again. Her heart raced, and Wrath struggled to contain the rumble of pleasure from his dragon.

"Do you know what personal space is?"

Wrath took a glass from the cabinet and then took a step back, allowing her a moment to breathe something other than his scent.

Mate. Claim.

He mentally assured his dragon that was the plan, but they needed to be gentle. Slow.

"I do. And I very much like you in mine. I intend to keep you as close to me as physically possible most of the time."

"You're crazy." She laughed, but it was forced.

“You’re still attracted to me.” He turned to the sink and filled the glass with water before turning back to offer it to her. Except she’d moved again.

She was back in the living room standing in front of the big windows. He was pleased she liked the view.

“Just because you’re nice to look at doesn’t mean you’re not crazy.”

“Naomi says we’re all crazy when we meet our mates.”

“Who’s Naomi? And I’m not your mate, whatever you think that means.”

Wrath joined her at the windows, standing at her side this time. He offered her the glass of water, and she took it.

“Naomi is mated to Col. And you are my mate. I only have to prove it to you.”

She gave a small huff of dismissal, but didn’t comment back. They stood quietly together staring out into the swirling white blizzard covering everything with snow.

“This is really strange, you know that, right? I’m cold. Your house is empty. You’re a stranger. And you’re acting like I’m a Christmas gift from Fate.”

“I give you my word; you’re safe with me.”

“But that’s just it. I don’t know you. Why would I trust you?” Her eyes were wide, a little wild, and her pulse was racing again. She was letting her worries reign in her mind.

“Rylee, I give—”

“Wrath. You home yet?” The crackle of Kann’s voice on the CB radio in the back of the room interrupted his mate’s rapidly approaching panic attack. “Naomi says get your

dragon butt over here. You're late for dinner. She won't let us eat till you get here."

He listened with amazement as his mate's pulse slowed. Her breathing evened out.

"Fucking lion," Wrath said, his tone halfway to a growl. He wanted to be angry with Kann for interrupting, but apparently, the lion's comments had grounded Rylee.

"Maybe you're not the only one out here that's crazy." Her tone was even and possibly even laced with amusement. "Why did you call him a lion?" Rylee walked over to the counter and put down the now empty glass. "Dragon butt?" Her lips curved into a soft smile. "Strange nicknames."

"I'll explain later, right now we need to head up to Col and Naomi's place. If we don't, they'll come knocking."

"W-ait. You want to go back out in *that*?" She pointed at the white landscape beyond the windows. "To a cabin up the river. How far?"

"I'll wrap you in my blanket. You'll be fine. I promise."

"Your blanket. Singular. Do you only have one?" She held up her hand. "Nope. Don't answer that. I'm not going back out into that. I don't even have shoes on. These are house shoes." She pointed to the blue fuzzy sock slippers on her feet.

"You're not walking, *shuarra*." He went to his bedroom and yanked the soft woolen blanket from where it was folded at the foot of his bed.

"Don't call me that," she shouted after him. "I don't know what that means, but it makes it sound like I belong to you or something. I don't."

Wrath stifled a chuckle and headed back to the living room. He opened the blanket and headed toward where his mate was standing.

“Nope. No.” She dodged his first attempt to wrap the blanket around her shoulders. “I’ll die. It’s too cold.”

“You’re nervous being here alone with me. We won’t be alone at Naomi’s.”

She paused, considering his words, but Wrath could tell she still was against going back into the storm. “You go to your dinner with your people. I’ll stay here.” She eyed the CB radio behind him. “It’s fine.”

“Do you know how to use a CB radio?”

“What?” She met his gaze. “I—”

“As long as you’re against my body, *shuarra*, you won’t be cold.” He feigned left and then swung the blanket to the right when she tried to dodge him again. “My people are the only ones able to get out in this storm, and they are all waiting for us at Naomi and Col’s cabin.”

“Hey.” She pushed against the blanket, but only for a couple of seconds before she stopped and stood still, allowing him to wrap her fully. “Your people? Why are you so warm? Are you sick with something? Should I be concerned?”

He scooped her into his arms, tugged the blanket up to look at her face. “Nothing to worry about. Even if you don’t trust me yet, Rylee, know that you are the most precious thing in all the world to me. I wouldn’t take you into the storm if I didn’t think you would be safe.”

The pretty pink flush that filled her cheeks made his cock hard.

“Yes?”

She took a deep breath and gave a small nod. It was a tiny victory, but he’d take it.

He pulled the blanket back down to protect her face from the sting of the wind and headed out into the snowstorm. He couldn’t see the familiar trails between the cabins, but he knew the way, snow or not.

WRATH STOMPED his boots on the steps up to Col and Naomi’s porch. The front door opened before he could knock, and he found himself face to face with Col—the alpha of the tribe.

Col eyeballed the bundled woman in his arms.

Wrath knew Col couldn’t actually see Rylee, but even having the alpha that close to his mate without having claimed her fully was making his dragon itchy and irritable.

If not for these weekly dinners with the tribe, he would have had more time alone with his mate. Now he would be surrounded by people who would make her nervous and even more overwhelmed.

“Your *shuarra*?” Col finally spoke, not moving from the doorway.

“Yes.”

“He thinks so, but I’m not on board with his assumption. I would also like to be inside out of the storm if possible.” Rylee demanded from beneath the blanket.

The big alpha’s stony expression cracked, and a smile spread over his face. “Naomi will like her.”

Rylee wriggled in his arms, and the flap of the blanket covering her face fell away. “Look here, can we please go inside? Who stands on the porch in a blizzard and talks, I—” Her words trailed off when she caught sight of Col. “I—sorry.”

“It is a fair question,” Col answered, flashing a small smile at his mate.

Wrath growled but didn’t speak. Col was still standing in the doorway and wasn’t giving any indication that he was going to move any time soon.

“Col, let the man inside!” A bright female voice shouted from inside the enormous cabin. “Then go check on the babies upstairs. I think the battery died on the monitor.”

“Of course, *shuarra*.” He waved them in and then disappeared into the crowd of people standing around the massive living room and kitchen.

The woman in Wrath’s arms wriggled like crazy. “Put me down. Now. Get this thing off of me. I heard what he said. He called her that same *word*. The one you’ve been calling me. I’m not your shooo-arr-rah. Whatever that is, you need to stop.”

Wrath pulled the blanket loose from her flailing arms, unable not to stare hungrily at her. Her purple hair was bunched up on one side. Her blue eyes were flashing with determination, but the second their gazes met, he could practically taste her desire in the air, and it made him hard.

His mate might be fighting their connection, but she was losing.

THE VOICES that had been filling the room, died off. Silence enveloped Rylee. She'd shouted all of that at him in a room full of strangers. *Dammit.*

He made her so...

Admit it Ry, you're horny. That man makes your inside go all gooey, and you're dreaming of having his babies. Also, is every man in this group a giant? She took in the room full of people. All of them staring at her.

And then there was Wrath. He was staring at her too, but it was different. The way he looked at her was primal. Like she was a snack he wanted to gobble up. And it was difficult to remind herself she didn't want him to be her next mistake.

"Hi, I'm Naomi. Welcome. So glad Wrath brought you for dinner with the family."

This was the Naomi he'd mentioned. This was Wrath's family.

All the tension in the room disappeared. This tiny woman with a mess of brown curls gathered up on top of her head approached her with the most welcoming smile. A smile that felt like morning sunshine on her skin. Rylee couldn't help but smile back.

Everyone was quiet, reverent, acting like this small bubbly woman was in charge of everyone and everything.

"I'm so sorry for the interruption. I—just—it's been a strange couple of hours. A tree broke my house. Wrath got me out and then told me I was his and took me to his house. And then he took me here. And he's wearing a t-shirt in freezing weather, and..." Rylee paused and looked at the woman in front of her more carefully. "You're barefoot and wearing a tank top."

Naomi's grin widened. "It's a thing. I'm sure Wrath will explain later. We don't really get cold."

"Are you sick?"

Naomi's eyes widened. "Oh, no. Nothing like that. I would call it a gift. Why don't you come back to my room? We can find you some clothes. Make you more comfortable. Then I'll introduce you to everyone." She pointed toward a hallway near the front of the cabin. "Liam and Sean, would you two please get the rest of dinner served. I'll be right back with..."

"Rylee."

"Beautiful name." Naomi started walking, and Rylee followed. Wrath followed them all the way to the bedroom door.

"She's perfectly safe with me, Wrath."

Rylee could've sworn the big man growled like an angry dog. And then it sounded like the little woman growled back. But not like a human pretends to growl. They both sounded like *actual* animals growling at each other.

"Mine." That was the last word she heard before Naomi shut the door in Wrath's face.

"Sorry, he's got this weird thing. He keeps saying I'm his Fate or something. There's a weird word he calls me too."

"*Shuarra*?"

Rylee turned to face Naomi. "Yes. How did you know? Is that a local thing?"

The woman gave a light laugh and walked over to a large wardrobe. "More like a family thing."

“You’re related to Wrath?” Maybe her husband was related to Wrath, not her.

“No. Not directly. Think of us more like a tribe.”

“But you’re not native, are you?”

Another ripple of laughter slipped from Naomi’s lips, and then she turned to face Rylee with a stack of clothes in her hands. “Sorry, I’m not laughing at you. No, we’re not native, except for Katherine. She’s part Inuit. Our tribe is a little complicated, and it really needs to be Wrath that explains it when he’s ready.”

Naomi’s smile was so genuine, and her positive tone was infectious, Rylee couldn’t help but feel relaxed and easy with her.

“Sweatshirt and sweatpants okay? You’re a bit taller than me, but I think these will fit. I’ve got some warm socks too, in case those house shoes aren’t warm enough.”

“Thank you. I really appreciate it. I was a little uncomfortable standing around in my pajamas. Could I ask another favor though. I have a wound that needs a new bandage. Do you have any bandages or gauze?”

“You’ve been hurt? Who hurt you?” Wrath’s growly voice was right next to her, and his hands were on her body a second later. “Where? What happened?”

“Holy shit! Where did you come from? I didn’t even hear you come in.” She swatted at his hands. “It was a couple weeks ago. A car hit me.”

“A car. Oh, my gosh. Let me grab my first aid kit from the bathroom. I’m sure we have some.”

Wrath's face was next to her wounded shoulder. "Where I touched you before. You winced. Did I hurt you when I carried you here?" Rylee heard the concern and pain in his voice. He was distraught that he'd caused her any discomfort.

She put a hand on his arm. "I'm okay. I promise. I think it strained the scab. I need a new bandage, so I don't ruin Naomi's sweatshirt."

"This car accident. Does it have anything to do with you thinking I was attacking you in the house?"

"I was scared." She looked down at their feet. She hated that Jeff scared her. She hated that she thought he'd sent someone after her to hurt her again. She'd left Texas. She wasn't even in the continental United States any longer.

Wrath cupped her face. "You will tell me who hurt you, so I can protect you."

Rylee shook her head free. "I'm fine. Everything is fine. Just let it go."

"I will not." He crowded her until the back of her legs hit the side of Naomi's bed. "Show me the wound."

"No." Rylee put her hands on his chest and shoved, but it was like an ant trying to push a boulder. "You go. I need to change. Naomi will help me."

"I want to be sure I don't hurt you again. I can't do that unless I know where you're injured."

Part of Rylee wanted to let him see her back and then another part knew he was going to lose his shit if he did. Something deep inside her said this possessive dominant growly man would take deep offense to the bruises and semihealed gash stretching from her shoulder halfway down her back.

“You’re mine to protect, Rylee.”

“I am not. I’m not yours. Get out.” She pointed to the bedroom door. “Respect me enough to do as I ask.”

His eyes lit with a strange glow for a second, sending a flicker of worry through her brain. Not fear. Every instinct told her this man would do anything to protect her, but she didn’t understand something about him. About the tribe as Naomi had called them. There was something really big he was hiding.

He bent down and nuzzled her neck. “I will change your mind, *shuarra*.” Then he turned and left the room as quickly and as quietly as he’d entered.

Naomi coughed from the bathroom door. “You good?”

Rylee released the breath she’d been holding. The way he went from big and growly to soft and seductive gave her whiplash. And she would be lying to herself if she tried to say she didn’t like the way he was making her the center of his orbit.

“Yeah. It’s just. He’s so much. And I don’t know him. And I can’t show him what I’m fixing to show you.” Rylee grabbed the hem of her flannel pajama shirt and pulled it over her head. The tank she was wearing underneath still hid almost everything.

“When I first met Col, he was a barbarian.” Naomi opened the first aid kit and found the gauze and some tape. “Will this work?”

Rylee grabbed the hem of the tank top and pulled it off next, baring the ugly reminders that her ex-fiancé had most likely hired someone to kill her out of spite for calling off the wedding.

“Oh, honey.” The sympathetic gasp from Naomi sounded about right.

“It’s a lot better than it was.”

“Wrath is going to lose his fucking mind, Rylee.” Naomi carefully peeled the old bandage tape loose and removed the gauze. “It is seeping a little. But not bad.”

“Good. I felt some moisture. I was worried I would bleed through.”

“Rylee.” Wrath spoke from the other side of the door. His tone was dark, with a slight bit of desperation.

“Don’t you dare open that door, big guy,” Naomi shouted at the closed door in a mom voice that would’ve made even the most rebellious child think twice.

Naomi quickly put the new bandage in place and taped it down. “That should be good. What about the bruises? They look like they’re still tender. I have some salve that might help.”

“Sure. I’m not going to say no.” Rylee breathed slowly, adjusting to the extra discomfort dislodging the scab had caused. “You seem to be in charge around here. How does that work?”

Naomi laughed again. “I’m married to Col. And he is in charge. So that makes me his right-hand man, so to speak. Everyone is really great. We have such a great little community. Give them a chance. The men are a bit like big barbarians, but they treat women like queens, and you will get spoiled. I assure you.”

The word spoiled gave her chills. Jeff had spoiled her with expensive jewelry and perfume and clothes. She didn’t want or need to be spoiled by a man again. And why did this woman

assume she would be around long enough to be spoiled? She was here because of a storm. Because a tree fell on her house. She didn't belong here.

"I don't live here."

"I assumed."

"I met Wrath today."

"Mm-hmm." Naomi handed her a clean tank top.

Rylee carefully pulled it over her head, and Naomi helped tug it past the bandage. And then did the same with the clean sweatshirt.

"Thank you." Rylee breathed a sigh of relief once she was dressed and everything was covered up again. It wasn't a story she wanted to tell Wrath yet or anyone else.

"Of course, sweetie. Anything. And I mean it. I know Wrath is a lot, they all are, but I do want to vouch for him. He's a good man. Loyal. Kind. And if he says—"

"I belong to him."

The corners of Naomi's lips curved up into a mischievous smile. "You belong to him."

"It's not normal. The way he's behaving. He doesn't know me at all."

"Normal is overrated, Rylee. Sometimes extraordinary things happen to us in life, and we have to decide if we're going to take that leap and follow the current."

"I make bad choices. It's kinda my thing."

Naomi put a hand on Rylee's arm and looked her straight in the eye. No hesitation. No wavering in her tone. "Wrath is not a bad choice. I give you my word."

CHAPTER EIGHT

WRATH

He'd known she was hurt. He'd seen her wince earlier when he'd touched her shoulder. He'd been careless carrying her here. He'd opened a wound. Why hadn't she said something?

Had she?

Had he been so distracted that he missed it?

When she'd asked him to leave, it'd gutted him. He wanted to take care of her. He wanted to be the one to change the bandage. He wanted to do everything for her. And he wanted to crush the car that'd hit her and tear apart the person responsible.

Naomi was approaching the door, and Rylee was right behind her.

"Why are you hovering next to my bedroom door?" Col's voice held a dark layer of threat. "Back away."

Wrath bowed his head and took a step away from the door. "My mate is with yours, alpha."

A little of the fury in Col's face melted away. "There's blood. What happened? I felt Naomi's emotions rise."

“My mate was injured before she came to Mystery. I don’t know anything. She sent me out of the room. She told Naomi a car hit her.”

“On purpose?”

Wrath rolled his neck and stifled an angry growl. “I intend to find out. She was terrified when I pulled her from the closet in her house. She thought someone was after her.”

Col bared his fangs and growled.

Wrath nodded. “Exactly.”

The bedroom door opened, and Naomi stepped into the hallway. “Where are my children?” She looked up at Col and tapped her bare foot on the wooden floor. Rylee was right behind her, dressed in a black *Game of Thrones* sweatshirt and gray sweatpants.

Col’s wife didn’t own many things that didn’t have some type of dragon reference on them. She was currently sporting a *How to Train Your Dragon* t-shirt and a pair of loose-fitting jeans.

“The babies are asleep. I fixed the monitor. Not that I need it, my love. I can hear them no matter where I am in this house, and so can you.” He traced his wife’s face with a thumb and tucked a wayward curl behind her ear.

“It makes me feel better to have it.”

“And that’s why I fixed it.” He took the monitor from his pocket and handed it to her.

She took it and tucked it into her pocket. “They’re good?” Naomi leaned into Col’s side and stretched to her toes.

The giant man smiled and leaned down to give her a kiss.

“Perfect.”

“Mmmm, good. Let’s go eat dinner. Let them have a minute.” She glanced over her shoulder, and Rylee nodded her head slightly.

“Are you sure you’re not in pain? Did I hurt you?” He stepped closer, wishing she would let him take care of her.

“I’m fine, and you didn’t hurt me. It aggravated my shoulder injury.”

“I could’ve been more careful.” He shook his head, refusing to believe it wasn’t his fault.

She stepped closer to him and put a hand on his arm.

Every nerve ending stilled in that moment. His dragon purred, and she yanked her hand away, eyes wide and filled with confusion, but not fear. Her scent said she was interested, hesitant, but still *very* interested.

“What was that?”

“I like you.”

“Meaning you’re not going to explain right now?” She crossed her arms defensively. He didn’t like it. She never needed to be scared of him.

“Not yet. But it does mean I like you. *Really* like you.”

Her face flushed a beautiful crimson. He cupped her face with one hand and gripped her chin gently but firmly. “Tell me if I do anything that hurts you. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“Hungry?”

“That means more people, doesn’t it?”

“They’re not that bad once you get used to them. Plus, Naomi is a really great cook. Or I can take you back to my cabin and cook you a steak.” He gestured down the hallway, and she walked with him.

“I’ll take my chances with your friends this time, but I appreciate the offer.”

He was disappointed. Part of him had been hoping she would want to leave and go back to his place, but he was also pleased that the alpha’s wife liked Rylee. And that his mate had felt comfortable enough to ask Naomi for help.

She wouldn’t need to again. He would fill that role moving forward. “I expect you to tell me exactly what happened to you and what’s got you so scared when we get back to my cabin after dinner.”

Rylee’s breath hitched a little, but instead of arguing, she nodded her head.

He’d take the win. He’d heard Naomi vouch for him when they’d been in the bedroom. Maybe Rylee would stop fighting the match so hard and let Fate have her way.

Let him have his way, too.

WRATH LED Rylee to an empty chair at the dining table and then sat down next to her. Saul and his mate, Lorelei, were to Rylee’s left.

Saul took Rylee’s plate and put a biscuit on it and passed it along the table.

Each male at the table added something from the center to the plate until it was filled with at least a taste of everything.

Roasted potatoes, some green stalks Wrath considered unfit food, creamy cheese noodles, seared flanken ribs from a moose Kann had brought in this morning after a hunt. There was also a rice and corn dish, but Wrath preferred to mostly eat the meat with an occasional biscuit.

None of the men had food on their plate yet, as per usual. If there was a female that hadn't been served yet, men didn't eat.

Wrath took the plate from Kann, who sat directly across from him. He set the plate in front of Rylee, and she gave him a confused look before picking up her fork.

"It's a thing with them," Penny said from across the table, grinning up from her plate. "They like to feed us." She winked at Wrath and then looked back at his mate.

"I'm sorry?" His mate ate a bite of the rice and then looked back at Penny.

"I'm Penny. The men here, they always make sure we eat first. It's very chivalrous of them. A girl gets spoiled around here quickly." She waved her hand down the table. "You were the last one. They were waiting on you."

Rylee turned to look at Wrath and then quickly checked the rest of the table, verifying what Penny had shared.

Wrath put some ribs on his plate. "The ribs look good, Kann. Thank you."

Rylee took a bite of one of the rib strips on her plate and then paused. "What is this?"

"Moose. Kann got it earlier today." Penny smacked her lips. "So good."

Kann sat up a little straighter and pushed out his chest, pleased that his mate was happy with the food he'd provided for the tribe dinner this week.

"So funny," Rylee said, her voice light. "I saw a moose when I was driving into town. And even stranger, I could've sworn I saw a lion chasing it. I actually had to pull over and google whether or not lions lived in Alaska." She ate another bite of her ribs. "They don't, according to google. So, I guess I was really tired, especially since it looked like an African lion, not a mountain lion. Crazy, right?"

Penny's mouth opened wide and then snapped shut. She turned to her mate and narrowed her gaze to a glare that made Wrath feel sorry for the poor lion male.

"Did I say something wrong?" Rylee eyeballed Penny's scathing glare at her mate.

"Nope. Not you. This is all on Kann."

Wrath ignored the rest of the conversations at the table and waited, watching Rylee sort through what had been shared so far. How many pieces had she put together so far? Was she even putting it together? She was suspicious. She'd heard his dragon growl, purr, and seen his eyes light at least a little. She had questions.

So did he.

"He saw the lion too?" Rylee said, her voice even softer, almost like she couldn't believe that maybe she'd seen what she thought after all.

Wrath shook his head, hoping either Penny or Kann would notice. He wasn't ready to have this conversation with Rylee. He needed more time with her before he had more between them.

“You know, old man Codger’s Chow Chow has been mistaken for a lion on more than one occasion.” Kann slipped his arm around Penny’s shoulder and squeezed. He met Wrath’s gaze and tipped his chin.

“A dog.” Rylee said it like she was trying to make it fit.

The rest of dinner went as smoothly as he could’ve hoped. Penny didn’t say anything else about the lion. And no one else made a crack about theirs or anyone else’s inner beasts.

The only thing Wrath could think about was getting Rylee back to his cabin and having her all to himself. She couldn’t go back to her house. It would take days, maybe a week to get a crew out to remove the tree and fix the hole in her house. Until then, she had no reason to stay anywhere else. There weren’t any hotels in Mystery. Only one B&B and it was usually booked out for months.

She’d eaten about half the food on her plate before she leaned back and started listening to the different conversations at the table.

Kann and Penny were telling a funny story about one of their babies pooping everywhere. Wrath wasn’t sure why it was funny, but Naomi and Penny were cracking up like it was the funniest thing they’d ever heard.

“Can I get you anything?”

Rylee shook her head. “It’s nice listening to them all laughing and talking about their kids. It’s crazy storming outside, and they’re all sitting around a table like they can’t even hear the wind howling around the house.”

He leaned closer, touching his shoulder to hers. “They can hear it. But these cabins are made of trees, not planks. You couldn’t be anywhere safer.”

“Do we have to go back out into the storm?” The fear in her voice made his chest tighten. Maybe it wasn’t really that she didn’t want to be around him. Maybe it was that she was really scared of the storm.

“Wrath can take one of the snowmachines, Rylee. It’s a quick five-minute ride.” Naomi said, raising her voice a little above the group volume.

“Thank you, *Mahadhri*.” Wrath gave Naomi a grateful look.

Rylee slumped into her chair, obviously disappointed that she was, in fact, going to have to brave the storm again.

“I’d offer you a spare room, Rylee, but it’s already taken.” Naomi got up from her chair and went into the kitchen. “I’ll get you some food to take back with you. I know Wrath doesn’t keep much in the fridge.”

A few minutes later, his mate was wrapped in one of Naomi’s coats and holding a stack of Tupperware full of leftovers.

“Thank you,” he whispered to Naomi before stepping outside into the storm ahead of Rylee.

“Move slow, big guy.” Naomi gave him a knowing look and locked the big front door behind them.

It would’ve been easy enough to tell Liam and Sean to sleep in the living room and give the extra space to Rylee. Naomi had really come through for him so that he had the evening alone with Rylee.

Had Naomi not packed them up and shooed them out, they easily could’ve been there for dinner and drinks and dessert most of the night.

Sometimes the evenings with the tribe stretched into the wee hours of the morning. Likely, they would all be there talking and carrying on for many hours longer before they slowly started excusing themselves and making their way back to their own cabins for the night.

He guided Rylee down the steps and into the light snow drifts forming on the side of the house. Naomi had found some boots that fit his mate and a few other essentials to make her more comfortable. The wind whipped loudly, and he gently turned his mate toward the covered carport where several covered snowmachines were parked.

“Is it safe?” Her voice was lost in the wind, but he could see the fear creeping into her eyes.

He leaned down. “You’re safe with me. I promise.”

CHAPTER NINE

RYLEE

He'd put her on the snowmachine in front of him, wrapping his massive body around hers on the ride back to his cabin. Had she really agreed to go back to this man's empty cabin? Granted his family or tribe or friends were only a half mile through a blizzard.

The ride was over very quickly. He parked under his carport, and before she could dismount the machine, he scooped her up and carried her bride style into the cabin.

Wrath set her down gently and pulled the blankets away from her face. His face was so close she could see golden flecks in his brown eyes. Smell the warm spice of his aftershave. Then she made the mistake of letting her attention drop to his mouth. His lips.

She licked hers, and a dark rumble vibrated from his chest. Not a growl. More like a purr. An aggressive purr. She forced her gaze up and back to his eyes. There were more golden flecks in them than she remembered seeing at first.

Strange.

"How are you? Was I gentle enough, *shuarra*?"

"Stop calling me that. And yes, I'm good. Thank you."

His sinful mouth curved into a smirk that made her insides warm. “But you are my mate, Rylee Florence. Your soul glows for me. You are meant for me, and I am meant for you. What else would I call you?”

More warmth climbed into Rylee’s cheeks. In fact, it was spreading over her entire body. In all the years she spent with Jeff, she couldn’t remember him ever making her feel as special as this stranger had managed to do in less than eight hours.

She wiped her watering eyes with the back of her hand. This man was being so open and vulnerable and genuine with her. And because of her past, she refused to trust what her mind and heart were telling her. What Naomi had told her.

Wrath wasn’t a bad choice.

But she wasn’t in a place to make a choice right now. She had baggage, and her brain was messed up because of Jeff and the accident. This man didn’t deserve her mess, and she wasn’t going to saddle him with it.

“Are you okay on your own for a minute? I’m going to get the stove lit so the cabin won’t be so cold for you.” Wrath straightened, rising to his full height and reminding her how much bigger he was.

She wasn’t tiny, but he was huge. At least six and a half feet tall. Maybe taller. And his body was cut and carved from muscles that would make ancient Greek sculptors green with envy.

“I’m good.” She glanced around the semidark, very empty living room. “Is there ... are we...” How was she supposed to ask the man if he had a bed for her to sleep in?

He gestured for her to follow him. He flipped on a hall light and opened a door into a large bedroom with an even larger bed centered and facing another wall of floor to ceiling windows.

She rubbed her arms and stepped into the bedroom behind him.

His bedroom.

With one bed.

“There are extra pillows and blankets in the trunk at the foot. I’ll be back after I light the stove.” He set the bag of clothes Naomi had given her down on the trunk and then left her alone.

She plopped her butt down on the trunk next to the bag and stared out into the dark forest highlighted with white snow and ice and shadows.

Was she about to sleep in the same bed with this man that local women fought over? He was treating her like he’d snapped his fingers and fallen in love. It wasn’t normal. Or possible.

And was it real?

Was it an act?

If he really hadn’t been interested in that *perfect* Barbie-looking woman from the grocery store, why the hell would he look at her? With her My Little Pony purple, pink, and blue streaked hair. Baggy sweatpants. No makeup.

She could clean up nice, but he hadn’t seen that. He’d seen her crying and scared to death. He’d seen her tell him he was crazy. He’d seen her hurt, and she’d sent him away.

And he kept coming back.

He kept saying the same thing.

That he would prove her doubts wrong. That they were fated for each other. Which wasn't a thing. *Right?*

That table had been full of people who believed it was a *thing*. And he'd said that wasn't even the whole tribe. That two of the couples were out of town right now. They all believed. They all accepted that he'd brought her to dinner because she was *his*. That he'd *found* her.

Fuck.

Either she had been surrounded at dinner by extremely happy brainwashed women and beautiful giant dominant men, or whatever *fate* thing they were talking about had at least a little bit of merit.

Nope. She wasn't prepared to believe that yet. She had too much on her plate right now. Mystery, Alaska was supposed to have been a hideaway while she recuperated and rested.

No people. No men. Just her and a comfy couch and some really good books.

Which she didn't have. Cause her phone was back at the house and so were the paperback books she'd brought. It wasn't that she didn't like the idea of *fate* and *meant-to-be* romance. She read plenty of it. But it was a fantasy. Like the wolf and dragon shifters she read about in her books sweeping their mates off their feet.

If a Fae prince waltzed into this cabin and stole her away to a world where she was his fated mate, would she go? Would she even believe him or give him the time of day? Would she dismiss him like she was dismissing Wrath?

Heavy footsteps came from her right. Wrath walked into the bedroom and paused when he met her gaze.

“Did something happen?”

She shook her head.

“Tired?”

“Probably more than I’m willing to admit.”

“You take the bed. I’ll sleep on the floor.” He grabbed a folded blanket from the foot of the bed and a pillow.

“I—but, it’s freezing. The bed is huge.” The war inside her was real. He was a stranger. A kind one. But one who was also openly attracted to her and interested. She was attracted to him, too, but it was so fast. She didn’t trust herself, and she was offering to share the bed. “We can put a couple pillows down the center. There’s no reason for you to sleep on the floor.”

Wrath stood quietly holding the blanket and pillow while she rambled.

“I mean, unless you’d rather sleep on the floor. If you don’t think you can share a bed without keeping your hands to yourself.” She looked straight at him, and he responded with a grin that made her ovaries implode.

“It won’t be my hands that cross the pillow wall, *shuarra*. I give you my word.”

Meaning what? That he thought she couldn’t keep her hands off of him?

“I won’t either.”

He held out the pillow in his hand. She took it from him and tossed it to the center of the big king-size bed. Then moved another to continue the wall down the middle. She leaned over to push another pillow in place, and he was next to

her a second later growling in a slightly scary way and lifting the hem of her shirt.

She yelped and slapped his hands away from her waist. “Hey!”

“You have huge bruises.” He crowded her and tugged at the bottom of her sweatshirt and tank top again, pulling them both up so her black and blue souvenirs from the accident were on full display. “Who fucking did this to you?”

“It was a car accident. I told you. A car hit me.” He hadn’t let go this time. His hands were still on her. Her body trembled, and she wasn’t sure if it was fear that he would find her body ugly or that in seeing the injuries he would further prove how much he cared about her.

He yanked harder, pulling the sweatshirt over her head and off her body.

She instinctively crossed her arms over the tank top, blocking him from stripping her further. She wasn’t ready for further...

“Explain how this was an accident.” His hands gently prodded and slid across her skin, like he couldn’t believe his eyes. Like he had to touch them, or they might be illusions.

They weren’t, and she could feel every single drag of his fingertips like they were white-hot irons. Except she didn’t want him to stop. Deep down beneath the fear, Wrath made her feel nothing but safe and treasured.

“My friend and I were crossing the street. The car came around the corner and he would’ve hit her. So I jumped and knocked her up onto the sidewalk.”

“You saved your friend and took the hit yourself. Brave woman.” His words were reverent and filled with

understanding. “You almost died.”

Her eyes glassed over, and she wiped them quickly. “The doctors said I was very lucky. I had a pretty bad concussion and was in the hospital for a while.”

“The person who hit you. What happened to them?”

“They ran. The police haven’t found any trace of them.” That little tidbit was why she’d come to Alaska. In case it hadn’t been an accident. She was very afraid that it had been on purpose.

Wrath bared his teeth and growled like an animal. Not at her, but still. It wasn’t a human reaction. And the room was suddenly really, really warm.

Rylee yanked her tank all the way back down to cover the bruises and backed away from him. “What the actual hell?”

His expression softened immediately. “Forgive me, *shuarra*. I didn’t mean to frighten you. I was angry on your behalf. The police have failed you. The man who nearly killed you walks free. This is why you’re afraid. Why you thought I was attacking you in the house.”

“I was—” Rylee stopped herself from telling him about Jeff. About the death of the secretary. A part of her wanted to tell him everything, but another part of her still thought she was crazy thinking that Jeff would really go to such lengths to punish her for canceling the wedding.

“Yes, probably,” she finally said. For now, his assumptions about her situation would be enough. “Now explain how you growled like an animal and why it feels like a tropical sauna in here.”

“Not right now. Right now, I want you to get some rest.”

He took a few deep breaths, and Rylee was surprised to feel the heat in the air noticeably fade. How was he controlling that?

“I will protect you with my life, Rylee. No matter what happens, you can trust that, even if you don’t trust or know everything about me yet.” He pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it on the floor. Then unbuttoned his jeans and slipped out of those too.

Naked.

He was completely naked.

Rylee stood dumbstruck.

Wrath walked over to a chest of drawers and pulled out a pair of sweatpants and then turned and met her gaze with the satisfied grin of a man that knew he made her *look*.

What had she even been thinking a minute ago? She couldn’t remember. All she could see was the very clear image of his erect cock and bare ass. The aroused part of her had completely taken over her brain space. It was playing Wrath’s naked display on loop.

He climbed into the bed and under the blankets, careful not to disturb her wall of pillows.

That’s it. He was going to go to bed after showing her everything.

Her body was a damn traitor, because every part of her ached lustfully. She gave a frustrated huff and climbed under the soft blankets on her side of the bed. They were warm and smelled like Wrath. The mattress was like a foamy pillow of clouds. She’d slept in a lot of fancy expensive beds, but she couldn’t think of a single one that felt this good. Like a hug you didn’t want to ever end.

She turned on her side so that her back faced the center of the bed and the pillow wall.

“Warm enough, *shuarra*?”

“I’m not your mate. And yes. I’m fine. Thank you.”

“The way your heart is racing says you are. And the way the scent of your arousal is flooding the room, also says you are my mate.”

She rolled over and sat up so she could see his face on the other side of the pillow wall. “Look. You’re strange. Your friends are nice, but you all share a secret that you won’t explain, and you growl at each other. You bared your teeth like some kind of wild, angry animal. You can warm the air around you at will. I’m grateful for the save from the tree crashing in my house, but *we* are not a thing.”

“No?” He didn’t sound mad. Or upset at all. Just calm and slightly amused, and that frustrated her even more. It was like nothing she’d said changed anything.

“No.”

His hands snaked up and around her, pulling her down over the pillows. He crushed his mouth against hers.

The kiss was savage and demanding, and the intensity was almost frightening. Except she didn’t want it to stop. She wanted more.

He wrapped one hand around her head, fisting her hair, holding her firmly in place so he could take what he wanted. He drank from her mouth, making pleased growls and grunts like she was the best thing he’d ever tasted.

Wrath’s other hand palmed her ass, pulling her tight against his hard body, grinding her soft belly over his

impressive erection. The one he'd proudly shown off only minutes before.

Then as quickly as he'd pulled her close, he yanked her away and tucked her back on her side of the damned pillow wall. A small whimper escaped between her lips.

Her pulse was roaring in her ears. She was panting for breath, and her body was trembling and unfulfilled. She'd never felt so aroused in her entire life. Not with Jeff. Not with anyone.

What she felt with Wrath was different. Overwhelming. And scary.

"Not a *thing*, hmm?" His tone was laced with smug male amusement.

Rylee threw her head back onto her pillow and stared up at the beams framing the ceiling. "Nope. Definitely not a *thing*."

It was so much more.

Epically more.

CHAPTER TEN

WRATH

Not even an hour after Rylee had fallen asleep, his little mate had burrowed under her pillow wall and curled her body into his, seeking heat, or comfort, or the intimacy she wouldn't admit she wanted.

It didn't matter to him why she ended up in his arms, just that she had. Her scent filled his lungs, and her soft curves were heaven in his hands.

She slept soundly all night, and he slept on and off, dueling with his instinct to claim her in every way and also give her the space she needed to choose him. He wasn't above playing a little dirty, like the kiss last night, but ultimately, this mating was her choice.

They had a lot to learn about each other. He wasn't the only one hiding secrets. Eventually, she would trust him enough to share more. And at some point, he would have to explain that he was more than human.

His cell phone blared out Kann's ringtone, a rendition of the Guns N' Roses *Welcome to the Jungle*, and Rylee jerked awake in his arms.

Wrath reluctantly released her and rolled to reach for the phone off his nightstand. “What?” His voice was deep and growly and annoyed as he answered the call.

Rylee made a quick retreat back to her side of the bed, but she didn’t get *off* the bed. He considered that a small win.

“Henrietta’s store took a few hits last night during the storm. Owen and Tara are already there. I’m headed out now with Col and Aarav. We could—”

“We’ll be there.” He hung up on the lion shifter and put the phone back on the nightstand.

“We’ll be where?” Rylee asked.

“The storm knocked out some windows at the grocery store.” He sat up and let the sheet fall away from his bare chest. Rylee unconsciously licked her lips, and he enjoyed the way her gaze perused over his body.

“That’s terrible.”

“We’re meeting the others there to help clean up,” he said, his tone casual. “It’s my day off, so after we get Henrietta taken care of, I can show you around town if you’d like.”

“I really need you to take me back to my house so I can get some clothes and real shoes. If it hasn’t blown up yet, do you think it’s safe to do that?”

He nodded, still pleased that she couldn’t seem to pull her gaze away from his chest for more than a second. “I’ll find the gas line and turn it off in case, but yes. We can swing by there first.”

Wrath swung his legs out of the bed and got up, stretching until his back cracked a couple of times. He reached for the hem of his sweatpants and shoved them down.

“Wait! Let me go out before you go all thunder down under again on me. Give a girl some warning.”

He looked over his shoulder. She was covering her eyes and feeling her way out of his bedroom.

“You enjoyed looking. Why would I deny my mate the opportunity?”

“Boundaries! Wrath. I’ve known you less than twenty-four hours.”

“Doesn’t matter to me how long I’ve known you. You’re my soulmatch.” He shoved the sweatpants all the way to the floor and walked over to his dresser. “Can you look me in the eye, Rylee, and tell me again that this connection between us isn’t a *thing*?” He spoke loud enough that she would be able to hear him clearly, even though she’d left the bedroom.

The hallway where she stood outside the bedroom was silent. She was still there, though. Wrath could hear her heart beating.

“I don’t know what to call the thing between us. But we are not to the level where you get to walk around naked.”

He pulled on a fresh pair of pants and chuckled. “You can come back in the bedroom, Rylee.”

She crept around the corner, peeking first, and then entering fully. “Look. I’m fresh out of a really terrible relationship, and I was not looking to replace him with anyone anytime soon.”

Jealousy wrapped itself around Wrath’s lungs and squeezed. His dragon rumbled from deep inside. *Claim. Our. Mate.*

“This attraction between us is a bit of a surprise, and I was not prepared for it or you or the intensity behind your claim that I’m this fated person for you. I need you to slow down.”

“I don’t do slow, but I will agree to not strip in front of you again unless you request it.”

She snorted out a laugh and ran her hands through her loose purple hair. He wanted to touch it again. It was shiny and soft and smelled like flowers. She smelled like flowers and tasted like the sweetest nectar.

“Well, I suppose that’s a start then.” She gave him a glare and frowned. “What are you doing?”

“Smelling you,” he answered without thinking.

“W-what?” The word sputtered out like a popped balloon.

He leaned over the side of the bed and crawled toward his surprised and very wide-eyed mate. He nuzzled at her neck, completely prepared for her to pull away or tell him to back off. She did neither.

“You smell divine. Like flowers on the hillside. Fresh and bright and sweet.” He nipped at her earlobe and then backed off as quickly as he’d approached.

She sat there.

Still.

Her heart pounded in her chest. Her breathing was a little more ragged than it’d been a few minutes ago.

Wrath went back to his dresser and grabbed a black t-shirt and a pair of socks. Then sat down on the edge of the bed and finished getting dressed.

Rylee still hadn’t spoken another word.

He glanced over his shoulder and flashed her a grin. “Are you going to change clothes?”

She grabbed one of the pillows from her wall and chunked it at his face. “Not with you watching.” His dragon really liked that she was playing. He let the pillow bounce off his face and then he lunged.

She squealed, but he had her boxed in with his body in mere seconds. He was careful to keep his weight off her body, not sure where exactly her bruises were or if she had other injuries she’d failed to mention. He assumed her ribs had also taken some of the impact too.

“Wrath.”

“I’m not naked, and you threw the pillow.”

“This is not going slow.” She pushed on his chest, but he didn’t budge.

“I told you I don’t do slow. You’re mine. You don’t believe me yet. You will.” He kissed along her bottom lip, nipping enough to make her gasp a little. “Get dressed, I’ll wait at the front door.”

He backed away, hopping off the bed, leaving her aroused and frustrated yet again. The angry huff she tried to muffle behind her hand only pleased him further.

She’d be begging him to be naked again by this evening.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

RYLEE

W rath paused at the bedroom door. “I forgot, I have to run down the road and get the truck from where we left it last night. Be back in a few minutes.” He flashed a panty-melting smile and swashbuckled right out of his bedroom.

Rylee sat on the bed where he’d left her. Panting. Horny. Confused.

The cabin door opened and closed, and then he was gone. To get the truck from behind the tree. She remembered the tree from last night. But there was snow everywhere. And how was he going to move a tree by himself?

She climbed off the bed and wandered over to the closed door in the corner. She pulled it open and couldn’t move.

“Holy bathroom Batman.”

The bathroom was like something out of a five-star resort hotel. Silver and white marble covered the floors and up the walls to her waist. A tub big enough to swim in sat in a windowed alcove to her right, then at the back wall was a beautiful floating double vanity. To the left a huge glass shower with dual heads at each end and a waterfall head on the

ceiling in the center. There was another glass door to her left where she assumed the toilet was hiding.

She used the toilet and washed up a little at the sink before retrieving some of Naomi's clothes and changing. They were a little snug, but it was good for now.

Rylee headed back into the bedroom, closing the bathroom door behind her. It wasn't like he was going to be upset that she'd used the bathroom, but it felt like she was sneaking around a little.

"Did you like it?"

"Shiiiiit!" Rylee slapped her chest and whirled around. "Make a little noise, would you? You're huge. You shouldn't be able to sneak around like that."

"I'm a predator," he chuckled, his voice deep and velvety. "I have to be able to sneak up on my prey."

"Are you hunting me?" She met his gaze and straightened her shoulders, squaring off. She hadn't missed his double entendre right there.

"Only if you run." The corners of his mouth curved up in a smile that made her insides warm and gooey. The way he said it. He made it sound fun. He made her want to try running just to enjoy the chase.

She'd be lying to herself if she tried to say she didn't like it when he caught her.

"How were you able to get the vehicle around the tree so fast? It's been less than ten minutes."

Disappointment flashed over his face for a brief moment, but then he nodded to answer her question. "I moved the tree."

Good to go. SUV is warmed up and waiting outside the door. We'll swing by your place first."

I moved the tree. Like it was nothing. Why hadn't he moved it last night?

Before she could contemplate longer than a few seconds, she was back in his arms, and he was carrying her outside.

"I'm perfectly capable of walking."

"I never thought you weren't. I like carrying you."

"I have boots from Naomi. I—"

"*Shuarra*, I like carrying you. Which means, I will carry you."

"I—" She started to argue again but stopped herself. As strange as it felt to be carried around like she was helpless, there was this tiny part of her that really liked it. The part of her that believed him. That he really did enjoy it. That he wasn't doing it to make her feel weak or less.

The roads had been snow plowed already, and the ride to her parents' home took about fifteen minutes. Wrath parked in her driveway, and she stared at the enormous tree lying on the side of the house, half outside and half inside the house.

"Shit."

He made an agreeing noise and got out of the vehicle. "I'm going to turn off the gas line. Stay here." He held her gaze and waited.

Rylee nodded. "I'll wait."

Wrath closed the vehicle door and then walked toward the side of the house that hadn't been crushed by a giant tree.

She needed to call her parents and tell them what happened. The insurance company needed to be notified. She'd have to find another place to stay. She didn't want to do anything except let Wrath cuddle her in his arms.

Was that so wrong?

A black Tahoe cruised down the road, passing the driveway slowly. She couldn't see anyone through very dark tinted windows, but she couldn't blame them for rubbernecking to stare at the poor house that'd been gouged by a tree.

She followed the SUV's progress in Wrath's rearview mirror until it turned off the street and disappeared around the corner.

When she looked back at the house, Wrath was walking toward her door and he looked worried. He opened it, unbuckled her, and plucked her out of the chair. "We're not staying long. Tell me what you need, and I'll help you gather it up."

"Did you get the gas off? What's wrong." His body was stiff against hers. Tense. She could feel alarm rolling off of him like a fog.

"Aarav and I have been hunting a ring of thieves the past couple weeks. They must've taken advantage of the storm and hit your house. It's trashed. I'm sorry, Rylee."

Fear hit the bottom of her stomach like a shot of rotgut whiskey. Nausea bloomed, and her head swam a little. She clung to Wrath's arm, even after he pushed open the front door and set her on her feet.

He hadn't been kidding. The couch cushions had been shredded. Chairs were upside down. Papers and books were all

over the floors, and the bookshelves were empty. Muddy boot tracks were all over the hardwood floors.

She raised her gaze to the kitchen. It hadn't fared any better. Cabinet doors hung from their hinges. Dishes were strewn around. Some broken. Some not.

"What were they looking for?"

"This is the first house I've seen where they trashed it like this. They're escalating. I'm glad you weren't here. They shot at the owner in the last house they hit."

"The people that did this were angry, Wrath, this feels—" She couldn't finish the sentence. This didn't *feel* like thieves. This felt like anger. Like revenge. Like she wasn't safe.

"You're staying with me. I'll find people to help get the house cleaned up, but you're staying with me." He cupped her chin in his hand and made her look right at him. "No fight."

His brown eyes were so golden, almost like they were burning.

She swallowed and nodded, letting his heat and intensity thaw the fear icing over her whole body. "No fight. I'll stay with you."

Some of his stress visibly released in his shoulders. He was so sure this was the same thieves they'd been dealing with. But the mess and destruction felt personal. She had no reason specifically to think it wasn't the people Wrath suspected, but he didn't know the truth about what she'd left behind in Texas either.

"What do you need?" He took her hand and led her through a mess of cushion fluff and books that'd been tossed to the floor.

She pointed at the stairs. “My stuff is up in the main bedroom, but I had to have dropped my phone here by the stairs.”

They walked a few feet down the hallway and found the phone—what was left of the phone. Bits of glass and plastic and metal were strewn everywhere.

“Wishful thinking, I guess.” Rylee sagged against him.

“We can get you another phone. Don’t worry about it.”

She nodded, her movements becoming more and more robotic as she distanced herself from the loss and the fear swelling inside her.

They turned and went back toward the stairwell. Wrath tucked her behind him and climbed first. She followed right behind him, and they entered the master bedroom together.

She covered her mouth but couldn’t stop the fearful gasp. The room was trashed just like the downstairs. The closets and dressers were emptied. The room smelled like piss. Everywhere. Tears filled her eyes, glazing her vision.

She yanked her hand free from Wrath’s and walked into the open bathroom. There in the center of the marble vanity was a black velvet box. *Till Death* had been written on the mirror in red lipstick.

The noose she’d been so sure she’d slipped tightened around her neck once more. Why? Why wouldn’t he let her go?

“Rylee, no. Something is wrong with this.” Wrath wrapped his arms around her from behind. “I’ll get you anything you need. Come.”

Rylee slithered out of his grasp and stepped toward the vanity. She knew what was in the box. She shouldn't have to open it and look, but she couldn't stop herself.

"I don't understand why they would write that on the mirror. I need to call Aarav out here."

She wasn't listening. She didn't want to believe she was right, but the box drew her like a flame. She was a moth bent on self-destruction. She had the box in her hands, but her hands were trembling so hard she couldn't open it.

Then he was right there beside her again. He took it from her. The little black box. He opened it and showed her what was inside—a small crystal bird in a cage.

He held it out to her, a soft hopeful expression on his face. "It's not broken. It's okay."

Her heart lurched in her chest like a train that'd been knocked from its tracks by a landslide. Nausea rolled in her stomach, and she dashed for the toilet. Nothing but dry heaves and tears. *Why won't he let me go?*

"Rylee?" He put a gentle hand on her back and rubbed.

WRATH

THE LITTLE TRINKET in the box hadn't been broken. It was some kind of little bird in a cage. It was pretty. But Rylee was acting like it meant something. Like it was tied to what she was scared of ... or who she was scared of.

Protect mate. Claim mate. Now.

He calmed his dragon and continued to stroke Rylee's back while she hunched over the toilet.

She'd tried to tell him downstairs that the destruction felt personal. She hadn't said the words, but he knew that's what she'd meant.

Now this trinket had scared her worse than anything else.

He glanced at the words on the mirror again. She'd said she'd gotten out of a bad relationship. *Till death* was a part of a human wedding ceremony vow. He'd been forced to watch enough TV to know that. Rylee hadn't been married. She wasn't wearing a ring. Unless she'd lied.

He lifted his hand from Rylee's back, and she whirled. "Don't leave me." Her face was pale and tinged green. Her heart was thudding in her chest like prey being hunted. Her eyes were wide, pupils huge, her focus darting all around the bathroom.

He cupped her face and lifted it so that she met his gaze directly. "I will *never* leave you." He let his dragon surface a little more, warming the icy chill from the air.

She noticed the show of power, and her focus locked on him instead of flicking around and around, like she was waiting for something to jump out of a shadow.

"Breathe, *shuarra*."

She took a deep breath. Then another. Her pulse relaxed. Her pupils softened.

"Good girl."

Her face flushed pink at his words. "I—I panicked. I—umm—we should go."

“I agree.” He released her face and slid his arms around her body, lifting her to his chest. “Put your legs around me.”

“I’m not a toddler, you don’t need to carry me.” She tried to push against his hold, and his dragon growled deep in his chest. Her arms stopped pushing and wrapped around his neck, instead. Then her legs tightened around his waist. “I’ve never met a man that growled when he didn’t get his way.”

Wrath gave her an obligatory grunt of acknowledgement. He held her tight against his chest with one hand on her back and the other hand cupping her ass. Then he marched her down the stairs and out of the house and back to his squad vehicle.

He placed her back into the front passenger seat. Snapped her seatbelt in place and stared at her until she met his gaze. “You good?”

She nodded slowly. Her pulse was calmer, but he could still smell the panic and fear leaking from her pores.

“I will not leave you. But you said *no fight*, so don’t fight me.”

She opened her mouth to object but didn’t say anything and then nodded again.

“I will carry you when it pleases me and because you need it, whether you’re aware of that need or not doesn’t matter to me in the moment. If something happens and I do something you do not care for, we can discuss it later. But I need you to trust me and do what I tell you when I tell you.”

“You’re asking me to obey you without question.” Her voice was soft, but confident.

“I’m asking you to obey me now and question me later.”

“But you’re not explaining things already. How long do you expect me to go without answers?”

“I could ask the same of you, *shuarra*. Someone is hunting you. And you know who it is.” He kissed her cheek and then closed the car door on her surprised face.

The bite of the winter wind was nothing against the fire burning inside him. Couple that with the rage toward the man or men who were threatening his mate. He wasn’t going to last long without giving Rylee some explanations. But he needed the information she was withholding too.

His fangs fought to descend.

His body warred with his dragon.

His magick and fire would flare if he wasn’t purposefully holding it back every second.

Now he had an escalating band of thieves threatening his town and an unknown enemy directly threatening his mate. He needed to control his anger and rage, but the only male with enough power to help him push his beast back was their alpha, Col.

CHAPTER TWELVE

RYLEE

Wrath was worried. Angry. Frustrated. But still kind.

The drive to the grocery store in town had been a silent one. He'd carried her from the vehicle into the store, put her in a rolling chair behind the counter with Henrietta, and told her he would be right outside helping board up the windows. Assured her that he could see her and hear her no matter what.

It was a little strange the way he carried her everywhere, but at the same time, it soothed the part of her that was so terrified of everything that was happening around her. She was a strong person. She could take care of herself, but being reassured that she didn't have to. That she wasn't the only one watching out for her. She liked that about Wrath. A lot.

She didn't know him well yet, but she trusted him. She didn't trust a lot of people, especially not this quickly.

Some of the other men she'd met last night were outside with him. She heard the occasional laugh or joke, but they were busily cleaning up the debris outside and putting up plywood to keep the inside of the store safe until new glass could be installed.

All the glass on two sides of the store had been shattered. Henrietta was sweeping along the wall inside. Several other women were working in different parts of the store, mopping, picking up damaged items.

What was she doing? Sitting on a chair cowering in a corner because Jeff was pissed that she'd dumped his cheating ass. And that same asshole had followed her all the freaking way to Alaska to what? Scare her? Kill her?

He'd already tried once.

She'd nearly died.

If there hadn't been a storm. If Wrath hadn't been there and gotten her out of the house. Would she already be dead? What would he have done if she'd been there? He'd left that crystal bird.

He'd been giving those little crystal trinkets to her since they first started dating several years ago. They were all birds. Beautiful little things that she'd kept safe in a curio in their apartment.

But none of those birds had been in a cage.

The destroyed house had been because she hadn't been there. But the crystal bird had been more of a threat than those damn words scrawled on the mirror.

Something touched her shoulder, and she yelped, jumping up from the chair, and backing noisily into a wall of cigarettes behind her, knocking several to the floor.

"Oh, honey. I'm sorry." Henrietta was standing next to the chair she'd vacated. "I didn't mean to scare you. I said your name. You didn't respond. You look like you're having a hard time. Wrath said all your things were destroyed back at your

house. I wanted to see if there was anything you needed while you were here. I will send it home with the both of you.”

Rylee unclasped her very tightly clasped hands and took a deep breath. “No, I’m sorry. I wasn’t paying attention. I just. It’s been—” Tears burned behind her eyes.

“Rylee.” Wrath’s voice boomed loudly from the doorway of the store. He hadn’t been kidding when he’d assured her he’d be able to hear her from anywhere.

Barely a moment later, she was wrapped in his arms, face tucked into his shirt, breathing in his scent and soaking up his warmth. The man was like a walking electric blanket. “I’m okay,” she murmured into his chest.

“I startled her. She didn’t see me walk up.”

Wrath’s arms loosened a little around her body. She turned to face Henrietta. “You are so kind. I can’t imagine dealing with this and taking the time to think about me. I should be helping you all instead of sitting in a corner like a—”

Henrietta shook a crooked finger at Rylee and clucked her tongue. “Mmm, nope. Your home was damaged by a tree in the storm, much like my storm. And instead of being able to go about your business and clean up the mess, you had to deal with the trauma of a home invasion. Whether you were present at the time or not, it’s an invasion of privacy and something like that has a way of knocking even the strongest person for a proverbial loop. No apologies needed.”

Rylee sagged a little in Wrath’s arms. She fought the tears back and forced a smile at Henrietta. “Thank you. I don’t know what’s up or down right now.”

“You let me know if you need anything. Same to you, Deputy. I know I don’t have to tell you to take good care of

her, but do.” She gave him a quick smile and then walked back to the others and continued sweeping. The clinking of broken glass could barely be heard between the hammer strikes outside.

Wrath took a step back and cupped her face with both of his hands. “A few more minutes. Then we’ll go back to my cabin for a very detailed conversation about that crystal bird.”

Rylee shivered, even though his hands were warm. She both dreaded and looked forward to telling Wrath everything.

“No fight.” He stared into her eyes like he could see the bottom of her soul.

She swallowed down the anxiety pooling in her mouth and replied, “No fight.”

Kann, one of the men she’d met last night at dinner, walked by the last broken window opening, drawing Rylee’s attention. A big black SUV was driving by the store, rubber-necking. She only took notice because it reminded her of what happened at the house earlier.

The driver’s window was down this time. And she recognized the man behind the wheel.

She bent over, bracing both hands on her knees, desperately trying not to throw up. Nausea swirled in her stomach like a tornado on the Texas prairie picking up speed.

Had he seen her?

“Rylee?” Urgency rang out in his tone.

He had to have seen her.

“Rylee?” Wrath was touching her. Then picking her up again. But she couldn’t process anything past the numbness of her fear.

Her heart was pounding.

Wrath was talking.

“She’s having a panic attack,” a female voice shouted.

Then everything became a noisy blur. All the voices blended together. And she couldn’t see anything in her mind except that fucking crystal bird in a cage and the words *till death* scribbled in Jeff’s handwriting.

It was so hard to breathe.

“THEY ALWAYS SLAP people in the movies.”

“What?” He clutched his mate tight to his chest and snarled at the idiot young male who’d thought striking his mate was the right choice when she was panicking. The young wolf shifter winced and backed away.

“Wrath, take her outside. She needs air.” Connie yanked his arm, guiding him outside into the parking lot of the Jenkins’ store.

He bared his fangs and snarled down at the nurse, but she stood her ground, crossed her arms over her chest and glared. Not fazed at all by his display.

Wrath wouldn’t really have hurt her. And she knew it.

“Wrath,” Aarav ground out his name from his other side. “Growl at my mate again, and I can’t guarantee you won’t bleed for it.”

“Can we please focus on the woman in his arms? Both of you. For the love of Fate.” She whirled and ran a few feet to a snowy patch and grabbed some of the white fluff into her

hands. Then ran back toward him. “This isn’t what I’d normally recommend, but she’s hyperventilating and not letting herself breathe. We need to shock her system a bit.”

Wrath’s stomach turned in his belly. *Not breathing. Dalmeck.*

She paused in front of him. Aarav was right next to her, ready to tear him apart if he so much as huffed the wrong way.

“I’m sorry.”

The tension melted from Connie’s face, and she gave him a small nod. She divided the snow in her hands and cupped it against Rylee’s cheeks.

His mate gasped and flailed a little, but her breathing resumed and her heartbeat immediately improved.

“Hey, hey, hey, sweetie. I’m sorry. It’s okay. I promise.” Connie cooed in a soft voice. “Can you tell me what triggered you? Or has it been building this whole time?”

“I—”

“*Shuarra.*” Wrath squeezed her a little tighter. “Please.”

“He’s here.” Her words came out like a tiny whisper of a breeze, but Wrath could feel her pain and fear like an avalanche pounding away at her courage. His dragon chuffed and pushed at his skin. He burned with ferocity that made both Aarav and Connie back away.

Kann and several others had gathered at a distance, but nobody else approached.

Rylee whimpered in his arms.

He instantly cooled. “I’m sorry.” He nuzzled his face against her neck and kissed her warm dampened skin. “I’m so

sorry. I will protect you. He will never touch you again. Do you hear me?"

She nodded against his face.

He pulled away from her and looked around. No one was on the street. No one was walking. He couldn't scent any strangers.

Aarav pointed at the main road. "There was a black SUV a few minutes ago. Had to be what spooked her."

Wrath's scales rippled across his skin, and Connie's eyes got big.

"Wrath."

He tamped down his dragon and turned to Aarav. "I'm taking Rylee back to my cabin. Would you update everyone on the situation?"

"Of course, but what are we doing?"

"This suspect is from a previous relationship she's fleeing. He's stalking my mate. He's already tried to kill her once. It's where she got her current injuries."

Aarav's cat rumbled in his chest. The lion shifter was a protective son of a bitch, and Wrath knew he had him on his side. Aarav's mate had been through hell in her past—injured at the hands of cruel men.

"Whatever you need. Just say it."

"Thank you." He took Rylee and headed toward his vehicle. He still didn't know all the details, and she owed him every single one. After he made sure she was calm and safe and satisfied.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

RYLEE

Her thoughts were like pinballs trapped in a bumper room.

She wasn't safe. She couldn't go home. Endangering her parents or Ayla again was out of the question. This was her problem. She was putting everyone in danger here, too. Where would she go? She'd have to drive back to Anchorage. What would stop Jeff and his hit-and-run assassin from running her off the road?

One of the pinballing thoughts whispered that maybe the big man claiming he could protect her—could. He might be the only one.

The other choice was running. Again. And then again.

When would Jeff stop chasing her?

Rylee didn't say a word the whole ride through town. Not until they were through the big gate and meandering their way along the gravel road toward his cabin. And then she finally chose to trust that little whisper.

"The man in the SUV was the same man that hit me with his car back in Dallas."

Wrath didn't respond. He parked the squad vehicle right in front of his door. Got out of the car like he usually did, came around and got her out of the passenger seat and carried her inside.

She didn't argue. He'd said not to and if she was being really and truly honest with herself, she liked the closeness. She liked that he carried her. It made her feel protected. Those moments when she was wrapped in his arms, she knew she was safe. She had a real-life romance novel hero who insisted on sweeping her off her feet.

Her feet were wobbly right now. Everything felt like it was swirling. It was good to be carried.

He kicked the door shut behind him and went straight to the bedroom. Sat her on the bed and then knelt on the floor in front of her where he proceeded to pull off the boots Naomi had lent her.

"I didn't see Jeff in the SUV."

"Tell me why the crystal bird was so frightening. I understand the threat written on the mirror." His big hands enveloped one of her feet and started massaging and kneading the tension that held her in a vise all the way down to her toes. "Those are words from the human marriage vows. But the bird scared you worse."

Panic wrapped its fingers around her throat. That's what the bird meant—be afraid. It meant suffocation and control and death, like the words on the mirror.

"He gave me little crystal birds as gifts. The whole time we were together, but none of them were ever in a cage. It was a message. A threat. It was him telling me what he's going to do to me."

Wrath moved to her other foot, working the knots until the tension bled away. “Tell me all of it.”

Rylee took a deep breath and looked down at the giant man at her feet. Jeff wouldn’t have ever knelt in front of her. He didn’t even kneel to propose. Tears welled up and ran down her cheeks.

“*Shuarra*. Tell me.” He ran a hand up her calf and back down. Gently. Coaxing. He wasn’t being pushy or rough about it, but she knew he wanted the whole story. And he deserved it. Even if it sent him away from her.

She could run too.

She could call her dad and make a run for the airport in Anchorage. She could hide somewhere else. Maybe Europe. But the thought of leaving Wrath made the tears flow a little faster. It wasn’t like he belonged to her. Sure, he said she was *his*. He said she was his fated mate—but it still sounded like fantasy talk to her.

“My family is well known in Texas—influential. So is Jeff’s. It was a good match, politically. His goal was to move into politics, run for office.”

“This marriage was arranged by your parents?” Wrath moved back to her other foot and started all over again. His hands slid up and down her calves. Each stroke was tender and possessive at the same time. A promise to protect and a promise of belonging twined together so tightly there was no way to separate them. He certainly made the fantasy *feel* like reality.

“Not arranged, but recommended. My parents love me. They would never have encouraged me to marry a man like Jeff if they’d known what he’d turn into. And I’m not sure he

was bad at the start, but working in politics is hard on the soul.”

“You’re making excuses for the man who would see you in a cage until you die.”

Rylee snapped her gaze to Wrath’s. Violent, piercing amber eyes burned like flames and fury lived in their depths. Not toward her, but for her. “He used you. He wanted you for your family, for your connections, for your name? Did he ever show you he loved you? Did he ever make you feel that he treasured you?”

Rylee wiped her wet cheeks and sniffled back a sob. “I don’t make good choices when it comes to men. I never have, and I’m terrified that—”

“That what? That I’m also going to be another mistake?” He rose from the floor, still on his knees, and pushed between her legs. “Did you choose me, *shuarra*?”

She shook her head and looked down at this man who’d dropped into her life as suddenly as the tree that had smashed her parents’ house in the storm.

A chunk of his brown wavy hair had come loose from the ponytail he usually kept it tamed with. He was sexy without even trying. Rugged. Handsome. Utterly capable of incapacitating her ability to think in any direction other than what he might look like naked.

His fingers tightened on her thighs like he could sense her heated thoughts.

She couldn’t keep from looking at his mouth and wishing he would kiss her again. She wanted to get lost in him again and in the promises he kept offering.

“If I told you how I know you belong to me, you’d think I was crazy. So I will remain selfish and shrouded in mystery a bit longer because I want you to love me *before* you think I’m crazy.”

She couldn’t help the snort of laughter. “I told you my ex is stalking me. Tried to kill me. Is still trying to either kill me or punish me for leaving him. He blames me for ruining his political career or embarrassing him or both. And you think telling me why you believe in a magickal soulmate connection or something is worse?”

He tipped his head up and slow-grinned at her with a confidence that suggested he knew exactly how charming and irresistible she found him. “You don’t love me yet.”

She put her arms over his shoulders and leaned her forehead against his. They were so close. She could feel his warm breath on her face. He smelled like pine trees and a campfire. “Are you saying that you *love* me?”

“With every breath inside me, Rylee.”

She couldn’t say it back. She couldn’t love him. She barely knew him. She was still reeling over Jeff’s betrayal.

How was this man so centered and calm and sure?

“You’re safe with me, *shuarra*. I know you don’t love me yet, but I’m not going anywhere. And one day, you’ll wake up and realize that your heart is healed and whole because mine has joined with it. And that’s the day you’ll tell me you love me.”

Her heart caught its breath. The picture he painted with his words made her want nothing other than the future he was envisioning. He wanted her, problems and all. He was all in, even with her crazy stalker.

“I want that, too,” she said, her voice a whispered prayer.

A soft sound rattled deep inside his chest in response.

She moved a hand to his chest, intrigued by the sound and the feel. It reminded her of her mom’s cat. She almost asked him about it, but she didn’t want it to stop. The way the sound vibrated through her hand into her body. It felt like she was waking up for the first time.

She pulled back her head a few inches and met his gaze. The way he looked at her—like she was everything. Like he was starving and she was his next meal. Like she was the most precious thing in the whole world and he would burn the world to keep her.

“I want you, *shuarra*.”

“Tell me.” She was baiting him, but she wanted him to do more. She wanted to feel him all over her. He said she belonged to him. He called her his shoo-ar-ah. She knew it was a word for mate or woman or something important.

His eyes raked over her like he could see right through the sweatpants and baggy hoodie. “I want to taste you, Rylee. I want to spread you out on this bed like a feast.”

She shivered. *Need. Need. Need.* That’s what her whole body was chanting. Her skin tingled and burned. Anticipation skipped along her limbs, making her blaze from the inside out.

Wrath bent his head, and his lips touched the outer shell of her ear. His breath caressed, hot and close. “Just say yes, Rylee. One word.”

The hum in his chest was the only hum she could feel now. Now her own body was joining the song. “Yes,” she whispered. She wanted to feel his mouth on hers again. Feel

his arms around her, blocking out the world, the fear, everything. He was a solid wall of male muscle and hardness.

She wanted him with a deep ache she didn't understand. And she was ready to give in completely.

Rylee reached for the hem of her top and then looked up, meeting Wrath's smoldering gaze. He didn't move. Didn't speak. He waited, inviting her to continue.

She slowly pulled the shirt up, tank top and all, baring her breasts to the cool air in the room, except it wasn't cool anymore. Everything was warm. Her breasts bounced and swayed, free of the clothes, and she heard his breath catch.

Tossing her shirt to the floor, she dared eye contact again.

And he met hers, his brown eyes bright and sparked with golden flecks. He quickly unbuttoned his shirt, removed it and the white t-shirt beneath it. They both landed on the floor near hers. He was huge, so much bigger than her, but she didn't feel vulnerable sitting there almost naked.

The way he looked at her, like he could barely restrain himself. She'd never felt so powerful before. This giant of a man with arms as big as her thighs, round and hard and stronger than steel. His eyes were so bright they stole her breath.

"Please."

"Rylee," Wrath growled. Her name sounded somewhere between a prayer and a curse.

She stayed on the edge of the bed, watching him watch her. The hunger in his stare gave her more courage. She liked his eyes on her. She liked seeing how much he wanted her. Each and every muscle in his massive body was tight and twitched with anticipation.

He made her feel in a way no man had ever made her feel, but he wasn't touching her yet. Just watching her. Waiting.

Waiting for what? She didn't want to make the choices. She wanted this powerful man to make her *feel* everything he could.

She licked her lips and let her eyes drift down, taking in the masculine lines and build of his chest. His shoulders were massive. A thick chest and sculpted arms and abs that made her fingers twitch with the desire to run her hands over his smooth skin.

There were the two angled V lines leading beneath the waist of his pants. And the bulge under the fabric made her whole body ache.

When she dragged her gaze back to Wrath's, he wore a cat-at-the-canary grin across his sexy, scruffy face.

"What?"

"You are beautiful. Fate has gifted me with perfection. I'm fighting my nature to keep from stripping you out of every scrap of clothing you're still wearing and then claim you so thoroughly and completely that you can't move from my bed for days."

Butterflies in the stomach weren't what Rylee felt, more like stampeding horses. Her body was heating up, and she could feel her pulse throbbing deep in her core. She'd never been so aroused before she'd even been touched. The mountain gods had delivered her a gentle giant. And maybe she hoped he wouldn't be *too* gentle.

She took another leap of faith and spoke. "You should stop fighting."

His eyes widened, allowing a bit of surprise to show before it disappeared beneath the surface layer of primal desire.

Wrath stood from where he'd been kneeling, toed off his boots, unbuttoned his pants, and shimmied out of them completely.

The stampeding horses were still running inside her stomach, but this time she couldn't stop staring at the massive erection jutting straight out at her face. She licked her lips, not able to help wondering what he would taste like.

A male groan rumbled from Wrath. "As much as I want your sweet lips on my cock, I want to taste you more." He stepped closer and put a knee on the bed between her legs.

Rylee gulped a breath and scrambled backward on the bed.

He leaned over her and hooked his fingers into the waist of her sweatpants. One quick movement stripped the rest of her bare to his hungry eyes.

He met her gaze, waiting, silently asking for permission to continue.

She nodded and watched his gaze drift down to stare at her clenched legs. Then it moved back up, resting on her bare breasts.

Warmth flushed over her whole body. It was like being naked in front of a man for the first time all over again.

"So, fucking beautiful, Rylee." He let his gaze wander again, head to toe, several times, always lingering on her breasts and her core.

"Wrath," she whispered his name.

"Yes, *shuarra*."

“Please.”

He grasped one of her ankles and pulled her leg to the side, opening her to his view. He licked his lips and inhaled deeply like he was taking in a bouquet of roses. “You smell so sweet, Rylee.”

Wrath knelt onto the bed and crawled forward, nudging her legs even farther apart. He approached like a predator stalking his prey, except Rylee wanted to be hunted. Wanted to be captured.

Her body was practically thrumming, waiting for him to pounce.

And then he did.

He lowered his body against hers, skin grazing skin. His lips brushed over her right breast, nibbling, licking.

She could barely breathe, completely hypnotized by his slow primal exploration of her body. No man had ever shown such reverence. Such desire. Such patience.

He smiled against her skin.

Then he was cupping her breasts with his big, callused hands, so gentle, so reverent. Then his lips captured her left nipple and breathing became even harder.

Wrath didn’t leave an inch of her breasts untouched or untasted. She was panting and soaked and fisted handfuls of the blanket beneath her, arching her body into his attention.

“You belong to me, Rylee. You are my mate.”

Rylee moaned. “Wrath. Please.” She needed more of him like she needed air to breathe. Each touch and tease made her body dance. His mouth and fingers controlled her. In this

moment, no matter what she thought she was holding back, she did belong to him.

He kissed his way down the curves of her stomach and hips. And then lower and lower. His mouth danced across her skin, and Rylee couldn't resist letting her hands trail over his broad shoulders, up his neck, and back down, loving the way he growled encouragingly beneath her touch.

His mouth teased and licked at every point except the one that ached the most.

Then his tongue was on her clit.

Her body quaked beneath the direct pressure.

He slid a finger inside her and curled it forward. His tongue lashed at her sensitive, throbbing clit, and she lost all sense of time and place. She curled her fingers into his shoulders, and her body arched of its own accord.

He kept licking and circling. Slowly. Then fast. Then slow again.

Rylee gulped air as the wave of pressure and heat seared through her, unfurling into an orgasm like none she'd ever experienced before. She would've screamed, but her body tightened to a point where that was impossible.

Wrath lapped at her body like a man dying of thirst. Like she was the best thing he'd ever tasted. Like he loved it. Like he wasn't finished...

"Wrath, I—" Her words came out between panting short breaths. "I—you—" Her fingers clawed at his shoulders, but he didn't budge. The deep rumbling sound she'd heard before vibrated loudly in his chest. She liked it. It distracted her momentarily from the fact that he was determined to drive her up into another orgasm.

She lost count of how many times he made her tumble over the edge of that tsunami-sized wave of pleasure. Her body was a writhing, seething, begging mess.

“Wrath—” She pleaded. “P-p-please.” Ripples of leftover orgasms fluttered across her abdomen. Her hands had found permanent purchase knotted in his hair.

“You are my *shuarra*. You belong to me and I to you, Rylee.” He crawled up her body, kissing and nibbling from her stomach to her neck to her lips. Then his tongue delved into her mouth, and she could taste herself. It only made her ache more for the erection pressing against her belly.

“Mine.” His voice was a growl. He rolled his hips and lined himself up with her body, nudging at her entrance. Waiting. “Mine,” he repeated, the tone implying a question. “Let me make you feel good.”

“Yes, please.” She writhed beneath him, needing so much more.

His body tensed. That wasn’t the answer he’d wanted. He nipped harder at the soft part of her neck, then lifted his head. “Look at me.”

Rylee opened her eyes and stared into a mesmerizing golden gaze. “Say it. Say you are mine.” His erection nudged at her body again like it had a mind of its own. Her hips also had a mind of their own and flexed, inviting him a little deeper.

She wanted those words to be true. Maybe they already were. Maybe she really did belong to this mountain man with golden eyes and a devotion to her unlike anything she’d seen outside of a romance novel. To find a man so overwhelmingly

bent on eternal commitment wasn't something many women found on the journey called life.

"I'm yours, Wrath."

Those three words were the right answer. He sank into her, inch by inch, carefully, gently. Never dropping her gaze for a second.

Each moment split her body wider, made her ache more, made her body burn from the invasion. He was so big, she worried he might not fit completely.

Another whimper escaped, and he paused, giving her more time to adjust to his girth.

He surrounded her. His hard body pressed her into the bed. His waist lay between her thighs, and his abdomen moved against hers as he slowly pushed further, and further.

Her hands roamed over the smooth skin of his shoulders.

Slowly the burn became pleasant. And she wanted ... no ... needed more. She rolled her hips, and he groaned this time. "I'm trying to go slow."

"Don't," she huffed out between gasps of pleasure. "More. Please."

He moved then. Thrusting. Driving harder. It was like she'd unsnapped whatever leash had been holding him back.

He lifted her from the bed and rotated so that he was on his knees, and she was straddling his hips. His arms wrapped around her, tangling in her hair, and his mouth sought her breasts.

Wrath drove up into her and she rode him. He pulled her down, spearing her with his cock. Then lifted her up and then pulled her down again.

She cried out with each thrust. A breathless wail, begging for the release boiling inside. His fingers grasped at her with bruising strength. Wildly. Furiously. He pushed her to the brink and then she felt him reach the edge.

Her ecstasy raced to meet his.

He was in control.

She belonged to him, whether she was ready for it or not.

The climax hit them both, and Rylee felt an amazing sense of closeness. Intimacy. Need. Want. Something about Wrath reached deep into her soul.

His power. His male beauty and strength. His primal animalistic drive for her to accept that he'd chosen her, that he wanted to possess her.

But not in the terrifying cruel way Jeff made her feel.

Wrath made her feel protected and treasured through that possession.

Her arms were wrapped around his neck. Her face was buried in his chest. Her body shivered, and her heart raced behind her ribs.

Wrath lowered them both to the mattress and they lay there—tangled limbs, gasping and panting breathlessly.

Rylee was quite sure he'd made good on his promise.

Walking was overrated anyway, right?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WRATH

Wrath moved quietly around the kitchen. He had a pan of bacon frying. Strips of moose flank sizzled in another pan. The fried eggs were already done and on plates.

Coffee was brewing in the machine Naomi had ordered, saying it was a necessary appliance in a kitchen whether he wanted to decorate or not. He hadn't really liked the flavor the first time he'd tried it, but it'd grown on him over time being in this world. His Keurig was his favorite machine, and he would've purchased one with or without Naomi's insistence.

Noise from his bedroom made him still for a moment and listen. The night had been beautiful, and it'd taken all his willpower to climb out of the bed and let her rest. She needed food and at least a short break before he made her scream in pleasure again.

A moan came from his tired mate and a satisfied grin spread across his face.

Rylee had given him everything he asked for last night. Her body and all her fears and worries. He would make sure she was safe from here on out. She was *his*.

His dragon grumbled at that thought and disagreed. *Not claimed.*

He pushed back at the beast. He'd wanted to bite, mark, and claim Rylee completely last night, but he couldn't link their souls permanently, not until she knew he was Reylean—and a dragon. As much as he wanted to claim what he knew Fate had given him, he needed Rylee to choose him even more.

“Wrath?” Rylee's voice was quiet, but he could hear her. He could hear her heart race and her breathing shudder from where he stood in the kitchen.

“In here,” he said in a loud enough voice to carry all the way to the bedroom.

Footsteps preceded her beautiful face peeking around the wall from the hallway. Her purple hair was tousled and wild, and he wanted nothing more than to wrap his hands in it and make her cry out in pleasure again. Maybe breakfast hadn't been the right choice.

He adjusted his erection and smiled up at her. “Good morning, *shuarra*. Hungry?”

She licked her lips and her gaze danced toward the plates he had sitting on the counter. “Yes. I—we need to—”

Rylee took a step beyond the wall, revealing she was wearing nothing more than his blanket wrapped around her naked body. She gripped it tight to her chest and crossed to the kitchen counter.

“I'll tell you what I need.” A soft chuckle rolled from his chest. “Knowing you're naked under my blanket makes me want to forget breakfast all together and just eat you.”

Her face flushed crimson. “I, um, well.”

He turned to the frying pan and flipped the heat off both. The moose and bacon smelled perfect. He slid a few slices of each onto a waiting plate. "I'll feed you so you can regain your strength first."

More blushing and squirming. He liked that response. He walked around the counter and scooped her into his arms and set her on the counter next to the plate he'd prepped.

A soft smile curved her pink swollen mouth. He leaned forward and kissed her, pausing to lick and bite at her bottom lip. Then he pulled away and turned to the coffee machine.

"Coffee?"

"Yes, please." She picked up a piece of bacon and bit off nearly half of it. "Thank you. This is really good, I like it chewy. It always makes me sad when bacon is cooked until it crumbles."

"Glad to hear it," he said, filling a mug with coffee. "Cream or sugar?"

"A little cream." She continued to eat on the plate, taking a hesitant bite of the moose strips. "What is this?"

"Moose." He set the mug of coffee right next to her, and then pushed her legs apart so he could stand between them while they ate. Also, so he could smell the sweet scent of her arousal even better.

He picked up a piece of bacon, folded it in half, and popped it into his mouth. Pork was one of his favorite meats in this world. They hadn't had anything similar on Reylea.

"So, I wanted to tell you I'm on the shot, so we're good birth control-wise. I know we didn't really discuss that before we ended up sexually active."

“What do you mean?” He ate a hunk of the moose from the plate and then put another smaller piece into her mouth. “What’s a shot?”

She chewed a moment and then answered. “For birth control. I get one each quarter.” Her face was tightening, and her mouth was a straight uncomfortable line.

“Birth control?”

She gave him a confused look and her forehead crinkled. “So I don’t get pregnant. We had unprotected sex. Where are you from?”

So she doesn’t get pregnant?

“But I want you to carry my child.” The words were out of his mouth before his brain even registered what he said. *Dalmeck*. “I mean, I would. I wouldn’t want you to prevent it.” He ran his hands through his hair and growled under his breath. “I’m failing this conversation. Forgive me.”

“Well, that conversation certainly went in a direction different than I expected.” A small reassuring smile tugged at the corners of Rylee’s mouth. “No forgiveness needed, but I’m not ready to have a baby. And certainly not with a man I’ve only known a couple of days.”

“But you’re not against having a child with me? Just not immediately.”

“Wrath, I’m not having this conversation right now. My ex is stalking me, and you—” She waved her hand at the large empty room behind her. “You don’t even have a chair to sit on. How in the world are you thinking about raising children?”

“I was waiting so that you could furnish the cabin the way you wanted.”

She dropped the bacon she had halfway to her mouth back onto the plate. “You what?”

Her eyes were wide. Her pulse was racing.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, so that she was pressed tightly to his chest. And then he let his dragon purr. It soothed her because they were mates. Her soul glowed for him. She shimmered with magick, and she would glow until he marked her. Until they were bonded.

“I know you don’t believe me yet. But I do believe with my whole being that you are the woman meant to be my soulmate. This cabin is meant to be *our* home. I couldn’t buy things for myself, beyond the most essential items because I wanted you to feel like this would be our home together.”

“But I’m a stranger. You didn’t know I would come to Mystery. How can you believe *that*?”

He released her body and cupped her face, tilting her chin up. Her eyes were still wide, but they weren’t fearful any longer. She always calmed when he touched her.

“Fate told me you were coming. So I waited.”

A single solitary tear rolled down her cheek, ripping a hole in his heart. He wiped it away and leaned closer, putting his forehead against hers. “You were scared when I told you, but as soon as I touched you and held you in my arms your fear disappeared.”

Her breathing slowed, and she put her free hand over one of his. Her other hand still held the blanket closed around her chest.

She didn’t push him away. Instead, she tucked her feet around the backs of his legs, holding him close.

He leaned and touched his forehead to hers again, giving her more contact. "Think about it."

"I don't understand it. It doesn't make sense."

"It's magick, Rylee. It's Fate."

"Magick isn't real, Wrath. It's just stories people tell. It's fantasy." Her words were denying the connection. Her voice broke every other syllable, but her fingers gripped his wrist with all the strength in her body, like she was afraid he'd evaporate into thin air.

"And if I could prove to you it was real? What would you say?" He could show her right now. He could tell her everything in this moment and lay his secrets at her feet, but would she run? Would telling her now ruin everything?

He wasn't sure.

The shrill ring of his cell phone broke the moment.
Dalmeck!

She pulled away, breaking contact.

Fuck. This wasn't a good place to leave the discussion, but with all the break-ins lately, he couldn't leave Aarav on his own if something had happened.

He turned and picked up his cell from the counter, Aarav's name flashed on the screen. "It's Aarav."

"Of course." She flashed him a fake smile, slid down from the counter and walked around to the other side of the counter. Away from him. She was putting distance between them now, and it made his fire rise.

"Sheriff," he said, his tone pissed and impatient but polite.

“They hit again, Wrath. I need you to meet me. It’s Leif.” Aarav’s voice was somber and strained. Something had happened. Something terrible. His teeth ground together painfully. The hits kept coming with this group. He wished he could patrol the town as a dragon. He’d find them in no time, and that would be the end of them.

“Aarav, what happened?”

“Come down to the Gas & Go, now.” The finality in Aarav’s voice said everything.

Leif was a nice old man who ran the gas station and mechanic shop on the south side of town. He’d lived in Mystery his whole life and from what Wrath had heard, he’d been particularly kind to the Reyleans when they’d arrived in Mystery. Ryan Berkley wouldn’t be the only angry vengeful person in town after word got out that he’d been killed. His stomach rolled. There were enemies pushing closer. The town was under attack. His mate was being threatened. He took a deep breath and pushed through the heat and anger welling in his chest.

“I can’t leave Rylee. Not with—”

“Take her to the alpha’s. She’ll be safe with Naomi. There’s work to do, Wrath, before the town finds out what happened.” Aarav hung up, not giving him any time for argument.

“I’m going to take you over to Naomi’s to stay until I get back. Something’s happened in town.” He put the phone back on the counter.

“What happened? Was it—”

“No, it’s the thieves we’ve been tracking through town. They killed someone.”

She glanced toward the hallway, toward the bedroom. Then back to him. She looked so small at that moment. So scared. “Can’t I stay with you? I could stay in your truck.”

He almost said yes. Immediately. No hesitation, but he wasn’t sure what he’d be walking into. These thieves continued to escalate. Continued to evade everything he and Aarav had tried to do to locate them.

And if he was focused on them, he couldn’t hunt the men threatening her at the same time. “You’ll be safer with Naomi until I get back. I’ll come back for you as soon as I finish.” He reached out and brushed his knuckles across the softness of her cheek. “I give you my word.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RYLEE

She watched until he drove away, then turned back to the warm and cozy, but very large cabin. It was at least twice as large as Wrath's home, but beautifully pulled together with fantastic, framed photographs from all around the world. The furniture was soft and colorful, a stunning contrast against the neutral honey-colored log walls and ceiling.

Naomi's husband had left with Wrath. She was left behind with Naomi and *three* babies. They gurgled and squealed and squirmed in the large playpen near the back windows.

"Come look, Wrath said I should show you some furniture options." Naomi held up a laptop and wiggled it, like the sight of the computer would lure her away from the window. She flashed Rylee a wide grin that spoke to mischief and mayhem and reminded her of her best friend Ayla.

Shit. How had she forgotten she needed to call her parents. Her phone had been off. She hadn't been able to check messages. Ayla was probably flipping out, too.

"Can I borrow your cell phone?" Rylee glanced out the window one more time. Snow covered everything as far as she could see. The storm was over, but it'd coated the country in a beautiful but unfamiliar blanket. It wasn't like she hadn't seen

snow before. But she was a Texan, and unless she traveled in the winter, snow wasn't really a thing.

"Of course." Naomi patted the couch. "Come sit."

Rylee left the front window of the cabin and went to sit next to Naomi. She sank into the cushion with a heavy sigh.

It was warm on the couch. Warm and cozy like sitting next to a campfire. It reminded her of Wrath's warmth when he was near.

"Here, hon." Naomi pulled a cellphone from her sweatpants pocket. "Everything, okay?"

"Yeah, I really need to check in with my parents and my best friend. I dropped my phone when Wrath grabbed me during the storm. And then it got trashed by—"

"The thieves wreaking havoc all over town? Or the guys stalking you?" Naomi got up and grabbed one of her babies from the playpen. She settled back on the couch, lifted her shirt and put the very excited baby on her breast. "I heard about the incident at the Jenkin's store."

Rylee sagged, mostly relieved that she didn't have to continue to keep face like everything was fine, but *damn*, this little group passed information fast. "My ex. He tried to have me killed back in Texas. He's followed me here. Or at least sent the same guy that hit me with a car back in Dallas."

"The wound? The bruises?"

"Yeah."

"How's your back feeling?"

"A lot better. Everything still hurts, but it's much more tolerable than it used to be. I haven't had any more bleeding, even with—" She stopped before she spilled the beans on

sleeping with Wrath. Although, what they'd done didn't really qualify as *sleeping* per say.

"Even with Wrath doing his very best to sweep you completely off your feet, you mean? How's that one-bed situation working out?" Naomi chuckled and stroked her nursing baby's face.

Rylee felt her face heat. "He's quite intense."

"But in a good way?" Naomi's expression hinted at worry.

"Yes, in a good way. I feel safe with him in a way I've never felt before. It's strange, actually. Like my whole body relaxes whenever he's around."

"Good. Good." Naomi's baby slipped off the breast, dozing contentedly in her arms. "I'm going to run this little guy up to his crib."

"Of course, but that was like a minute. Did he get enough?"

"I know, right? They all three nurse really fast. My mom says I must have a lot of fat in my milk." She got up and headed across the room.

"I'm going to call really quickly and check in with my mom."

"Of course. Be right back." Naomi went up the stairs and Rylee glanced at the other two babies squirming and rolling around in the playpen. Her thoughts drifted back to the conversation she'd had this morning with Wrath about her birth control.

He'd said he wanted babies. With her. She'd never met a man who talked about having a family with such assurance

before. It was always about their career or some other accomplishments.

Wrath made everything about her. About them being together. About fate.

She flipped the phone over in her hand and dialed her mom's number. The phone picked up on the very first ring.

"Hello?"

"Mom, it's Rylee."

"Honey, is everything okay?"

"Yes, I'm good." She stopped herself from naturally telling her mom *all the things*. Jeff was willing to come after her, he might be willing to go after her family and friends if he thought they knew anything. For right now, she needed her parents and Ayla to stay blissfully ignorant. "There was a really bad storm. The house was damaged."

"What happened? Do I need to have Dad send the plane back to Anchorage?"

"No, no. I'm good. I'm staying with a—friend, but my phone got damaged, so if you try to call or text I won't get it. I'm not sure how long it will take me to get another phone up here."

"Baby, don't you want to come home since you can't stay in the house?" Her mom's voice was full of concern.

"I made some friends, and I'd like to stay a while longer. I'm good. Really. Just call this number if you need to get a hold of me. Naomi will make sure I get the message." Rylee kept her voice calm with a positive upbeat tone.

"Alright. If that's what you'd prefer. Let me know if you change your mind. Your father is in New York right now on

business, but I'll let him know you checked in. We were wondering why you hadn't texted back."

"Thanks, mom. Love you."

"Oh, have you spoken to Ayla?"

"She's my next call."

"Good. Good. Love you, sweetie. Bye."

"Bye, mom."

Naomi came down the stairs. "One down, two to go." She flashed a wide smile and then crossed to the playpen. "You're next my sweet little Kela." She scooped up the little one and then sank back onto the couch next to Rylee and popped out the opposite breast this time.

"How do you feed three of them?"

Naomi's laugh rolled from deep in her chest. "It surprised me too, but as long as I rotate the boobies, the other one will be filled up and ready again by the time I get finished with her." She poked at the phone after the baby latched. "Call your friend. You don't want people worried about you."

Rylee dialed Ayla's number, but it went to voicemail. "Ayla, it's Rylee. Checking in to let you know my phone was damaged. You can contact me at this number if you need to get a hold of me for right now. Talk to you soon."

She tapped the red button on the screen to hang up the call and then handed the phone back to Naomi who slid it into her pocket. "So, should we look at some furniture?"

"Don't you find this a little ... odd?"

"What?" Naomi was speaking to her, but the question came out like a purr toward the baby.

“That he wants me to pick furniture for his house. I mean, he just met me.”

“Oh, hon. He’s been waiting for you. You’re his mate. With these guys, it’s a once-and-done. They’re in it one hundred million percent.”

“These guys?”

“Yeah, they all kinda came to town as a unit.”

“They’re military?” It made sense. The way Wrath carried himself. The way he moved, like a predator. Like he’d never been afraid of anything his entire life.

“That’s a good way to describe it.”

“But you’re not going to tell me for real, are you?”

Naomi looked at her other baby, still rolling around the playpen, smacking toys and making adorable little baby noises. “It’s not my story to tell.”

“He says he wants me to love him first.”

Naomi nodded. “That sounds about right for Wrath. Give him some time. I promise it will be worth it. When I met Col, my whole life changed for the better. It was a bumpy ride at first, but this group... They are some of the most loyal, protective, wonderful men you’ll ever meet. Give him the chance he’s asking for.”

“I want to. I just—”

The front door flew open and Penny—one of the women she’d met at the group dinner—waltzed inside, a baby on each hip in a sling and a big black backpack over her other shoulder. “Hey!” She waved and hollered out.

Right behind her was her husband—Kann. Rylee had met him at dinner too, and then again at the store. He had two babies attached to his body in slings as well. *What the hell was in the water here? Four babies?* “Col called and said he was going to be longer than he expected and asked us to come keep you both company.”

“Come on in, I was trying to convince Rylee to do some online shopping for Wrath’s cabin.” Naomi said, getting up from the couch and heading to the stairs with another well-fed baby.

“Oh, that must be overwhelming.” The beautiful woman set the small duffel down at the doorway and walked straight to the kitchen. “Have you made breakfast yet? Or even coffee?”

“There’s food in the fridge, hon. Help yourself. I have to finish nursing my little monsters,” Naomi said in a teasing tone of voice.

“You hungry, Rylee?”

“No, I’m good, but can I help with anything?”

“Yes, you can look at that website Naomi has pulled up on her laptop and give us some ideas on what kind of style you’d like for the cabin.” Penny pulled eggs from the fridge and a few other things. Then she put a pan on the stove to start warming and turned on the coffee pot.

Rylee turned and glanced at the open laptop on the short table in front of the couch. She’d never furniture shopped *ever*. Jeff had his apartment designed before she met him, and he’d never let her change anything. He’d even balked when she bought a couple of throw blankets that didn’t fit with his aesthetic.

“I don’t know how to design.”

“Oh, sweetie. You look for things you like, stay in a similar color scheme.” She paused and glanced around Naomi’s living room. “Or don’t.” She flashed Rylee a big grin. “Your guy will like it, even if everything you pick out is magenta.”

“She’s right.” Kann said, putting each of his sleeping children down into the playpen. “Wrath will be pleased to see that you picked something.” He went and retrieved the other two children from Penny and put them down in the playpen too.

Rylee grabbed the laptop and settled it into her lap. “It feels strange. And so fast.”

“These men only have one speed,” Penny cackled from the kitchen. “Don’t get me wrong, they are respectful and kind and amazing and a little strange at times, but when they settle on a woman. That’s it for them. They’re ready.”

Wrath was certainly ready.

Rylee was jealous of his certainty. His faith that *she* was his *one*. She’d told him that she was *his* last night, but was Wrath really and truly the one for her?

She was teetering on that fence already. There was something about him. Something that made her feel *whole* inside. Something that kept urging her to take the chance on this man.

“Okay then, time to do a little shopping.”

A small cheer went up from Naomi and Penny.

She’d called them ‘new friends’ on the phone to her mother. Friends were a big deal to her. She didn’t have many.

She didn't make new ones particularly easily. And yet, she told her mother she was staying with them. That she didn't want to come home.

Maybe she was closer to jumping over the proverbial fence than she thought.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

OWEN

A arav had yelled at him until he agreed not to go hunting right that second for the monsters that could do this to ... his friend. Now he was pacing back and forth the length of the small convenience store. The metallic smell of blood and death permeated the building. The man who'd shown him and his sister such kindness when they'd first arrived in Mystery lay dead on the floor.

And not just dead. They'd attacked him. A wolf had torn him apart and left him exposed to the elements. The door had been smashed. They were lucky no scavengers had wandered inside and taken the body overnight.

The men who'd attacked Leif were working with a Reylean. A wolf. A wolf he recognized.

Owen's bear wanted out. Wanted revenge.

Now.

Owen ground his teeth and punched a hole in the wall. A roar rumbled deep in his chest, and he shouted at the ceiling—half beast, half man.

“Owen,” Aarav said, his voice soft and calm.

“I should’ve come in sooner. Or stayed later.” He snarled and struck the wall again, smashing through the thin paneling covering the walls. “You’re letting them get away.” Every instinct. Every thought in his mind drove him to be his beast. And to hunt the beast that killed his friend. That dared to strike at an old man who would’ve helped anyone. Leif was a tough old man, but fair and kind.

“No one could’ve predicted this, Owen. They broke their pattern. There was no indication they would’ve targeted Leif. They’ve been hitting big houses. Stealing money, jewels, valuables easily fenced.” Aarav’s fists were clenched, and Owen could hear the rumble of the sheriff’s big cat. The lion shifter was pissed too, but he was certainly holding back better than Owen was.

Owen smelled the dragons before they arrived. That’s why Aarav had been trying to keep him calm. He’d been stalling until something bigger than Owen’s rage-filled bear sprouted claws and went berserk.

He whipped around and glared at the sheriff. “Bastard.”

“Fuck you, Owen. I want these people as much as you do.” He pointed down at Leif’s body hidden beneath a gray blanket. “But we have to act as a unit. That’s what a tribe is, Owen. This town is my responsibility, too. We protect them, and they protect us.”

“Our responsibility.” Col’s dark voice cut through the thick tension between Aarav and Owen. He and Wrath stepped through the frame of the shattered front door. “This is not singularly on you Aarav. Like you said before, we will act as a unit.”

Col walked to Leif’s body and squatted down, pulling back the blanket. His fingers tightened on the blanket until his

knuckles turned white. He pulled the bloodied blanket back over Leif's battered face.

"Alpha, we can't—" Owen took a step closer to where Col was crouched next to Leif's body. "We have to stop these men. They have a wolf. The scent is faint, but it's there, and I'm quite sure it's Tai. We have to *hunt*."

Col's eyes flared with flame, and the temperature in the store went from sixty to a hundred in two seconds. "You will not make this choice on your own, Owen. Do you understand?"

Owen bowed his head respectfully. "Yes, alpha." Back home on Reylea, he'd been alpha, but here, he owed his life and his mate and his allegiance to Col. He would never jeopardize that by going against his alpha's wishes.

"What do we do? There's more than humans involved now. I shouldn't have left Rylee. I should've brought her with me. There's too many threats circling."

The younger dragon male looked like he might pop a vein in his neck. Owen sympathized. When he'd thought Tara in danger, all logic had fled his mind.

"Calm yourself, Wrath. I already asked the younger wolves to patrol our land near the cabins. Aarav's brothers are also on their way out to my home." Col stood and turned to face the panicking male who'd come to town only a couple months ago.

Wrath had transferred his allegiance from his tribe down in Seattle and pledged loyalty to Col. Then he'd accepted the deputy sheriff position in town. He was normally very calm and put together, but he looked like he was about to run

straight back out the door. Finding your soul match could do that to a male—eliminate rational thought.

So could rage. Owen needed to keep his in check.

“Forgive me, alpha.” Wrath’s voice was calmer this time. Owen was impressed at the male’s control.

Col gave him a firm nod and turned back to Aarav and him. “Aarav, what do you think? You were first on the scene, right?”

“Yes. I drove by and saw the smashed door. I found him here when I came in. I covered Leif and then called Owen. Ava is making Ryder cut their trip short. They’ll be back in Anchorage tomorrow, Tor and Dawn too, and then back to Mystery the day after tomorrow.”

“You called Ava?” Col’s deep voice growled out.

“I did, alpha.” Owen spoke up. “She wouldn’t want to be gone. We both owe Leif everything. He took care of us when we first got here. Besides the tribe, he’s like family.”

Col glanced up and met Owen’s gaze. “I know. It’s good they will all be back soon. It will be better to have the whole tribe here to end this threat to our home together. And we will end it.” Col’s eyes burned with flames of promise.

Owen tipped his chin respectfully. That was what he’d wanted. The assurance this would not go unanswered. When it’d only been humans, he’d been okay turning them over to human justice. But with a wolf being involved. A wolf they all thought was long gone. Human justice wasn’t an option any longer.

“Is Knox coming?”

“I called him on the way over,” Wrath said, his tone solemn. “Col said it might be a wolf you’ve dealt with before?”

Owen ran his hands over his face and into his hair. “It’s been a while, but yeah, I think it’s Tai. He was involved in my mate’s kidnapping. Tara almost died. So did Katherine, Knox’s mate. Knox will know for sure when he gets here.”

CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

RYLEE

“I really like this. I still feel weird picking out furniture for Wrath’s house.” Rylee finished the order for a few things the ladies had insisted upon—a couch, a breakfast table, and a few rugs—and then put the laptop on the coffee table and flopped back against the puffy cushions.

“I already told you, he’ll be happier if you’ve picked stuff,” Penny shot back from the kitchen. “I checked with Dawn and Ava. They’re going to rent a truck and bring it up with them from Anchorage on their way back home.”

“That’s really nice of them, but there’s no rush.” Rylee stared out the big picture windows at the picturesque winter wonderland and the icy river in the distance.

“Yes rush, that man of yours only has a bed.” Penny gave a dirty laugh. “A bed is essential for sure, but chairs are also good. They were coming home early anyway because of Leif.”

Right. The man the thieves killed. At least that’s what she’d assumed from Wrath’s phone call.

A flash of movement in the trees caught her attention.

Something huge.

Rylee got up from the couch and walked to the window, peering into the shadows between the trees where she'd seen the *thing*. A thing that looked like a wolf.

"Hey, I think there's an animal outside." Rylee watched the trees, and a moment later, she saw it again, except she couldn't believe it was real. The wolf was the size of a small horse. "Umm, hey, guys. There's a giant wolf outside." Her stomach tightened and knotted, anxiety raking through her mind like nails over a chalkboard. Panic was all she felt.

"We get them from time to time. They hunt on the river," Naomi said, her voice nonchalant and ridiculously calm.

Rylee whirled and stared at the little Latin woman where she stood in the kitchen with Penny. Naomi shrugged her shoulders and made the I-don't-know-what-you're-implying face. *What the actual fuck? Wolves did not grow this big. This was not a thing. It was certainly not an it's-no-big-deal thing.*

"No, a *giant* wolf. Like a wolf the size of a moose."

Penny gave Naomi a suspicious glance, and Naomi shook her head, like she was telling the other woman not to say anything. Like they knew exactly what the giant wolf was and weren't the least bit concerned by a predator outside their door with the ability to swallow one of them in a couple of bites.

Rylee stared at them, and nobody said anything for what felt like multiple elongated stretched-out minutes.

The front door opened with a *thwack*, and Kann came inside with an armful of wood for the woodstove, and two more men stomped in behind him. Men Rylee hadn't met yet. But they were all huge and built exactly like Kann, and Wrath, and Col.

There was certainly something in the water in Mystery, Alaska.

“Is anyone going to tell me what’s going on?” Rylee moved her accusatory glare to Kann. Despite being a giant of a man, he seemed gentle and kind and reasonable. Maybe he would cave where these women would not.

Kann snuck a quick peek at his wife and then flashed Rylee a solemn frown that said he knew the hand she’d been dealt, and he wasn’t helping her out.

“Popped in to grab the handhelds. Turn on the radio, love.” He walked into the kitchen and gave Penny a big kiss. He grabbed three handheld walkies out of a cabinet by the door, and then he and the other two big blond men left as quickly as they’d come in.

“What about the wolf? Aren’t you going to tell them there’s a huge predator out there.” Rylee started for the door.

“Rylee,” Penny called out. “They’ll be alright. I promise. We know that wolf. He’s ... errr ... he’s friendly.”

Naomi hissed something unintelligible under her breath.

Penny sniped back something equally unintelligible.

“Just tell me something!” Rylee said, her tone rising.

Naomi took a deep breath and then turned to face Rylee. Her expression was somber and serious and filled with apprehension. “Okay, look. There’s a lot going on right now, and we can’t explain everything without breaking trust with our husbands that we’re not willing to do. They’re aware of the wolf. He’s not a threat to *us*. We’re consolidating our family here and in the bunker up the river about a half mile away so you’ll probably see more people come and go.”

“You have a bunker? Like a bomb shelter?” Rylee’s stomach climbed all the way up her throat and threatened to choke off her air. Why would they need a bomb shelter?

“What’s going on?”

She didn’t want to be in the dark. And she felt like she only knew a fraction of what was actually going on with these people. There was a serious threat. Wrath had been upset on the phone. Now there were giant wolves and bomb shelters.

“Technically, I call it a bat cave, but it’s hidden and secure and has bedrooms and bathrooms and food storage for months. We can’t all be up here in Naomi and Col’s house. There’s too many of us, but I have lots of cameras all over. We will see everything before it gets here.” Penny went to her bag and pulled out a laptop. She opened it and set it up on the kitchen counter. The screen was filled with little squares of video feed. She hadn’t been kidding about having cameras. There were at least twenty boxes streaming on the screen.

“Where were Kann and those other guys going?” Rylee walked closer and pointed to one of the boxes that showed the men walking.

Penny pointed to another box. It showed a large black SUV stopping in front of a big gate.

She recognized that SUV. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

“That’s the third time this vehicle has come to the gate. We’re pretty sure it’s the same one that gave you a panic attack at Henrietta’s store.” Penny met Rylee’s gaze and waited.

Words wouldn’t come out. Rylee’s ribcage squeezed like she was in a vice. She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t think straight.

“Hey. You’re here with us. You’re safe. I promise.” Penny’s voice was soft and soothing, and Rylee wanted to believe her. She needed to.

She sucked in a deep breath and then let it all pour out. “How does he know I’m out here? What am I going to do?”

She couldn’t stop staring at the screen. The man driving was the same man who’d hit her and Ayla in Dallas. He was the same man she’d seen stalking her at the store.

Was Jeff in the back? Where was her bastard of an ex-fiance?

“I should go. I’m putting you and the babies and everyone at risk. Jeff’s not going to stop. Wrath doesn’t understand how powerful he is. None of you do. I thought Alaska was far enough. It wasn’t.”

Penny put a hand gently on Rylee’s shoulder. “You’re part of this family now, Rylee. You came to the exact place you were supposed to. Fate sent you to Wrath. To us. Now, let us help.”

There it was again. Fate.

They all believed it.

She wanted to believe it. She was trying to believe it.

“Penny is right. Just watch.” Naomi came around from the kitchen and pointed at the screen again. Now the three men were in the same camera frame as the SUV. “Turn on the sound, Penny.”

“How did they get to the gate so quickly? It’s like a half mile down the road.”

“They ran.” Naomi popped a piece of bacon into her mouth.

They ran a half mile in like two minutes?

Penny tapped a few keys, and now the conversation was being broadcast.

“This is private property. You need to leave.” Kann’s voice held a threat that made goosebumps pop up on Rylee’s arms. The other two guys stood behind the gate, arms crossed over their massive chest like bouncers at a club.

“Sir, I have legal documents that need to be signed by Rylee Florence. I was told I could find her out here.”

“Out where?”

“Here.”

“Where’s here?” Kann shot back, obviously trying to rattle the guy. The guy was being evasive for sure.

“Is Miss Florence staying at a residence on this property?”

“I don’t know who you’re getting your information from or talking about, but this is private property, and you’re not welcome on it. Don’t come back to this gate.”

“I am a lawyer, and I’m trying to locate Miss Florence about legal matters. You would do well to cooperate.”

“That’s a lie,” Rylee said quietly. “He’s the guy who tried to kill me. I mean, I guess he could be a lawyer too, but—” She sucked in a quick breath and backed away. “Please don’t believe him. Don’t let him in.” Panic fluttered like a thousand butterflies in her stomach. This guy would try to kill her again ... or take her.

“We know. And so does Kann. Penny texted him.” Naomi grabbed Rylee’s hand and squeezed it reassuringly.

A few of the butterflies dispersed from her stomach, but the guy wasn't gone yet.

Kann's shoulders broadened, and he stood up even straighter next to the SUV. *"Are you threatening me on my property?"*

"Are you the owner of Reylea United, Col Li'Vhram?"

"Partner. And you didn't answer my question?" Kann's tone dropped to an angry growl.

"I'm trying to be civil."

"I'm going to take your vehicle apart piece by piece if you don't remove yourself from my presence and my property."

"I demand to speak to Col Li'Vhram."

"He's busy."

"My client is very concerned about Miss Florence. She's had a mental break and is dangerous to herself and possibly to others."

Kann halfway roared, reached for the bumper on the SUV, and ripped it off the vehicle like he was tearing paper.

Rylee covered her mouth and held her breath. *How had he done that?*

"What the fuck?" The man put the vehicle into reverse and spewed gravel in an effort to leave before Kann grabbed another piece of the SUV.

"I'll show you what it means to have a mental break if I ever see you near my property again." Kann shouted after the vehicle. Then he turned back to the gate, looked up in the direction of the camera, and winked.

He winked.

Like it was nothing.

Like he wasn't worried about a damn thing.

He winked.

Like he had her back no matter what the guy had said. Appreciation blossomed in her chest, warming and sending the last of the butterflies on their way. Tears pricked at her eyes. These people weren't kidding. They were protecting her. All of them. Not just Wrath.

Rylee turned to Naomi and Penny. "That man will come back. What's going to stop him from parking somewhere and walking around the gate? It's not like you have a big wall."

"That's where the wolf comes in," Penny said, her tone sounding suspiciously amused.

Naomi smacked Penny's arm.

"Look. They're gone for now. That's what matters. You're safe. We're all here safe together. Arrav's brothers are out there with Kann and—"

"The wolf?" Rylee interjected. "Is it like a pet? A trained guard dog?"

"It's more complicated than that, but sort of. And there's three of them, not one. So don't freak out if you see more than one wolf outside."

Rylee blew a breath out noisily and walked away from the laptop. *More wolves. Friendly guard dog wolves? Men who can physically rip bumpers off of cars.* "This is a lot."

"I know. And it's worse, because there's someone very bad in town hurting people and stealing shit and breaking into people's houses. And it has nothing to do with the fucking idiot in the black SUV who will die a painful death if he so

much as steps onto our property. Both are equally important. I'm just saying—”

“Penny!” Naomi covered her face with her hands.

“She’s part of the family. She’s Wrath’s mate. This is really frustrating, Naomi. What am I supposed to say? We can’t keep her out of the loop on everything.”

“Penny!”

Penny slammed the laptop with the camera feeds shut and walked across the room and sank into a bright orange chair with a huff.

“We’ve got problems coming out of our ears, Naomi. They killed Leif.” She pulled a throw blanket against her chest, put her face down into it, and muffled a shout of frustration. A few seconds later, she raised her tear-streaked face.

“They killed Leif, and I need to do something about it.”

Naomi pulled her phone out of her pocket and texted someone. Several someones. Her fingers were flying like she was writing a book.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you guys fight.” Rylee offered, hating that the two women were arguing over what to tell her or not tell her.

“Not your fault,” both Naomi and Penny spoke at the same time and exchanged an apologetic smile with each other.

Naomi held up her phone. “I told Col what happened. Kann had already called him, though.”

Penny folded her legs under herself in the chair. “What’s the plan? How can we help?”

“We stay right here for right now. Callum and the others are trailing the SUV/lawyer guy now. Kann said there was only one man in it, and Wrath wants him followed so we can figure out where your ex is hunkered down.” Naomi made eye contact with Rylee and then turned back to Penny. “Connie has one more patient to see at the clinic, and then she’ll head here to hang with us. She said she’d be done in about an hour.”

“Okay good. What about Katherine?”

“Knox is getting her from the Community Center, and then he’s headed out to the Gas & Go to meet Col, Aarav, and Wrath.”

“Why do they need Knox and Katherine?”

Naomi shook her head. “I don’t know. Col said they needed Knox.”

“Fuck.” Penny got up and retrieved her laptop, and then sat back in the chair. She didn’t say anything else. Didn’t look up from the screen once she started typing.

“What am I missing?” Rylee asked, her tone sharp with irritation.

Penny didn’t respond, and Naomi walked to the radio cabinet and picked up a handheld. “Kann, what’s your location?”

The radio crackled for a second before Kann’s voice came on. “We’re patrolling between the cabin and bunker. Col asks that you stay put for now.”

“Got it. Thanks, Kann.”

Rylee walked past the playpen where Penny’s babies slept peacefully. It was like they didn’t even care that the adults around them were flipping out with worry. Or maybe it was

only her and Penny. Maybe Naomi wasn't worried at all, but Rylee had a feeling Naomi was hiding it a lot better.

A loud *thunk* drew her attention to the big picture windows at the back of the cabin again. A big reddish grey wolf stood right in front of the window shaking its head.

Then another wolf came barrelling out of the forest and body slammed the window right next to the first one. *Thunk*.

"Shit!" The word came out of Rylee's mouth sounding more like a wounded animal shrieking than a person cursing.

Three more wolves ran out from the shadows of the trees.

Thump.

Thunk.

Crack.

"Penny. Rylee. Get the babies upstairs. Now." Naomi's voice was a roar.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WRATH

Wrath stood in the dimly lit back-room office of Leif's gas station. The only light came from a naked bulb flickering overhead and the images on the small monitor.

Aarav sat in the old chair at the computer desk. He and Col and Owen stood behind Aarav, eyes glued to the small screen on the desk. They watched the footage with silent intensity.

Three men came into the store, dressed in dark clothes, ski masks covering their faces. Leif went for something beneath the counter, probably a gun, but the assailants were too quick and dragged him over the counter before he could get to it.

The old man fought impressively, and with a ferocity Wrath respected. He withstood against three younger men for several very long minutes before one got in a really good shot to Leif's kidney and doubled the older man over. From there, it only took seconds before their friend was bleeding on the floor.

"They will pay for this," Col said, grinding the words out, thick with vitriol.

"Yes, they will," Aarav and Wrath said together, a hushed promise of vengeance.

The soundless footage revealed another man, bigger than the other three, breaking the glass on the front door and entering the convenience store. He proceeded to speak to the others, his behavior and body language angry.

“He looks pissed.” Wrath watched the man clench his fists. The man’s body tensed, and he gestured aggressively at Leif and then at the other three men.

“He also looks like the leader of the group.” Aarav pointed at the other three men backing away from where Leif was lying on the ground. “They’re deferring to him.”

Col grunted a noise that sounded like an agreement.

“We still can’t identify any of them. Their faces are all covered,” Owen said, his tone sharp with frustration.

A moment later, the man on the screen who’d been yelling at the others morphed into a giant white wolf and stalked toward Leif, who was struggling to crawl across the floor.

Wrath hissed out an angry breath. The leader of the thieves was a Reylean. He’d broken his protocol. He’d come to a scene. He’d left his scent. And now they would find this wolf and end him.

Nothing would stop their tribe from defending the town.

The wolf on screen was a blur of fur and teeth. It attacked Leif, clamping its jaws down on the man’s throat.

Wrath’s stomach knotted, and he swallowed back bile. He’d seen men killed. He’d killed some himself—but his victims had deserved it. Leif didn’t deserve this.

Aarav flipped off the footage, and the screen went dark. “Fuck.”

They didn't need to watch the horror of Leif's death. It wouldn't bring him back.

"Do you recognize the wolf? He's white like Knox and—"

Owen interrupted. "Yeah, it's probably Tai. The scent here is familiar, but I only crossed his path a couple of times, and I wasn't in the best frame of mind when it happened. Knox and Katherine will know for sure. Tai is Knox's cousin, and a traitor to his pack." Owen took a step back from the desk and crossed his arms over his massive chest. The bear shifter was big. Probably outweighed Wrath by twenty or thirty pounds and was a couple inches taller.

"It is Tai," Knox said, stepping into the already crowded back office. Katherine, Knox's mate, stood right behind him. Her sleek black hair was tied up in a tight ponytail and her brown eyes flashed an angry gold. She'd nearly died because of Tai. Wrath had heard the story.

"Owen, I'm so sorry for your loss. I know you and Leif were very close. Does Ava know yet?" Katherine's voice was soft and empathetic, even though Wrath could still see her wolf's magick burning brightly in her eyes. Knox turned to his mate and took her hand in his, calming her wolf's tension.

Wrath watched Owen's shoulders crumple forward slightly, and then he whispered a *yes*. It was only a short second, but he recognized the pain of loss. He'd lost everything and everyone during the exodus of Reylea. None of his family made it through the portal.

That's what Leif had been to Owen. Family.

"When do we hunt him, alpha?" Knox asked, his voice respectful but urgent. He held Col's gaze with confidence.

Col nodded. "We will. Together. No one goes off alone. We don't know if his group is larger than those three men. We don't know how they're armed yet or where they are based. They have to be staying somewhere. We have reconnaissance to do before we act. I do not intend to lose anyone else. Is that clear?"

"Is what clear? What the fuck!"

"Dalmeck!" Aarav growled under his breath. Wrath turned for the door first, he recognized the voice.

The sound of a shotgun being pumped had Wrath scrambling. He pushed his way past Owen. Knox tucked Katherine behind him and allowed Wrath to pass.

"Ryan, it's the deputy. Put away the gun," Wrath bellowed at the man. "Now."

"What happened to Leif? Was it the same people that nearly got me?"

Aarav and the others followed Wrath out of the office slowly.

Ryan's eyes widened when he saw the rest of them, and he lowered the shotgun immediately. "Shit. I thought maybe it was still going down. I saw your vehicles in the parking lot but didn't see either of you." Ryan heaved a huge breath and then wiped his face with his free hand. "What the hell? What are we going to do?"

"You're not going to do anything, you fool," Aarav said quickly, walking toward Ryan. He reached for the shotgun and took it, then tossed it to Wrath.

Wrath caught it, unloaded the shells, and put it on the counter near the register.

“The hell I’m not, they killed someone. This isn’t only thieving anymore. This is murder. Ryan’s gaze flitted about the store, focused mainly on the area where Leif’s body lay covered. “There’s blood spatter everywhere. What did they kill him with?”

“We’ll take care of this. Ryan, I need you to—” Aarav gestured to the door.

“No. Mystery only has you and the deputy. You need more help. I don’t know why there’s so many other civilians here, but you need me. I’m military trained. Deputize me. Let me help before someone else ends up dead.”

“No.” Aarav’s voice took on more of a growl. “We’ve got this handled. Just let us do our jobs. Go home.”

Ryan ground his jaw but did finally turn and leave. A few seconds later, Wrath heard his car start and then watched him drive north away from the station.

“He’s not going to let it go,” Wrath said, his tone laced with concern.

No one said anything, and the only sound in the store was the hum of the overhead lights and their racing heartbeats. Not only was there a killer wolf to catch and his band of violent thieves, Ryan was likely going to insert himself into the investigation and make it that much harder for the tribe to exact vengeance for Leif.

The *Game of Thrones* theme song split the silence. All eyes fell on Col’s pocket. Col’s mate was obsessed with a TV show about dragons. They all knew who was calling.

Their alpha pulled his phone out and answered Naomi’s call.

Her words exploded through the silence like a sonic boom.

“Wolves are attacking the cabin!”

Wrath felt his heart wrench inside his chest. His dragon pushed, demanding to be freed. But he knew they couldn't risk the exposure. It was daytime. The sky was clear. People for miles would be able to see them if they took to the skies.

Mate. His dragon bellowed deep in his subconscious.
Mate.

He roared, his voice taking on his beast's pain. Col's voice joined him, a mixture of frustration and rage. Then they all ran for the parking lot.

Wrath got to his SUV, and Col jumped into the passenger seat. They were out of the parking lot first and tearing down the main road that would lead through town and across the river toward the tribe's property. The others were close behind him, but Wrath could only focus on the road.

Getting to Rylee was the objective. That was all that mattered.

He hoped he wasn't too late.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

RYLEE

R ylee stood in the center of the nursery room, her heart racing as the cries of seven children filled the air. That last wolf who'd cracked the glass had stopped her heart in her chest.

Naomi and Penny had shoved two babies into her arms and herded her up the stairs and into this room. It was all such a blur.

She and Penny had put her four into cribs with Naomi's. Then Penny had told her to stay in the room no matter what she heard and left.

What were Naomi and Penny going to do?

Against a pack of wolves? Giant moose-sized wolves.

Then the gunshots started. High powered hunting rifles. She recognized the sound from hunting with her dad.

But it was the roaring animals that were throwing her off. Wolves didn't roar. And she could've sworn some of the roars sounded like fucking lions—like African-Mufasa-Simba-type lions. She knew for a fact, cougars screamed more than roared.

Another roar, a different sort of roar, rippled through the air making her skin nip into gooseflesh.

How was she going to protect these kids if an entire zoo was attacking the cabin? She couldn't even think straight. You couldn't punch an animal. You couldn't reason with it.

You could shoot it, but she didn't have a gun. And the last thing she wanted was a rifle in the baby nursery. The door was solid.

Another roar echoed from outside, bigger than the others, and Rylee edged toward the window on the side of the house. There was a flash of copper wings, and she saw a giant lizard creature, the size of an eighteen-wheeler.

A dragon or a dinosaur.

There were no words other than dragon to describe what she'd seen.

A second later, a lion bigger than anything she'd ever seen in a zoo ran around the corner. His face was stained red, and unlike the African lions she'd seen in zoos, this one had tusks or saber-teeth. It was a cross between a regular lion and a prehistoric one.

I'm crazy. I'm hallucinating. I'm in fucking Jurassic Park.

She sunk to the floor and hugged her knees tight to her chest. The kids were screaming and crying, and she couldn't do anything. She couldn't tell them it would be okay. She couldn't tell them their parents would be okay, not when there were mythological monsters and prehistoric animals fighting a war right outside.

What the fuck had she landed in the middle of?

More roars. Screams of animals in pain. Gunshots. All of it echoed around and around in her head. It couldn't be real. It couldn't be real. It couldn't be real.

Another huge roar rumbled, shaking the entire cabin.

Rylee tucked in tighter, trying to find some comfort in the chaos. She couldn't stop thinking about Wrath and how much she wished he was there with her. She missed the feel of his arms around her, the warmth of his body against hers. The sound of his voice telling her everything would be okay.

She jumped up from the floor and ran to the center of the group of cribs. Several of the babies were sharing. She pulled one of the smallest out of her crib and hugged her tight.

"We're going to be okay. Your mamas are tough. Your daddies are tough. They know what they're doing." She kissed the baby's forehead and made rounds from crib to crib, hugging and kissing and cooing.

The sounds of the fighting died off, and the children also calmed. They'd needed the same thing she did—comfort, reassurance. It'd taken her a minute to realize she was the one who needed to give it. They were depending on her. Penny and Naomi had trusted her with their children.

She might feel helpless on the inside, but she could be the comfort the babies needed. She could do that for them and pray it was enough to get through whatever was happening outside.

Eventually, she was able to focus on the kids and tune out the horrific sounds outside. She sang a song her mom had sung to her every night when she was a kid and kept singing, no matter what she heard outside.

All that existed right now for her were these kids. They were her responsibility. They were what mattered, and she would fight for them if it came to it.

WRATH

COL CLIMBED out of the vehicle before Wrath could park in front of the cabin. He ran to the side where a fire had been started in a small clearing. The smell of burning fur was quite clear on the breeze—wolves had died.

But had anyone else been a casualty?

“Naomi!” Col’s shout reverberated through the empty space.

A long copper-scaled dragon head popped around the corner of the cabin they were both running toward. Wrath was right on Col’s heels.

The dragon’s mouth opened, and a keening cry of relief was released. A moment later the dragon was gone, and Naomi was running toward Col.

She leapt into her mate’s arms with another more human cry of joy. “*Shuarra*. Forgive me for not being here.” Wrath watched the reunion for a few seconds before turning his attention back to the scene of slaughter before him.

Wrath scanned the area. “Rylee?” He shouted her name. No response.

The smell of blood was everywhere. Wolf. Lion. Naomi’s dragon had broken a few trees and burned some others. The charred stumps smelled of her magick and fire.

He wanted to find Rylee. He wanted to hold Rylee and smell her hair and taste her skin. He needed to know she was safe. He couldn’t smell her, and his heart was racing.

“Hey!” Kann’s voice carried from the edge of the trees. He was dragging a limp reddish-colored wolf. “Wrath.”

Wrath hurried to his friend’s side and grabbed a leg of the wolf to help carry the body to the fire. “What happened? Was it Tai? Where’s Rylee?”

Kann’s eyes widened. “Shit. That makes a lot more sense. These wolves were idiots. Rylee is fine, none of them made it inside. Help me, would you?”

Wrath growled, but he followed Kann to the burning heap over on the side of the cabin. Scent told him the heap of bodies were wolves—Reylean.

He wanted to run into the house. The only thing he wanted was his mate in his arms, but Kann was in pain and struggling to lift the dead wolf.

“Why do you think the wolves were idiots?” Wrath lifted and swung the wolf body on top of the roaring fire.

“They didn’t know how to fight. Didn’t know how to maneuver. They were big and mean and tough, but they had no skills past that. They hadn’t been wolves very long.” Kann wiped blood from his hands on the already bloody blue t-shirt he was wearing. He had a few bad slashes on his arms and a deep one on his ribcage.

“You need to get to the bunker and let the magick-benders fix you up.”

“Yeah, I’ll not be leaving until I see my mate and my kids. Was it Tai that got Leif? More wolves?”

Wrath’s fangs lengthened. He was losing control. His dragon needed Rylee. He needed Rylee. “It was a slaughter. The man didn’t have a chance. We watched part of the footage.

Humans started it. They work for Tai. Tai showed up late and shifted and killed Leif, no mercy, no reason.”

Kann snarled and rolled his neck. The lion shifter’s fangs descended, and the man growled from deep in his chest. “I’ll tell you why. It was to hurt us. Tai knew exactly what he was doing. This was coordinated. He wasn’t here himself. Too much of a coward, and then he sent more cowards here to threaten our families.”

Wrath couldn’t hold back his roar. Heat flared from his body, melting snow in every direction. His vision changed to thermal. If he wasn’t careful, he’d lose control and shift.

Kann’s expression softened. “Hey, man. She’s okay, I promise. She’s inside with my mate and the kids. Penny picked them off from the top terrace. She took out quite a few. Once Naomi got outside and shifted, pretty sure they knew they were in deep shit. Me and Aarav’s brothers took off after the runners once Naomi cleared most of the pack.”

He ran his hands over his face and into his tied back hair. “Damn. I thought Col was fucking scary. You do not want to threaten a momma dragon. Course my woman was damn scary with that sniper rifle too. So maybe you don’t want to threaten a momma in general.”

He threw a wide grin and nodded toward the house. “Come on. Let’s go check on our badass women. Col and Naomi are gonna end up pregnant again before they come back inside the cabin. Knox, Katherine, and Aarav are standing guard.” He pointed to the three Reylean’s that’d shifted and spread out around the cabin—a black wolf, a white one, and a massive sandy-colored saber-toothed lion.

Wrath scanned the treeline, allowing his eyes alone to shift and use his dragon’s heat vision. “Are we sure they’re all

gone? Where are Raj and..." He took another long inhale. "Shenn?"

"Cleaning up in the river. I passed them on my way back with that wolf. They're headed to the bunker to check in and make sure there's not another group of wolves. The bunker is solid though. Penny said someone would need heavy ordnance or a tank to get inside her batcave."

Wrath followed Kann's quick pace back to the cabin, barely able to keep himself from running. His dragon was chanting *mate mate mate* inside his head. Kann's lion was probably doing something similar.

Kann made it to the front door first. He threw it open. "Penny?" he bellowed.

"Upstairs, babe," Penny responded, her voice slightly strained.

Kann heard it too, and his pace quickened. Wrath was a half a second behind him. Something was wrong.

They came barrelling up the stairs only to stop at Penny's raised hand.

She was standing in front of the nursery door, talking in a soft low voice. "It's okay, Rylee. I promise. Open the door, hon."

Kann stepped up beside his wife quietly and kissed her. "What's going on?" He kept his voice low and calm.

"Move. Penny. I need—" Wrath stepped forward, ready to take the door off its hinges.

Penny shook her head and snapped her gaze to Wrath's. "Don't you fucking dare."

Wrath froze.

“She’s singing a lullaby. The babies are calm. I can hear them all. I think she’s probably in shock... She locked the door and won’t open it.”

More footsteps on the stairs behind them made Wrath turn slightly. Col and Naomi came into view a few moments later.

“What’s wrong?” Naomi spoke first.

“Wrath, she needs you.” Penny was talking to him again.

Rylee needed him. Of course she needed him.

“I can’t even imagine how scared she is and what she might’ve seen during the fight.” Penny and Kann stepped back away from the door.

“I can break the door,” Col said, his voice a deep growl. “Move.”

Naomi grabbed his arm. “No, you don’t. That poor woman has been through enough. She doesn’t need the trauma of you busting through a door and scaring her even more. She needs Wrath.” Naomi motioned him toward the door and Penny stepped back, pulling Kann along with her. “Don’t you break that door either, you hear me?”

Wrath gave Naomi a polite nod of acknowledgement and stepped up to the door. He raised his palm to the heavy wood.

“Rylee. *Shuarra*. You did good. The babies are safe. Everyone is here. Open the door, *shuarra*.”

He could hear inside the room like all the other worried parents behind him. Her voice was soft and repeating a few short lines of a lullaby over and over. The younglings were quiet and listening to her. Nothing *sounded* wrong, except that Rylee wouldn’t respond.

Mate. His dragon pushed from inside.

He started to push the beast back down, but then thought better and let the dragon rise closer to the surface. His chest rattled, and he let the dragon call to his mate. The women in the tribe called the sound a purr, and it'd already calmed Rylee more than once.

Within seconds, he heard her footsteps crossing the room.

"Wrath?" Her voice was tiny and thin and filled with doubt.

"*Shuarra*, let me in. I'm here. You're safe."

The doorknob clicked, and a second later, the door was thrown wide and his mate was climbing into his arms. She was sobbing into his shirt, crying about wolves and a dragon and lions and how she was crazy. Then she said something about telling the babies they were safe.

"Yes, love. The babies are safe. So are you." He moved aside, Rylee tight in his arms, so the parents could get inside to their little ones. "You did so well. I'm proud of you." He kissed the top of her head and let his dragon continue to rumble.

She burrowed deep into his arms, her head directly against his chest.

"Take her back to your place, Wrath. We're good here for a while. Tai's not coming back until he licks his wounds. She's going to need to talk once she comes out of this shock." Naomi held her two daughters up and nuzzled their faces then looked back at him. "Be patient and be honest. It's time."

"I'll set the perimeter cameras on alert. If I see anything, I'll radio you," Penny said, picking up one of her babies.

Wrath nodded. "Thank you." Then turned to Col. "Alpha?"

“Go. We hunt tomorrow.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

WRATH

He hurried down the road toward his cabin, unwilling to put her down for even a second to drive. She was safe in his arms. His chest swelled and cracked. If he hadn't been focused on purring for her, he'd have been shaking like a leaf.

He kept hugging her tighter and tighter. Wrapping his arms around her, enveloping her completely. He could've lost her.

The snow melted around him with each step. He was running hot, but he couldn't focus on that. She would be asking all those questions soon enough. There was no reason to hide anything any longer.

Hiding the truth from Rylee had been the hardest thing he'd ever done.

He wanted her to love him. He wanted her to accept him. But he needed her to love and accept every part of him.

He got them into his cabin and back to his room. Then set her gently on the bed. He wanted to continue holding her, but his pants were wet from the snow, and he wanted to be in bed with her more.

He kicked out of his boots, pants, and then stripped out of his shirt. Rylee had stopped crying by the time they'd gotten to

the door of his cabin, and now she was watching him intently, her gaze hungrily devouring his naked form.

She grabbed the hem of her shirt and yanked it off, revealing that she wasn't wearing a bra. Her heavy beautiful breasts swayed again when she reached up to pull the colored band from her top knot of purple hair. Her pale skin glowed with the magick of Reylea.

His soulmate. The one promised especially for him. The one and only woman he wanted to mark and bond with for the rest of his life. The woman who would complete him. The woman he already loved with every breath he breathed.

Rylee shimmied out of her pants too and then crawled beneath the layers of blankets on the bed, leaving the edge turned back—a clear invitation to join.

Even though she still hadn't spoken a word since he'd picked her up from the nursery, she was communicating. She was telling him this was okay. That she needed this. Wanted him.

“Can you warm up the bed?” Not only had she spoken, she'd asked him to do something only a dragon could do. A tiny shiver shook through her body, and she looked up in the dim lamplight of the room and met his gaze.

Wrath cocked his head, surprised that she would ask him to do this like it was normal. Like she expected him to be able to snap his fingers and warm the bed.

He could.

His dragon could.

But when had she realized that?

“Of course,” he answered, crawling into the bed to join her. He moved to his side and let his inner fire rise. The icy sheets instantly warmed, and a soft smile of contentment spread across his mate’s face.

“I love that skill of yours.” She burrowed into his chest, and he pulled her close. Her breasts to his chest, hips, legs, as close as he could get her. Then stroked his fingers up and down the curve of her back, memorizing every inch he touched. The scent of her skin. The rhythm and sound of her heartbeat. The feel of her soft puffs of breath against his chest. He loved all of it.

“You know it’s not human, right? That skill.” He went for it. Threw it out there and waited for her whole body to tense. Waited for her to struggle against his hold and flee the bed in terror.

But she didn’t.

There was no tension.

No pulling away.

“I know.”

The quiet answer made his heart race and his stomach coil. What did she know? Had the women told her something? What had she seen during the fight? Would she still leave him when she knew everything?

Her fingers traced along his abdomen, lazily drifting toward the tip of his very erect shaft. “Everyone out here is something. Aren’t they?”

“Most.” The word came out of his throat like a bullfrog had lodged itself in the back of his mouth. He bore down on his panic. He didn’t want to lose her, but he couldn’t keep his secrets any longer.

“You and Col and Naomi all have this nifty heat trick, and you all dress like it’s summer in Texas when it’s winter in Alaska. I heard Naomi’s voice change into a roar when those wolves attacked. And then I heard the same roar from an animal that could only be described as a dragon or a dinosaur. I only saw it for a brief moment ... but it was her, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, Naomi is a dragon. And Col.”

“And you,” she said, her tone breathless and unsure. Her heart raced in her chest, but she still wasn’t pulling away. Not yet. “The conspiracy theories about the portals that appeared around the world are true?”

“Yes.” Words wouldn’t come out. How much should he explain? How much did she know or had she already seen? He wanted to tell her everything, but what if it was too much? What if he still managed to scare her away?

She *knew* he was a dragon. But *knowing* and *seeing* were still different things.

“Are some of you prehistoric-looking lions?” She snuggled closer, and her hands drifted even closer to his cock.

Her behavior calmed some of his worry. Surely, if she was scared, she wouldn’t keep her hands on him. She wouldn’t want to touch someone she considered a monster.

His dragon purred softly, encouraging her to explore further.

A soft laugh came from the woman in his arms.

“You’re humming again.” She grabbed his cock and wrapped her small fingers around the girth and stroked.

Wrath groaned and fought the urge to come right then and there like an unpracticed teenage boy. Her hands were like

heaven. “Rylee. *Shuarra*.”

Her breath caught at his voice, and her hand tightened. She slid her hand up and down. Then she added her other hand. She paused and rubbed her thumb over the tip. She had all the power, and he was along for the ride. And what an amazing ride it was turning out to be.

“Are there lions?”

“Yes, there are lions. You know I would tell you all of this even if you weren’t stroking my cock.”

Her hands paused and she moved a little so she could look up at him. Their gazes met, and she gave a slight gasp.

He’d made sure his magick was showing. His eyes would be glowing gold in the dark, illuminated by the same magick that made her body glow for him.

“Why now?” she whispered, her voice so low he could barely hear her over the pounding of both their heartbeats.

She’d started stroking again. His gut tightened. Her touch was making him crazy.

“You were scared because of what you saw. I couldn’t not tell you.” He paused, swallowing the fear that spiraled in his gut. “I was afraid to scare you away.”

“I would’ve been scared to tell you something like this too.” Her hands kept moving, never using the exact same stroke more than twice in a row. “I mean how do you explain to a normal person that you can turn into a dragon?”

Wrath rocked his hips into her hands, unable to hold completely still any longer.

“You don’t. We would be hunted down and killed or worse if the public knew what we were capable of. But lying to you,

hiding it from you was the worst feeling I've ever experienced."

Her hands didn't stop, even when he was talking. "Thank you for trusting me."

Wrath growled, hummed, a low pleased sound. He gritted his teeth and slowed his movements, controlling himself for her. So she could enjoy his body the way she wanted.

"Our world was made up of tribes. Dragon. Lion. Wolf. Tiger. And others."

"There's a tiger?"

Wrath groaned and buried his face in her neck, breathing in her sweet scent. "Yes. You haven't met him. He and Dawn are still in Anchorage."

"And you all can shift into these different animals."

She moved from his arms, slithering down deeper into the bed. A moment later her mouth was around the head of his erection, and her hands were gliding up and down his shaft.

He gasped, reaching for her head. His fingers gathered her hair into his fist and tugged enough to see how she'd respond. And respond she did—her efforts doubled. Wrath groaned and focused on not coming too fast, but she was trying his willpower.

One of her hands moved to cup his balls.

He couldn't hold still. He couldn't stop himself from pulling her hair and guiding her mouth to take him even deeper. His hips flexed, and her tongue swirling around him had his eyes rolling into the back of his head. The feel of her mouth. The sensation. It was heavenly. Otherworldly. Magickal. There weren't enough words to describe it justly.

His brain was short-circuiting. His lungs were empty of air. Everything in his whole world was centered on the woman with her mouth on his cock. Every sense. Every cell in his body.

“Rylee, I’m going to come,” he said, his words strained.

She didn’t let go. Even when he tugged on her hair, she pushed him deeper into her mouth and made little determined growling sounds.

His hips flexed again, pushing his full length deep into her mouth. He heard Rylee gasp for breath, swallowing hard. The feeling of euphoria spread through his entire body.

“Rylee,” he said, a louder growl this time. He tugged her hair again, and instead of pulling away, she attacked him like she was starving, and he was her last meal.

He was nearly there. His hips were bucking. And then he pulled her off, just before he lost control.

He reached beneath the blankets and wrapped an arm around his mate’s waist. “Wrath, I was—”

But he wasn’t having it. He needed to be inside her.

He pulled her close, chest to chest. He was up on his shins and her legs fell to either side of his thighs. His cock prodded her very wet center.

Wrath wrapped one hand into her hair again, angled her mouth, and kissed her hard. Hard and full. His tongue dove into her mouth, demanding hers to participate.

She did. She rocked her body against his. Raised her hands to his head and wrapped her fingers in his hair, pulling him closer. Opening herself up for him. Her breasts pressed against his chest. She gasped for air between kisses.

“Wrath, please—” Her legs squeezed over his thighs. She needed him as much as he needed her.

He leaned forward, catching their weight with one hand. He dropped her gently to the bed and moved to taste each of her breasts in turn, spending a good deal of time with her perfectly pink little nipples. He teased until she was gasping and writhing underneath him.

His cock prodded again at her entrance, and she rocked her hips, making little noises of encouragement. Or demands. Maybe both.

“You are the most beautiful woman, my Rylee. Fucking gorgeous and all mine.”

“Yes. Yours.” She repeated, her eyes opening wide and meeting his gaze boldly. “Please.”

He slid deep and buried himself inside his mate. Her hips cradled his body, and her smile broadened. Her eyes were hungry, and her whole body quivered. She wanted him. She knew his secrets, and she still wanted him.

He would never crave another woman the way he desired Rylee. She was his *shuarra*. His fangs lengthened in his mouth, but he pushed the overwhelming urge to bite and mark her away. She hadn’t yet said she loved him. She hadn’t yet agreed to stay with him forever.

He would never take that choice from her. He couldn’t.

Her body clenched and fluttered, clutching at his cock, reminding him to focus on her experience. His mate hadn’t come yet.

She was trembling and desperate for the release she hadn’t found.

He slipped a hand between their bodies and found the sensitive little nub right above where they were joined. His shaft slid easily in her arousal. He spread it over her clit and rubbed in small teasing circles, pushing and pulling his cock until she was a bundle of over-sensitive nerves about to explode.

“Wrath.” His name was a plea on her lips.

“Come for me first.” He growled into her ear. “Now.” He pinched her clit and drove his body hard, filling her completely.

Her back arched, pushing against his weight. Her body clutched at his, and she screamed as her release crashed over her like a wave breaking on rocks. No control. She broke around him.

He drove into her again. Pinched her clit again. And she screamed a second time. This scream morphed into a cry of pure ecstasy.

Then he thrust harder. Faster. Over and over into her pulsing still-fluttering body. “Mine. Mine. Mine,” the word tumbled from his mouth with each drive of his cock.

On the last thrust, he roared. And he didn’t hold back. He let his beast shout in satisfaction. He poured into his mate, filling her with his seed. Filling her with his promise.

His voice was raw, and he gasped for breath, sinking into the softness of her body beneath him. The silky slickness of her heated skin. The softness of her breasts. The little puffs of air from her panting breaths hit his shoulder.

He wanted to exist in this moment as long as possible, but he couldn’t stay on top of her. Not for too long. He thrust one

more time and then took her and rolled with her, he was under her, and she was spread over his body like a blanket.

His cock had pulled free of her in the process, but he wanted her as close to him as he could keep her. And she calmly let him arrange her over him. Pull the blankets up to cover them both.

She settled on top of him with a contented sigh, rubbing her cheek into his chest. Wrath stroked down her spine and then back up to her shoulders and ran his fingers through her hair.

Wrath listened to her heartbeat slow and her breathing even out. Moments later, his mate was fast asleep, leaving him to his thoughts for what tomorrow would hold.

He would protect her. No matter what.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

RYLEE

“Where are you going?” Rylee reached for Wrath before he could get up from the bed. The last thing she wanted was to get out of bed today. “Stay.” She wanted to touch him more. Bask in his presence.

She didn’t want to dwell on the attack. On the wolves. On seeing *people* turn into beasts. The world was not as it seemed. Wrath had pulled back the veil on the supernatural, and she wondered what else could be hiding in the shadows...

“Later, *shuarra*. The truck’s here with furniture. Tor. Dawn. Ryder. Ava. They’ll be at the door shortly. I hear them coming up the drive.” The room was barely lit, but she could see a satisfied smirk on his beautiful face. Damn. She could stare at the man forever. She’d never get bored.

“Furniture? Oh. Already?” she said, trying to hide the wobble in her voice. “I hope you like what I picked.” Insecurities reared ugly heads in her psyche. What if he didn’t? He was a dragon. He was from another world entirely. What if he preferred to have an empty house? What if she’d picked things he hated?

Even as she thought it, she knew it was ridiculous.

“They drove through the night to get here for the hunt today. We’ll unload it and bring it in before we head over to the alpha’s—I mean Col and Naomi’s.”

“The hunt? The alpha? That’s what you call Col? Is he in charge?”

“Yes. All males in our tribe have pledged loyalty to Col,” he said, rising from the bed and pulling on a pair of gray sweats, leaving his chest bare for her to admire. “We’re going after Tai and his pack today. The wolves that attacked the cabin.” He slipped his feet into a pair of unlaced black combat boots. “Glad the women were able to get you to shop. The cabin will look better. More like a home.”

Rylee stared, taking in the whole crap-ton of information he’d dropped like it was nothing. They had an alpha. Like a pack of ... animals. Which made sense, they had animals inside them. And they were going hunting.

She wasn’t going to get to keep him in bed.

She wasn’t even going to get to stay in bed.

“The wolves?”

He looked at her, his eyes sparked with gold. She’d gotten used to seeing it whenever his emotions were up. She liked it.

“Yes. Tai is leading them. He never should’ve been allowed to leave Mystery alive in the first place. That mistake will be corrected today.” He leaned over the bed and kissed the top of her head. “Tor is on the steps about to knock. Could you please get dressed so I don’t have to murder my friends for looking at what belongs only to me?”

Her face heated. She flashed him a daring smile and yanked back the blankets, revealing her very naked body. “This?”

She loved the way his heat flared, warming the room like she was inside a sauna. His eyes became like molten steel—white hot. Then he growled, deep and low and rumbling.

It made her horny and wet and needy. Did he really have to go unload furniture right this second?

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

The knocking on the front door made him look up for a moment.

“Rylee,” he said, fangs lengthening in his mouth like a vampire from a supernatural TV show. *Holy shit. Wrath had actual fangs.*

But she wasn’t scared. In fact, she was surprised to find herself even more aroused. Was it a dragon thing? Was he changing? Would he bite her? Did she want him to bite her?

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

“I’m not stopping you,” she said, her tone light and teasing. She couldn’t stop staring at his fangs. What would it feel like if he did bite her? What would it mean?

He noticed and covered his mouth with his hand. “Forgive me.” When he removed his hand, the fangs were gone. Only normal human teeth showed. “I can explain—”

“Are you like a vampire?”

One of his eyebrows quirked. “I don’t know what that is.”

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

“Tor, fucking give me a second,” he bellowed at the open bedroom door and then looked back down at her. “What is a vampire?”

“They bite people and drink their blood.”

His stunned expression made Rylee snort out a laugh. “They aren’t real. They are scary stories people have made up. Course I used to think werewolves and dragons were fake too, so who knows.”

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. The knocking was more insistent this time.

Wrath growled and then stomped out of the room. She heard the door open and him talking to someone. Several someones.

She slipped out of the bed and into clothes so she could help or watch the procession of furniture. She could barely remember what she’d ordered. Naomi and Penny had kept on telling her things she would need—like they would be hers. Like she was staying here forever with Wrath.

She was, wasn’t she?

She wanted to stay with Wrath. Even after the big reveal that he wasn’t quite human. That most of them weren’t.

Being anywhere else, going back home, none of it sounded right. Being with Wrath. That felt right.

Rylee poked her head around the hallway. Wrath and a huge red-headed beast of a man were carrying in the light blue-colored couch. It had a chaise at one end and would wrap the room and face toward the beautiful wall of windows.

“Rylee, this is Tor,” Wrath said, tipping his chin toward the man at the other end of the couch. “His wife is Dawn.”

“Hi!” A petite blonde woman stepped out of the shadows of the entryway. Rylee hadn’t seen her yet. She was holding a big box. “Where would you like me to put the curtains?”

Another woman, much taller and a brunette, came through the doorway with a small end table in her hands. “Which room? I’m Ava by the way, nice to meet you, Rylee.”

“The bedroom please.” Rylee stood for a moment after Dawn and Ava disappeared into the bedroom. Tor. Dawn. Ava. Check. Check. Check. Okay. She could do this. It wasn’t like there would be a quiz later.

“Where would you like the couch, *shuarra*?”

She whirled to face Wrath. “Oh. There,” she pointed. “So it mostly faces the windows and the stove. Then if you want a TV, you can put it there on that big wall too.”

“Did you order a TV? I don’t remember seeing one on the list.” Tor asked as he and Wrath set down the first couch piece.

“No. I didn’t. Should I have?” She held Wrath’s gaze. She’d ordered a lot of things, but probably nothing a big mountain man deputy sheriff would like. She’d tried to get mostly oversized furniture so he would be comfortable.

“Not unless you want one. I mostly read for entertainment. Jack Ryan is quite entertaining. And there are these other books, archaeological thrillers, by Ernest Dempsey I really enjoy.”

This man would never cease to amaze her, would he... “You don’t own a bookshelf. I don’t know if I ordered a bookshelf. I didn’t—”

Tor laughed out loud. “You two are a pair. He didn’t want to furnish his place because he was worried his mate wouldn’t like something he picked, and you look terrified that he’s not going to like what you chose.” The red-headed man walked a little closer to Rylee. “I promise you. He’ll like everything if

only because you chose it. And if you didn't get a bookshelf this time, we can get you one next time."

A little bit of the tension in her chest released at his words. Was it really so simple?

Tor walked back outside, and Wrath walked straight up to Rylee and kissed her hard. Kissed her like he hadn't kissed her all night. Kissed her like the act of kissing was his favorite thing on the entire planet. Kissed her until she was breathless and warm and gooey on the inside.

"The couch is a great choice. And Tor's right, don't worry about what you picked. This is your home. I want it to feel like it." He pulled away and then left, following Tor out the front door.

Cold wind blew inside, and she shivered. The sweatshirt she'd put on wasn't super warm against the Alaska winter wind. And she still needed to put boots on, too.

The small blonde woman, Dawn, came out of the bedroom first, followed by the very tall, slightly pregnant brunette who'd introduced herself as Ava. "Why don't you grab some shoes and a coat? Wrath said you're riding with us into town. We're all meeting at the Community center for baby and toddler playtime."

"After what happened? Is it safe?"

Ava waved a hand in front of Rylee showing off where her fingernails had morphed into long sharp talons. "We'll be good. Promise."

Rylee gulped. "Are you both ... something?"

"Just Ava," Dawn said. "She's a Reylean bear shifter. Tor doesn't have royal blood, so I didn't change after we bonded."

Change? Bonded? What did it mean to bond? Would she change into a dragon if she bonded to Wrath? How did the bonding happen? They'd already had sex. Surely, he would've said something about her changing into a dragon...

"Is that why Naomi sounds like she's from Jersey, but she's a dragon? She changed when she did what you mentioned, bonding?"

Both women nodded their heads in sync.

"Royal bloodlines have the ability to change humans into Reyleans. Wrath did tell you about his dragon and—"

"Yes, we didn't get into the smaller details yet. Is he... I mean ... will I?"

Ava shook her head. "I don't think Wrath comes from a royal bloodline, so it's unlikely that you would be changed by your bonding. Have you felt sick or feverish at all since he bit you?"

Rylee shook her head and glanced around the cabin. "He hasn't bitten me."

"Oh, well then. You won't know for sure until that happens. Did you tell him you didn't want to bond? He said you were glowing for him, right?" Ava asked, keeping her voice low.

"Yes, but—I—well—it's been a rough couple of days. We kinda talked about more stuff last night."

"Well, that's some fortitude on his part. Once Reyleans find their mate, about the only thing they can think about is marking and bonding to them."

So the fangs were definitely for biting. Or marking. And bonding.

She'd have to ask Wrath what exactly that entailed and why he hadn't brought it up last night. Although, they had gotten distracted by each other. He'd been hesitant to share much of anything. She knew by his behavior he had been worried about how she'd react.

It was fair to assume that him wanting to bite and bond to her and possibly turn her into a dragon too, was something he'd purposefully avoided last night to keep from overwhelming her.

It was a lot to unpack. All of this was. All of them. The whole tribe. The attack.

In addition to the threat he'd been fighting since before she got to town, she'd brought another psycho to Mystery along with her.

Wrath and Tor and another tall well-built man walked into the cabin with the bigger half of the couch. Wrath had said his name ... Ryder. He was with Ava.

Within a few more minutes, they'd unloaded and set up a kitchen table and chairs, three bar stools, a coffee table, several lamps, and several rugs. Most of it was sitting in the living room. But it was here, and she felt a sense of belonging in seeing the emptiness of the cabin start to be filled.

It was the beginning of a home.

"Let me go grab my boots and a coat."

"Yep, we'll head out to the pickup and get it warmed up again." Dawn kissed her husband, and he nibbled at her neck and whispered something in her ear that made her laugh.

Ava also told her husband goodbye with a kiss and a hug.

The man was tall, like all the others, broad shoulders, long dark hair, and piercing brown eyes. He had that look about him, the one soldiers have who've seen horrors in war. But when he looked at Ava, Rylee saw all that pain reflected in his eyes melt into adoration and hope. Ava was that man's light.

She went back to the bedroom and put on her boots and picked up the heavy coat Naomi had given her a couple days ago. She slipped her arms into the soft, sherpa-lined garment and then looked up to see Wrath standing in the doorway.

He was beautiful and still half-dressed.

This little mountain town had delivered her a giant. He made the door seem small. He made her feel so small and protected.

His muscled chest would make Greek athletes jealous. Intense masculinity. Gorgeous. Beautiful. There wasn't a perfect word to describe the male beauty standing before her.

Black tattoos covered his shoulders, and the swirling lines continued down both his biceps and forearms. Forearms she wanted very much to touch.

His eight-pack of abs was bare, and the sweatpants hung low on his hips, showing off those very tantalizing male lines. She'd do about anything to lick along those lines.

Died and gone to heaven. There's no other explanation.

The room warmed with his presence. She had to fight the urge to cross the room and press her body up against his. The way his eyes burned, she wanted to disrobe and offer herself as a sacrifice for whatever he might want.

She licked her lips, and a low growl rumbled from his direction.

“Don’t look at me like that, *shuarra*. Or I won’t be held responsible for making you scream in pleasure while the others listen.”

Her whole body shuddered, and she found herself even more turned on by the scenario he’d described. Her hormones were in overdrive. That voice. Holy-growling-libido-revving. The deep, rich, baritone words stroked her like he’d physically touched her.

Her ovaries did some backflips, and she put a hand against the closest wall for support so she didn’t collapse into a lusty sex-crazed puddle at his feet. That would’ve been embarrassing.

Or would it?

A tiny whimper of need escaped her mouth.

He raised an eyebrow, like he was astonished that particular noise came out of her at that particular moment, but the burn in his eyes became even more intense. And then that familiar smirk curved his mouth. That beautiful infuriating smirk of male satisfaction. He knew she’d liked what he said. That she was aroused by the thought of people hearing her scream when he made her come.

“My sweet little Rylee, the things I will do to you when I get you back home.”

She breathed a little hard and held her chin high. “You better get back home. Safe.”

He crossed the room in a heartbeat and pulled her tight into his arms. “I promise. It also pleases me to hear you call this *home*.”

He guided her out of the doorway and then picked her up and carried her out of the cabin, tucked in his arms and his

warmth. He put her gently in the back seat of Ava's truck and kissed her again.

"Wrath. Wait. What if Jeff comes back? Or the other man? Is it really safe to go into town?"

"I wouldn't be sending you if I didn't think it was safe. I promise you. We have people trailing the man in the SUV. He's an hour away in the ski town south of Mystery. The community center is public. All the women will be there. I will be back soon."

Rylee nodded.

Wrath kissed her again and then shut the door.

"Be safe," Ava said to Wrath and looked over his shoulder at her husband. "Love you."

"Don't be stupid," Dawn called to Tor.

Tor chuckled and blew Dawn a kiss from the cab of the box truck before he climbed inside.

"We'll be in touch as soon as it's finished," Wrath said, speaking to Ava this time.

"We'll be at the community center until you get back. Katherine's got food and everything prepped for us to stay late if we need to."

He nodded and stepped back from the truck.

Ava slid the truck into drive, and it lurched forward, sliding a little in the snow before the tires caught a grip. A few seconds later, they were on the dirt road leading out of the tribe's large property.

Rylee turned and looked out the back window at Wrath. He stood there for a few moments with Ryder, and then they both

ran to the truck and joined Tor.

Now she had to get through the day, waiting for Wrath and the others to get back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

WRATH

Everyone was outside when Tor pulled up and parked the box truck next to Col and Naomi's cabin. Every single male member of the tribe, except the three younger wolves who were busy tracking Jeff's lackey.

"You aren't planning to fly are you?" Tor asked, opening the door to the truck and climbing out.

"No." Wrath looked at the clear sky. "Maybe if it was dark. But there's no way Col would want to risk it in the middle of the day like this."

Ryder climbed out first, and then Wrath followed after him, closing the passenger door behind him.

"Listen up," Col's voice rumbled across the open driveway in front of the cabin. "Ryder and Knox, you will lead the group. The tribe lions will shift as well and spread out to protect against a surprise attack. Wrath and I will follow on foot with Tor and Owen. Stay hidden. Everyone takes a rifle. We don't know what we're walking into."

Ryder walked to the deck in front of Col's house and took one of the rifles Penny had set out before leaving. He slung the rifle over his neck and then took a few steps and shifted into

an enormous black wolf, his back was easily up to Wrath's chest.

The wolf snarled and shook his head back and forth.

Knox followed suit, and shifted into his white wolf.

The tension in the air for the wolves was palpable. Tai had nearly killed Knox's mate Katherine. Ryder was feeding on Knox's energy. Wrath hadn't been in Mystery when everything happened with this wolf, but he wanted justice for his tribe and safety for the town he called home.

Today Tai would breathe his last.

Kann, Saul, Aarav, and his brothers all armed themselves and then shifted into their lions—equally as large as the wolves. The group of large beasts moved around to the back of the cabin where the wolves had emerged from the forest yesterday.

Wrath wished he was flying. Wished he could shift. His senses were better and his vision sharper as a dragon. Unfortunately, being the size of an eighteen-wheeler didn't lend itself to trudging through the forest tracking without calling a lot of unwanted attention.

It was going to be a slow hike through the woods.

Wrath took a rifle from Col's porch and slung it over his shoulder. He could still use his beast's senses and its vision, but it took a lot of concentration, and he couldn't hold it for long periods of time.

Tor fell into step right next to him. "It's because I'm orange. I'm like a walking construction sign drawing attention to myself."

Wrath couldn't help a snort of laughter. "That's not true, you blend into the scrub really well."

“Yeah, just not when the scrub is white,” Tor said, kicking through a mound of snow.

“Haven’t shifted in a while?”

“Been a few weeks since it was my turn. There’s so many of us, and the park rangers have been patrolling really close to the edge of the park lately.”

“Probably because we keep eating their animals. They know the boys run all over the mountain, I’m sure they worry about wolf prints the size of dinner plates.” Owen said, moving to walk a few paces ahead next to Col.

“Moose are good. The women like them,” Col said, with a nonchalant shrug. “We don’t take too many.”

Wrath watched the ground. There were multiple trails of wolf prints. Huge and easy to follow. “You know I caught some of the park rangers putting up wildlife cameras. We’ll have to be sure to let Callum and the other two boys know to be very careful where they shift if they aren’t on our land.”

“We will warn them. Are the camera’s close to our property lines?”

“Yeah,” Wrath answered. “Some of them are facing our property too. We’ll need to plant more trees and scrub to obscure the view, but we don’t want to hinder our food supply migrating.”

One of the lions came loping toward Col and Owen, shifting before he got too close. It was Aarav. “Ryan is out here.”

Tension tightened Wrath’s chest. Stupid human. “Fuck,” Wrath growled under his breath. “None of our cameras picked him up?”

“We were all taking a beating last night. He’s just one person. And we don’t have people that watch the cameras 24/7.” Aarav pointed off northeast. “He’s tracking the wolves.”

“How did he know they attacked us last night?”

Wrath stared at the five men for a few seconds and then off into the forest. No one would have talked to Ryan last night. Neither he nor Aarav had been to the office. Patsy knew they had radios in the house, and she would’ve radioed or called if he came by looking for information on the investigation. That woman could hold a secret about as long as she could hold her breath.

Owen was the first to speak. “What if there were tracks at Leif’s?” We didn’t really look around because we weren’t going to track them from there. But what if he found Tai’s tracks?”

“Those are on the other side of the river on the south side of town. That’s miles from our property. He tracked him from there all the way here?” Aarav shook his head and rubbed his hands over the scruff on his face and then through his hair.

“Which means he likely saw some of them shift,” Wrath said, his voice deadpanned.

“*Dalmeck.*” Col’s voice was dark and deadly. “We’ve added enough insiders from the town lately. We don’t need a vendetta-carrying-military-trained liability also in the inner circle.”

“That’s saying he’ll still be alive when we catch up to him,” Owen added.

Wrath ground his teeth. Whether or not they needed another human insider, Ryan didn’t deserve to die.

Col heaved out a heavy breath and looked into the trees. “Let’s pick up the pace. Hopefully, we can stop him or save him from himself.”

Good. Col might not be happy about the situation, but he wasn’t going to give up on saving Ryan.

Wrath broke into a ground-eating jog, Tor in sync right behind him. Their footfalls were light on the snowy ground. He could hear the lions moving along to his left and right but couldn’t see them through the shadows of the trees.

The scent of wolves was stronger in the air, the further into the park they went. He could only hope the tribe didn’t catch the attention of the park rangers moving in such a large group during the day. But that wasn’t a problem for today. Focus was required. People would die today, and he needed to make sure it was none of *his* people.

SEVERAL MILES LATER, a scream of pain cut through the stillness of the forest. *Ryan*. The metallic scent of blood permeated the air along with the strong scent of unfamiliar wolves.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

More wolves.

Not just Tai.

Wrath could identify at least a half dozen individual scents.

Another scream tore through the forest. They had to get to Ryan.

Wrath and Col leapt into a run through the trees. His heart was racing. His dragon on high alert watching every movement, listening to every sound, scanning for heat signatures between the trees.

They came out into a clearing, and there they were. A big white wolf stood over a man on the ground. The same one from Leif's security video. It was Tai. He had Ryan by his shoulder and was tearing at him.

"Wrath get to Ryan!" Col's order rang through the forest.

At least six other wolves circled their alpha, protecting the murdering bastard. Five human men with rifles raised their weapons and fired.

Pain tore through Wrath's shoulder.

White hot and searing.

Blood stained his shirt.

He roared and shifted with his next step.

Col shifted right next to him, the snap of his massive jaws making short work of the men with guns. As dragons, they were bullet proof against small caliber weapons.

The white wolf dropped Ryan, bloody and limp, to the ground and leapt away from Wrath's jaws.

Wrath's dragon roared, wanting to end the threat of the wolf and his team of thieves. The threat to his tribe. The threat to his town. The threat to his mate.

A giant brown, roaring bear ran right in front of Wrath's snout. Owen's bear slammed into the big white wolf, taking him to the ground.

Teeth and fangs snapped. Blood stained the ground.

Growls and snarls echoed around the small clearing. The lions were taking down the scattering wolves.

Wrath shifted back into a man and knelt at Ryan's side. He'd seen mangled bodies before, but Ryan was in bad shape. Bile crept up Wrath's throat.

"H-help. Me." The man's words were stuttered between labored breaths. "Please."

The gashes were deep. Each beat of his heart was killing him. There was no way to stop the bleeding fast enough. They hadn't brought any type of first aid with them.

"Hang in there, Ryan." Wrath pressed his hands against the biggest wounds on the man. The deep ones in his neck, but the gashes on his stomach were pouring blood too. He didn't have enough hands.

"Col!" The wounds needed to be cauterized. Fast. And he wasn't royal, he couldn't burn with his hands. He couldn't save him. Only Col might be able to save him.

Col appeared at his side a moment later. "Fuck. He tore him to pieces."

"I d-don't w-want to d-die. P-please." Ryan's voice was so thin. He'd lost so much blood.

Cole grabbed a stick from the ground and put it to Ryan's mouth. "Bite this."

The second the man bit down, Col placed his hands over the stomach wounds. The smell of burning flesh permeated the area, bringing even more acid up into the back of Wrath's throat.

But the screams were worse than the smell. Wrath would never forget Ryan's screams.

Col swapped places with Wrath and cauterized the neck wounds next, stopping the flow of blood from the largest wounds. Ryan was thankfully unconscious during those burns.

The others started gathering closer, creating a circle of protection. The sounds of breaking bones and tearing flesh were still present.

“Are they all dead?” Col looked up at Aarav.

“Yes,” Aarav answered, his voice solemn.

Col turned his head to follow the sounds.

Wrath followed his alpha’s gaze to where Tai had landed when Owen’s bear had attacked. Owen’s bear was still tearing into Tai’s body, even though the bastard was long dead.

Knox stood a few yards away, watching Owen.

No one moved to stop Owen.

Col looked down at Ryan. “Tai bit him. If we stopped the flow of blood in time, he’ll live.”

Wrath’s eyes widened.

Ryan would become part of the tribe if he survived.

In the chaos of trying to save his life, Wrath hadn’t registered that because Tai had been the one biting him, he would become a wolf if he lived. Tai and Knox both were royal blooded wolves—cousins.

“Let’s get him to the bunker so he can be looked after, and we can prepare him for what comes next if he makes it.” Col stood and turned to Wrath. “You’re bleeding, Wrath.”

“It went straight through. I’m already starting to heal.” No one needed to worry about him.

Col nodded and turned to the others. “Anyone else injured before we took out the men with rifles?”

“Only some scratches that are already healing. We are all well, alpha,” Saul said. “Should we stack the bodies to burn?”

“Yes. Nothing can be left for anyone to find.”

The men moved off away from them to collect the wolves and the men who had died in the fight.

Wrath stared down at Ryan. At the burned flesh over his wounds. At the pale color of his skin. His lips were dark. Cold. If the blood loss didn’t take him before the Reylean change took over, he’d die from the cold.

Wrath put his hands on the snow-covered ground and called up his heat. The snow melted around him first and spread out about ten feet. The air around him filled with steam as he turned himself into a source of warmth for the injured man on the ground.

Col turned and looked back at him. “Good. We’ll need that when we move him too. We can take turns so that he stays warm enough.” He walked toward the growing pile of bodies and shifted back into his beast. Col was bigger than Wrath as a dragon, though they shared the same onyx coloring.

He watched Col’s beast inhale and then breathe fire, burning away the death. Removing any trace a human might use to identify those who died in this clearing.

Owen’s angry growls had subsided. He’d backed away from the body, but he was still in beast form. And Wrath could hear Owen’s heart beating aggressively. The bear swung his big head back and forth and roared an angry, painful sound.

Owen, like Wrath, had lost all his family in the Exodus from Reylea. Except his sister Ava. Owen had been blessed in

that way.

Wrath was alone. No sister, no parents. No one from his entire family had made it through the portal.

Leif had become family. And now Leif had been lost too.

Wrath could hear the pain Owen was feeling in the bear's cries.

He'd cried like that when he arrived in this world. And he would cry like that again if anything happened to Rylee. Worse than that.

"Aarav."

The lion shifter turned away from the burning bodies and walked to Wrath.

"Have you heard from Callum and the others this morning?"

"No, they checked in last night. The SUV lawyer guy hasn't moved from the fancy ski resort about an hour south of town. Still no eyes on Jeff," Aarav answered. "I'll check in with them again as soon as we're in range."

"Thank you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

RYLEE

The community center of Mystery, Alaska was full of moms and kids and shouts of laughter. The big gymnasium had tables and chairs set up near the kitchen passthrough. There were groups playing games with toddlers. Mats for babies to roll around on with their mothers.

It was almost enough to make Rylee forget all the danger she'd faced over the last couple of days. She put a couple of small cinnamon rolls on her plate and went to sit near a group of older women, all with knitting needles and projects in their laps.

"I hear you've caught our deputy sheriff's eye?" The older woman next to her put her needles down in her lap and held out a hand. "I'm Mrs. Sampson, welcome to town, Rylee."

Rylee shook her hand and gave the old woman a surprised smile. Not only did she know that she and Wrath were together, the stranger also knew her name.

"Gossip in Mystery. It travels fast. It's a small town, and we don't have much to talk about. So you're the hot topic this week. You. Wrath. Your hair, which is fabulous by the way. I've never seen purple hair before."

Rylee smiled. “My hair is my fun and crazy thing. But how did you know about Wrath?”

Mrs. Sampson waved a hand across the room.

Rylee followed the gesture until her gaze landed on a small woman with gray hair and bright pink glasses. “Henrietta from the store.”

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Sampson chuckled and went back to knitting. “Tara’s mother was quick to pass along the information that the deputy was quite taken with a certain new visitor.”

Rylee’s face heated, and she smiled. “I’m pretty sure I’ll be staying here ... permanently.” The words were easier to say than she thought. Still, she was a little surprised that she came right out and admitted to a perfect stranger that she was staying in Mystery.

“Texas, right? Your accent has a little of that twang to it.”

She nodded. “Born and raised in Dallas.”

“What brought you to Mystery, Rylee?”

Rylee watched the woman’s knitting needles fly. She didn’t even have to look and the scarf or sweater or whatever it was in the woman’s lap grew by the second. “I needed to get away from someone.”

Mrs. Sampson’s features darkened. “You okay?”

“I will be.” And she knew she would. She knew with time and Wrath’s patience, she would stop being scared at every little thing. And she prayed that Jeff would finally give up and go back home.

“I’m sure that young man of yours now will make sure of it.” She flashed Rylee a reassuring smile.

“I think he will,” Rylee answered, her voice soft. Her attention drifted away from Mrs. Sampson and toward the group of women she was getting to know from Wrath’s family—or tribe.

Penny met her gaze from where she was sitting on the mat with her children and Naomi’s. She raised her hand and waved at Rylee, inviting her over. There were several other women there as well, pregnant and not. She’d been introduced and reintroduced to some. Their names were swimming in her head. It would probably take a few more times to really solidify them all.

They were so different and welcoming and easygoing about all this mate and magick stuff. They all had their crazy stories to share that had made her feel like she wasn’t so out of place. This whole afternoon had been filled with laughter and giggling and them giving her tips.

Before they’d even gotten to the community center, Dawn and Ava had filled her in on some backstory of the group. How some of the women were humans like her and some were from Reylea, a completely different planet and world. A world that had magick and shifters of all kinds. And a world that they’d been forced to flee for their lives before it burned.

She couldn’t imagine having to do that. Having to flee your planet? Not knowing where you were going or who would be there. Whether you would be accepted or not.

Wrath had done all of that. He’d lost his family. Ava had told her that. He had no one on this planet with him and had asked to stay with Col’s tribe after meeting one of the magick-benders who lived here—women who sounded similar to priestesses or perhaps goddesses? Although Heather—one of the magick-benders—seemed perfectly human to look at.

Wrath was here in Mystery waiting for his soulmate. Waiting for a woman to glow or shine with their old world's magick. And then he was willing to take that leap of faith that she was the *one*.

He made her feel like she was the one. She hadn't believed him at first, but she did now. There was this undeniable connection between them. The way he made her feel adored and cherished and exactly herself.

She was falling in love with him. With his tribe. With this town. All of it.

Love.

She was falling in love. It was hard to believe that she could have such strong feelings in such a short time period. But she did. She kept looking at the front door, expecting him to come walking inside any second. She couldn't wait to see him. Touch him. Hear his sexy voice rumble in his chest and his dragon purr because he loved her and wanted her, too.

She was in love with a man who could turn into a dragon.

A man with fangs.

A man who wanted to bite her and bond to her with some kind of magickal soulmate promise.

And she wanted all those things too.

Several little toddler boys started screaming behind her. Rylee turned and winced at the sight. They were about to knock over all the water pitchers and nobody was going to get there quick enough.

"Brandon! Stop."

"Matthew and Tristan, don't you dare—"

It was too late. One boy shoved another, and the card table jiggled enough. Four pitchers of water, koolaid, and tea cascaded from the table to the floor and partially onto the children.

Rylee popped out of her chair. “I’ll find the mop!” She’d much rather do that than attend to the now sobbing sopping wet children.

Mrs. Sampson murmured something after her about how sweet she was.

She hurried through the swinging door into the large kitchen with its mixture of commercial and home appliances. It was cobbled together and felt natural. They fed a hundred people at a time quite regularly from what she’d been told. Sometimes several hundred.

She went straight for the door in the corner. Mops were almost always to be found in closets. The door didn’t disappoint. Not only was there a mop and a rolling yellow bucket, there was a faucet at the perfect height to fill the bucket.

She poured in the soap and then turned on the water.

A shadow moved beside her. “I found the mop, I was putting some soap in the water to—” Her words left her when her eyes met Jeff’s. Cold terror gripped her stomach and squeezed. Her heart leapt into her throat.

“If you make a single sound, I’ll make sure your new friends and their children suffer.”

Fuck. She sucked down the scream clawing at her throat right behind her heart. “Please.”

“I like that word coming out of your mouth. You should say it more.”

The babies. The women. The gymnasium was full of mothers and children and grandmothers, granted a few of the women could turn into huge predatory beasts, but not without great cost to themselves. A cost they shouldn't have to pay for her bad luck with men.

"Why won't you let me go?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Because you're going to be my wife. Your money is going to buy me the next election for senator's position and beyond. You don't get to leave me, Rylee Florence." Each word was ground between his teeth. His face was red, and his jaw was flexing. His fists clamped open and shut at his sides.

"You're going to walk out this back door with me without a single tear. One signal from me, and this place becomes a news story with the headline: Massacre."

Rylee wiped the tears rolling down her cheeks, sucked back the sob, and swallowed down the bile in the back of her mouth. She didn't want to believe he would murder innocent women and children just to take her back to Texas and marry her, but she also couldn't risk it.

The vision of them all lying lifeless and bloody on the floor flashed through her mind. Wailing cries. Screams of pain and anguish. The whole town would suffer if she didn't go.

"I'll go. Please leave them."

He took a step back out of the closet and encouraged her to move forward.

She took two steps, and he roughly grabbed her arm, dragging her the rest of the way. His fingers bit into her arm like a tightening vice.

Pain shot through her nerve endings, but she didn't make a sound. She would protect those women and children, no matter what it cost her. All that mattered was getting Jeff to back off. To leave them alone and unharmed.

"You won't hurt them. Promise me." He was hauling her across the back parking lot now, toward a large black SUV.

Panic made her fight. She didn't mean to, but the vehicle was the same that she'd seen outside her house, outside the store. The man who'd tried to kill her. The man who'd tried to get onto the tribe's property.

Wrath said they'd been watching him. How did he get away?

She clawed at Jeff's hand and twisted her body, trying to break away.

Jeff grabbed her by the shoulders and slammed her against the side of the vehicle.

Her head bounced against the glass and the trim on the door.

"Shut the fuck up." His words were black and dark and filled with vitriol.

Black dots clouded her vision, like someone had splattered her eyeballs with paint. The ground spun, and Jeff's words echoed in her ears like she was underwater. Everything felt and sounded like it was in slow motion.

Her face felt wet.

And then she couldn't feel anything at all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

WRATH

Wrath practically leapt from the truck before Tor could even put it in park. He needed to see Rylee. Needed to touch her, smell her, everything. All of it. Forever.

Leaving her that morning had been torture.

After everything that had happened with Ryan, her fragile existence as a human was front and center in his mind. He couldn't change her into a Reylean. And he wouldn't wish being a dragon on her, not in this world where they were so feared. It was a hard life to hide what you were every second of every day.

Not being able to fly every day.

Not being able to feed.

But losing her to an injury or a sickness made him question his doubt.

"Wrath." Tor shouted at him.

But he was already walking through the front double doors of the community center. The large entry room was decorated for winter. Paper snowflakes hung from the ceiling. Crayon-drawn pictures of Denali and snow-covered forests covered

the walls from floor to ceiling. Katherine's after-school groups had been busy.

He pushed open the doors to the gym and inhaled.

He could smell where she'd been, but the scent wasn't strong enough for her to be in the room. If she wasn't in the gym, where was she?

His gaze flew from group to group to group. He accounted for every single woman. Naomi. Penny. Tara. Ava. Katherine. Dawn. Lorelei. Connie. They were all here and more. The magick-benders were both there too.

His heart climbed into his chest, and pain seized both his lungs. He couldn't breathe.

Something was wrong. He knew it.

"Rylee." Her name came out in a pleading breath.

"Wrath," Naomi called out, a bright smile on her face. There was no worry in her expression. Nothing. Was he overreacting?

The bathroom. Maybe she was in the bathroom.

"Rylee went to the kitchen to get a mop." She pointed to the swinging door on the far side of the room. "We had some toddlers crash into the drink table."

His pulse slowed slightly.

They weren't worried.

He made his way carefully through happy children running amuck in the gym. There were large bouncy balls, small bouncy balls, and things Katherine called noodles being wielded by children like swords.

He inhaled again, focusing on Rylee's scent. Then let his dragon push forward enough to change his vision. A quick scan through the wall of the gym and into the kitchen revealed nothing.

He rushed the last few yards to the door and shoved it open. "Rylee?"

The lights were on. But she wasn't here. A closet door was open across the room, and he could hear water running.

He ran toward the closet.

"Rylee." His voice took on a deeper worried tone. Panic crept into his heart like rivers of poison.

He got to the door. The mop bucket was under the faucet. The water had overflowed the bucket and the excess circled the drain right below, disappearing.

She'd been in the closet. She'd touched things here recently. He could smell her fresh scent.

But someone else had been here too. A male.

He ran for the back door and shoved against it, yanking it open so hard it slammed into the wall. "Rylee." He shouted her name into the parking lot behind the community center.

That's when he scented it.

Her blood.

Terror sliced through his heart like someone had run him through with a sword. Wrath couldn't contain his roar of anger and pain. He'd lost her. He'd failed her. He'd promised her she was safe, and someone had taken her.

How had that man gotten past them? Who was it? Where would he take Rylee? Back to where she'd come from? Texas?

“Wrath?” Penny’s voice called from the broken back door he’d crashed through. “Where is she?”

He turned and looked at Kann’s mate and roared again. He wasn’t mad at Penny, but everything inside him had reverted to his predator brain. All the anger. All the frustration. All the pain and fear.

His failure as a mate echoed in his mind again.

He’d told her she was safe, and it’d been a lie.

She’d trusted him.

Penny disappeared from the doorway, but Wrath couldn’t move. He didn’t know which way to go. Rylee’s trail ended there. The smell of gasoline and tire tracks in the crusty ice showed him plainly that she’d been put into a vehicle.

He looked up at the sky and screamed, a sound filled with torment and despair and remorse and outrage. He should be able to fly. He would be able to find her if he could be a *fucking* dragon. If he could just *be* what he was.

She wasn’t that far. The women hadn’t even missed her yet. She couldn’t be far. He could find her from the air.

He couldn’t lose her. He couldn’t let that monster of a man stalking her succeed in stealing her away. But he couldn’t betray his tribe either. And flying in broad daylight where anyone could see him.

He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t break their trust like that. He couldn’t endanger their lives. The lives of the young children.

“Wrath!” Naomi called his name this time.

He looked back at the doorway. The small but mighty alpha’s mate was beckoning him closer. She held a phone in

her hand. "It's Callum."

Callum. This was Callum's fault. He'd let the threat slip away. Wrath curled his lip and snarled, a very inhuman very dragon sound.

"Put it on speaker, *shuarra*," Col said, standing behind Naomi. "Control yourself, Wrath. That's an order."

Wrath swallowed his anger, but barely.

She touched the screen a couple of times, and the cowardly crying of a man filtered through. He was begging for his life. Begging them not to kill him.

"This male, how did he get here? Is it Jeff?" Wrath asked, bellowing toward Naomi's phone.

Callum's voice crackled through the speaker. "This man was a distraction. The one called Jeff, he drove into Mystery last night. He's got a plane meeting him at the airport to fly them out," Callum's tone was sharp and deadly and full of disgust. "Anything else you need from this worthless human? May we end his torment, alpha?"

"Yes. Finish him." The finality in Col's voice satisfied Wrath's bloodlust rage. He wanted to be the one *ending* that bastard, but Callum and the young wolves were half feral. The human male who'd attempted to kill Rylee more than once would suffer and wish for death long before it was bestowed.

Wrath clenched his fists and stared at the sky again, wishing he could leap into the air.

Col's hand settled on Wrath's shoulder.

"We will get her back. I vow this to you, Wrath." Col's eyes burned bright with his inner dragon. "Come."

"I will kill him."

Col matched his angry gaze and snarled. “I will help you.”

“Col,” Naomi spoke softly. “Be careful. We know this man is unhinged. Remember what he did to Rylee’s things in her house.”

Col turned to his mate and nodded. “There will be no trace of him left in this land, my love. He will never be a threat again. No one threatens a fated match and lives.”

“I know. I’m so sorry I didn’t realize he was here. We never thought—”

“This is not your fault, *Mahadhri*. Please don’t take on that burden.” Wrath took a step closer, shaking his head. “Don’t. This is my fault. It was my duty to protect her.”

“Ridiculous, both of you. This is no one’s fault but that arrogant bastard of a man who took her.” Penny threw a set of keys right at Wrath’s face. “Go get her, and bring her home.”

Wrath caught the keys to her and Kann’s red truck, parked only a few yards away. “Thank you.”

He and Col rushed to the truck and headed for the airport. They weren’t far. A few miles at most.

Mystery’s tiny airport was on the far east side of town. Only small planes could come in and out of town. There was time to catch them.

They made the last turn and took the road up onto the tarmac, but there were no planes in sight. “She’s not here.” Wrath put the truck in park and leapt out of the vehicle. “She’s not here. Alpha.”

He inhaled, searching for her scent. Fear, shock, worry and adrenaline mixed together, making controlling his dragon very

difficult. “Col, I—” He bent at the waist and pushed hard. He was so close to shifting. Panic was stealing his control.

“Someone is here,” Col said, and took off.

Wrath looked. Sure enough there was a man lying on the ground next to the storage building.

How had he not seen that too? Fire shot through his veins again. His dragon was angry. Their mate was gone. They were wasting time. His heart shuddered.

He shook it off and followed Col to the figure lying on the ground. It wasn’t Rylee, he could smell that much. It was a man. “Who is it?”

Col was helping the man sit up.

“Where is she?” Rylee’s scent was in the air. So was plane exhaust. They’d already taken off. But Alaska was a big place. And even a small plane could make it all the way down to Washington or Oregon if it had a full tank of gas.

The man groaned. “I was supposed to fly them down to Seattle. But the woman was unconscious and bleeding when he got there. And then she woke up once we were about to head down the runway. She started screaming and crying. I told him I wouldn’t fly, so he pulled a gun on me and fucking shot me.” He put his hand against his stomach where his shirt was wet with blood. “I hit my head hard when I jumped from the door, or I would’ve already called someone.”

Each of the man’s words made Wrath’s heart beat faster. “Was she injured?”

The man nodded, his expression grim. “Looked like a small gash on her head. Looked like blood had been wiped off her face, and there was some in her hair. I wish I could’ve done more.”

Wrath shook his head. He couldn't speak at that moment because his heart was exploding with new hope. Jeff wasn't killing her. He would've already done it if that had been his goal.

His heart started to pound again, tripping over itself with excitement and hope and determination. Rylee was safe for now.

Alive.

Another car pulled up onto the tarmac. Kann and Knox got out and rushed to them. "Do you know where to go? Did he see them?"

"Yes," Col answered. "Wrath and I must go. Now."

Knox looked first to Wrath and then to Col. Then he nodded and held out his hand to the human male. "Come, we'll make sure you get medical attention. What's your name, sir?"

"Greg Marks, thank you." He walked toward Knox, who turned him so he couldn't see Col and Wrath any longer. Then he hit him. Punched him right in the face.

Wrath's heart jumped inside his chest. "Wha—"

"Let's go," Col said, his voice deepening to a growl.

His alpha ran several yards and shifted into his dragon. Great black wings unfurled and beat and lifted him into the fading light of the dusky sky. He was magnificent. Powerful. And he was risking everything to help Wrath get Rylee back.

Wrath looked back at Knox for a second.

The male nodded and mouthed the word *go*.

Wrath needed nothing else. They'd knocked out the witness. Col was already climbing into the clouds.

He released the hold he had on his beast and loosed his dragon. Magick unfurled around him like a blast of heat from an oven, except he loved it. He relished it. It was an embrace between his soul and the soul of the beast.

Must. Save. Mate.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

RYLEE

R ylee gulped for air, but her lungs wouldn't obey. No oxygen. It was like the air inside the plane was gone. Like someone had vacuumed it all out and left her in an empty void of space.

She wanted to scream. She wanted to kick and fight and claw, but Jeff had a gun. He'd shot the pilot. Killed him. Right in front of her.

Would he really kill her too?

Where were they going?

How far would she be from Mystery?

What would Wrath do when he realized she was gone?

More tears prick at her eyes, because that was the only action she could afford. She couldn't try to overpower Jeff. She didn't know how to fly a plane. And she couldn't open the hatch and leap out of the plane.

She could barely move. Her hands were bound behind her back, and she was clipped into the seatbelt.

There was nothing to do but sit and wait for the scumbag to land and try to get her onto another plane.

He wouldn't shoot her for crying.

Her mind spun through details around her. Where was Jeff taking her? Anchorage was a short flight, but the sun was behind them, not beside them. East. Which meant he was likely headed for Seattle or Portland.

Would she ever see Wrath again? More tears stung her eyes, but she kept the sobs silent. She wouldn't give Jeff the satisfaction of hearing her cry. Even though the noise from the engine likely would drown out any sound she made.

How would she signal anyone for help?

Would anyone believe her?

Would he knock her out again?

He'd threatened her friends. Would he hesitate to threaten her family back home? Probably not.

When he'd shot the pilot and taken over the plane himself, he'd looked at her with such hatred. Cold. Calm. Calculated hatred.

She might be alive right now, but that wouldn't be the case for long. Once he got what he wanted, he'd discard her like a used napkin.

A wave of turbulence shook the plane for a few seconds.

Jeff messed with some controls and peered out the window on his left. Then looked to the right very suddenly, like he'd seen something that made him nervous. His hands tightened on the stick, turning his knuckles white.

Rylee turned her head and peered out the window on her right. She could see patches of snow-covered land, puffs of clouds, and blue sky.

Nothing that indicated anything was wrong. No flocks of birds. Nothing.

The plane shook again.

Wrath? Could it be?

Jeff slammed his hand against the console, rage and worry seeping from him like sewage from a leaky drainpipe. It poisoned the air and made Rylee wish there was a way to press an eject button for her seat.

He bent and looked out the window on his left again. Then to the right.

The plane jumped hard, and Rylee felt weightless for several seconds. The plane was sinking straight down, giving the feeling of falling like she was trapped in an elevator with no brakes.

Then the plane stopped falling. It stopped like something caught it.

A flash of black swept by her window, and an unearthly roar of anger she recognized and welcomed to the very depths of her soul shook the plane.

Wrath.

Jeff was unbuckling his seatbelt. He was looking at her. He had a gun in his hand.

Then the plane split apart.

Just broke into two pieces.

She screamed, except no sound came out. Panic clawed at her like a wild animal. He'd come for her, but all she could see was an angry dragon. And the plane had been torn in half.

Jeff clung to the back of the pilot chair in the front piece of the plane. A giant claw encircled the cockpit. A huge black-scaled claw with talons as big as her whole body. Jeff was yelling at her and waving the gun, seething and infuriated. Like he wasn't in a plane that had been ripped in half. More like he was throwing a temper tantrum that his toy had been stolen.

And then the next moment, that part of the plane was flicked away. And Jeff along with it.

Just gone.

Tossed away at ten thousand feet like trash.

She thought she would feel something, but all she felt was relief.

Her chair creaked and groaned and then broke away from the other piece of the plane. The dragon was holding the back of the plane in another claw.

The chair rotated as she fell, and she could see the whole dragon for the first time. He hung in the sky like he owned it. His massive wings and powerful body were magnificent and breathtaking.

The rush of icy wind stole her screams. She closed her eyes against the pain. She was still trapped in a chair with her hands tied behind her back. Except the chair was hurtling toward the ground like a missile.

Another roar tore through the loud sounds of the wind in her ears. She couldn't open her eyes. The wind hurt too much. Then another roar. And another.

They weren't the same dragon.

Their voices were different.

Then something snatched her out of the air. Her head whipped back and forth from the momentum, and then she wasn't falling anymore.

It was dark.

The chair was lying on its side. She was on her side and her face was against something ... warm. And she was still moving, but it was controlled. And somehow, she was shielded from the wind.

Wrath. She knew it was him. The dragon holding the plane had been one of the others, but Wrath was the dragon holding her now, tight to his body. Wrath had her. He'd come for her.

They'd risked exposure to save her. What if someone had seen them? Filmed them.

Her heart twisted in her chest, fear crystallizing in her veins even though she was surrounded by warmth. They were moving, flying. She could feel the momentum.

Every second they were dragons was another second they were endangering themselves.

The feeling of rising and then falling and then stillness settled over her. The claw clutching her opened, revealing the fading light of the sunset. With slight maneuvering the beast got the chair settled on the ground, in the snow, upright, with her still buckled up and unable to move.

Holy shit. He was huge.

She'd gotten a glimpse of Naomi during the attack, but that was only in passing, out a two-story window, with so much adrenaline running through her body that she'd seriously considered her mental stability.

But this dragon was right in front of her.

His snout was the size of a truck. And his teeth were really, really close to her body. She could feel his breath. In and out. Warm.

Every survival instinct should be screaming *run*, but she didn't feel fear. Instead, she reached out with her face and put her cheek against the smooth scales between the dragon's nostrils. And then she whispered. "I love you."

The dragon made a huffing noise, and a second later, Wrath stood in front of her. All six and a half feet of power and confidence and compassion. His brown eyes blazed with flames. And the air around her was still steamy and warm, which she needed because her poor body felt frozen.

More tears streamed down her cheeks, and a sobbing cry tore from her lungs.

His chest heaved, and he visibly shook.

"*Shuarra.*"

His. Wrath was calling her that special name that meant she belonged to him. She had feared she'd never see him again. Never hear his voice again.

There was no doubt left. Even with all the dragon stuff and magick stuff and who-knew-what-else. It didn't matter. Whatever came with having Wrath, she wanted it.

He knelt in front of her and ripped the seat belt loose from the chair with his bare hands. Then snapped the zip tie binding her wrists.

She threw her arms around his neck, and he stood, lifting her completely off the ground. Her legs went around his waist, and she pressed her body to his, removing every inch of space possible from between them.

His hands caressed her body, smoothing over her back and her arms and her butt and her legs, like he was checking to make sure she was all there and unhurt.

“I don’t know the word in your language to call you *mine*. But you are, Wrath. You are my home.” She swallowed a sob and pushed the words out. “I want to be with you. I love you.”

“You are my heart and soul,” he whispered into her ear, nipping at the earlobe. “I will love you with every beat of my heart from now until the end of my life. Thank you for this priceless gift, my love.” He squeezed her tight, nuzzled her face until she turned it to him and then he kissed her. Hard.

“I can’t lose you, Wrath.” She said the words against his lips.

“You won’t.” His hand moved to the side of her face and his thumb stroked across her cheek. She never wanted him to stop touching her.

WRATH

THIS WOMAN WAS EVERYTHING.

Everything he’d been waiting for. Everything he’d been searching for. Every promise and bargain and prayer he’d ever offered up to Fate. And she loved him.

She’d at last said it out loud—she loved him—and he could feel everything inside him snapping into place.

Her skin was iridescent and glowing with the soul call, and his dragon wanted to bite her—literally. He needed to bite her.

Make her his.

Bond them together for the rest of their lives.

“Rylee,” he said, pulling his mouth from hers a fraction of an inch. His fangs descended just a little. The need to claim her was screaming in his head.

She stared up at him with blue eyes full of attraction and excitement and desire. “Yes.”

He kissed her again.

Not roughly, not aggressively, but it wasn't tentatively either. He kissed her the way he wanted, the way he'd always dreamed he would kiss his mate. The way he would kiss the woman meant for him. The woman he would spend his life with.

She was so soft. Her curves fit perfectly against him.

He pulled her tighter and kissed a little harder.

He pressed his tongue deeper, tasting her and the low whimpering needy moan growing in her throat. He felt it all. Tasted every emotion.

One of Rylee's hands moved to his neck and then to his ear, tracing the lobe. So soft. So gentle. Like she was memorizing what he felt like.

Liquid fire burned in his veins.

Everything about her touch drove him wild, made his pulse pound, made his heart hammer, made all logical thought impossible.

He slid his hands down over her curvy ass and ground her body against his, pressing himself even harder to her core. He could smell her sweet scent. Her arousal filled his lungs like a drug driving his dragon mad with desire.

A sound of pleasure vibrated from deep in his chest.

He kissed along her jaw and down her neck and found himself nipping at the soft curve of her neck. The place he wanted to mark her and bind her to him forever.

“I want you as mine forever, Rylee.” The words came out half prayer, half plea. “I want to mark you as mine. Bind our souls together.”

He licked the place on her neck, and she shivered.

“I want that too, Wrath. I want everything with you.” Her voice was soft, but clear. “Please.”

He opened his mouth wider, allowed his fangs to descend all the way, and he bit down on her neck, breaking the skin, tasting her blood, and marking her as his forever.

She clutched at him, her hands tangled in his hair, but didn’t cry out. She clung to him like he was the very air she needed to breathe.

He felt the change between them inside himself. Things that weren’t aligned were. He watched the luminescence of the soul call fade from her skin. He felt the connection between them snap into place like a taut bowstring.

Her emotions. Her sense of being.

Everything reflected through their bond, and it was beautiful.

Everything was as it should be.

She was his.

He was hers.

They belonged.

EPILOGUE

TWO WEEKS LATER...

RYLEE

“Honey, I can’t believe you’re staying here permanently. You know it snows. A lot. Are you sure? If Wrath wants to move to Texas, I’m sure your father could put a good word in with the Chief of Police in Dallas.”

“Mom, you just got here. Could you hold off on the arranging-my-life talk for a few minutes?” They were almost back to Mystery. She’d had to bargain hard with Wrath to let her go get her parents by herself. A smug smile tugged at her mouth. Though, in her opinion, offering to let him have his way with her every night for a week sounded like a win to her. She had to find a way to excuse herself by seven p.m. each night. That’d been the harder end of that deal.

“I’m trying to make sure you’re not making rash choices. Don’t you agree with me, dear?” Her mother poked her father in the back, trying to get the silent man to jump into the conversation with her and back her up.

“I would like to meet the man that convinced our daughter to leave Texas before I make any assessment on my daughter’s state of mind.”

Her mother huffed and turned to look out the window.

“It is beautiful up here, dear, I could see why it would be easy to fall in love with this place. Even if they do have a lot of snow.” Her father’s voice was calm and warm, and Rylee appreciated that he wasn’t letting her mother’s worry color his opinion. “You said you made friends, too. I’m looking forward to meeting them.”

“I want you to be safe, sweetheart.” Rylee met her mom’s gaze in the rearview mirror for a second before putting her focus wholly back on the road.

A person couldn’t be too careful in Mystery, what with all the lions chasing moose. “I am safe. I’ve never felt safer than when I’m with Wrath.”

“Who names their child, Wrath?” Her mother mumbled under her breath.

“I for one think it sounds like a name from a romance novel. Is he from a romance novel you’re editing, Rylee?” Ayla grinned from the back seat next to her mother. Unlike her parents, Ayla knew *exactly* what was happening today.

Rylee couldn’t help the laugh. The truth paralleled fiction quite too closely in this instance. “Wrath is quite real, Ayla. Thank you very much.”

She pulled off the main road and parked at the Gas & Go. Her 4Runner needed more gas, and she wanted to see how Owen was doing.

While preparing for Leif’s funeral, he and Ava had found out that their friend had left them everything. The gas station. The mechanic shop. And the junkyard.

Today was the first day they’d opened the gas station since the funeral. “I’ll be right back. Dad, do you mind putting in the gas? I need to check on a friend.”

“Of course, hon.” He got out of the car, and Rylee hurried into the store.

The bell jingled, and she looked toward the register. There was a young man she didn’t recognize behind the counter, maybe nineteen or twenty. “Is Owen or Ava here?”

“In the back.”

“Rylee,” Owen’s voice echoed from the back room. The big burly mountain of a man appeared a few seconds later. His wife, Tara was right behind him.

The small woman ran to Rylee and hugged her. “You’re back!”

“I was only gone one night.”

Tara rolled her eyes. “For these men, one night away from us is like a month. I swear, all I’ve heard is how grumpy your man has been over the last twenty-four hours.”

Owen slid an arm around Tara’s waist and pulled her halfway up his body in a hug. “That’s why you’re never allowed to leave me. Who knows what I might do.”

Tara laughed and elbowed Owen. “Put me down, you barbarian.”

“Other than that, everything was good?” Rylee asked, not willing to admit she’d been a bundle of crazy being away from Wrath too.

“Everything is ready! Dawn and Tor went up to Fairfield to get the judge. He’ll be waiting at the sheriff’s office at noon. So you don’t have long. Are your parents excited?”

Rylee rolled her neck to the right and then the left, cracking several nervous vertebrae. “I—”

“Rylee.” Her name came out of Tara’s mouth like a scolding whisper.

“I wanted the drive to be pleasant. It’s four hours in the car with them. I’m about to let them know.”

“That you’re marrying Wrath in two hours,” Tara said, her tone dry and amused. “You really should.”

Rylee huffed out a long breath. “I’m going to tell them.”

“Tell us what?” Her mother’s voice sent tendrils of ice through her veins.

Rylee turned. Her mother stood in the doorway. Her father was right next to her, and Ayla was peeking over her mom’s shoulder shrugging her shoulders and mouthing *sorry*.

Fuck.

“Rylee Agatha Florence, are you pregnant?”

“Mom, no. Well, I don’t think I am. But that’s not the thing.” This was not going the way she’d planned. Of course she hadn’t planned. That was part of the problem. She’d just—avoided.

Her mother’s face was whiter than whip cream on an apple pie. “You don’t th—think you’re pregnant?”

“I’m on the shot. I shouldn’t be pregnant. Look, I—I didn’t want to talk about it all the way up here, but I’m getting married at noon. And I wanted you three here for it. And I wanted Dad to give me away. And I wanted you, Ayla, to be here with me.” Her words trailed off when her mother raised a hand. “And I—”

Owen and Tara stayed silent but didn’t back away. Rylee was grateful for the silent support.

“We haven’t even met the young man. And you’re telling us you’re marrying him at noon. Some deputy sheriff from Mystery, Alaska who you just met.”

“Mom, please. I love him. You know me, and I wouldn’t say that lightly. This man is the most important person on the planet next to you three. I can’t imagine not being married to him. Not seeing him every morning when I wake up. Not falling asleep in his arms every night. Not growing old together and having kids together. We fit. There’re no words I can use to describe it justly. We belong together.”

Rylee stared at her mom and dad. Her mom’s mouth snapped shut, but she didn’t respond. Her dad’s face was thoughtful. Still shocked, but not angry or disappointed. Not like the waterfall of emotions cascading over her mother’s face.

“Dad?”

Her father took a step forward and opened his arms.

Rylee ran into them, and he hugged her tight. “I want you to make smart choices and be happy, sweet girl. That’s all I’ll ever want. If this is what you want, then I’m behind you one hundred percent.” He took her shoulders and pushed her back so he could meet her gaze. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. And smiled. And tears rolled down her cheek. “So much.”

He smiled back and hugged her tight again. “Then I suppose we have a wedding to get to.”

“It’s more like a judge at the sheriff’s office,” she said, her voice muffled by his shirt.

Her mom made several unhappy squeaks before she formed actual words. “No. Wedding? Rylee, please.”

“Mom, Wrath and I want to be married now. If you want to plan a big white wedding like we...” She stopped, unwilling to bring up Jeff’s name.

Her parents knew what he’d done. They knew he was dead. And they knew that the police in Mystery had officially closed his death as accidental—crash due to pilot error. Which was easily believable because while Jeff had a pilot’s license, he rarely flew.

“I would love to have a party with all your friends and our family back in Texas. Maybe in the spring. But today, it’s about me and Wrath, and you guys being here with us for this special occasion.”

Her mother wiped a tear from her cheek and nodded. “I don’t want to miss out on those memories with you. You’re my only daughter.”

Rylee walked to her mother, and they hugged. “That’s why I pushed so hard for you guys to come this weekend. I wouldn’t get married without you.” She squeezed her mom and buried her face in her mom’s hair. The sweet scent of jasmine and home and safety filled her lungs. “I want those things with you too, mom. I need this with Wrath right now.”

“Because you might be pregnant?” Ayla teased from behind her mother.

Rylee glared at her friend over her mother’s shoulder. “You’re uninvited.”

Ayla snorted out a laugh. “Mmm, it’s okay. If more of the town looks like this guy over here—” She waved at Owen. “Do you have any single brothers?”

“No brothers.” Owen’s tone was amused, and he hugged Tara tighter.

The door swung open behind Rylee's parents, ringing the bell.

"Owen, have you seen—" A very relieved smile spread over Knox's face when he saw Rylee. "Thank fate, we can tell him you're back. He was about to send us down the highway to find you."

Rylee smirked at Knox and Kann. "He's quite impatient."

Ayla walked over to Rylee and leaned close. "Let me guess, neither of these are available either?" If a woman could've been caught drooling, her poor friend was dead to rights. Ayla was staring at Knox and then at Kann and then back to Knox. "I see why you want to stay."

Rylee shook her head. "Sorry, no. Ayla, this is Knox and Kann. Both are married, and Kann has quadruplets with a lovely woman named Penny."

Ayla pressed her lips together and then smiled like a cat that'd caught a mouse. "Understandable. Pretty sure my ovaries just dropped several eggs."

"Ayla!" Rylee scolded her friend.

"Either of you have a single brother?" Ayla asked innocently.

Kann shook his head. "Nope, but Aarav does."

Ayla mouthed the words *there are more* to Rylee and didn't bother containing her squeal of excitement. "Will they be at this small ceremony?"

"No, they won't. They left with the fire and rescue to help out with a minor avalanche in the park." Rylee herded everyone back to the door. "Can we please focus on me getting

back to my man and getting hitched today? You can drool over the locals later.”

“You can’t blame a girl.”

Rylee flashed her a wide smile and then waved at Owen and Tara. “I’ll see y’all later.”

Tara nodded and waved back.

It only took a few more minutes to get everyone back into their vehicles and then a few more minutes on the road before she was parking in front of the sheriff’s office.

A peaceful calm had settled over her mind. Her parents knew. They weren’t still freaking out. They were good with her choice. They were letting her make this choice, even though it was uncomfortable for them.

This was what she wanted with her whole heart.

He was.

Wrath was standing on the steps waiting. All handsome in his uniform and broad-brimmed hat. Sexy dark eyes stared at her with a fire that promised to warm her later. Just like the first time she’d seen him outside the store.

Seeing him made her whole body light up. She could feel his joy mixed with her own. Feel his anticipation. Feel his adoration. She wanted to be with him all the time. It was an obsession. An obsession she intended to cultivate for the rest of her life.

She jumped from the vehicle, and he was there beside her, pulling her into his arms before she could take one step in the slushy, snow-covered parking lot.

He was so warm, and he smelled so good. She nuzzled her face into the crook of his neck. “I missed you,” she whispered.

“Not as much as I missed you, *shuarra*. You’re not allowed to leave overnight again. It was simply unbearable.” His arms squeezed her tight, and then he proceeded to feel all over her, like he was making sure she was all in one piece. “The things I will do to you tonight.”

Damn. This man. The timbre of his voice made her insides melt. It was like he’d found a way to speak *sex*. She could feel the rumble and promise of it on her skin.

She clung to his shoulders for support, digging in her fingernails, and praying that when he slid her back to the ground her knees wouldn’t give out. She gave a little shudder, and he chuckled.

A low cough from behind Rylee shocked her system.

Shit. Her dad had watched her climb Wrath like a tree, and then Wrath had felt her up while not only her dad watched, but her mom and her best friend as well.

He was magick. Every syllable and sound when he spoke eliminated her ability to think complete thoughts.

She tapped Wrath’s shoulder, but he didn’t put her down. And she could feel he had no intention of doing so anytime soon. So she turned in his arms and faced her family. “Mom, Dad, Ayla, this is Wrath Di’Lasha.”

Ayla was grinning wider than a dog who’d been offered a porterhouse steak. She’d never hear the end of it from her friend. Which was fine.

Her mother stood open mouthed and speechless. And her father looked about the same.

“Wrath, these are my parents and my best friend.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Florence. And Ayla, so good to meet you as well. Thank you for coming all the way to Mystery to celebrate with us today.” He gestured toward the office. “Please join us inside. The judge is already here and eager to start so that he can get back home before darkness falls today.”

Once inside the building, Wrath reluctantly set her on the ground. Kissed her hard and then pushed her toward Patsy’s desk. “We have to sign this paper and then the judge can start.”

Rylee leaned against him and inhaled. She really had missed his smell. His warmth. His voice. Everything about him. Her whole body was more relaxed now that she was back.

She hadn’t thought being gone for one night would make such a difference. But it had.

“I missed you,” she said, soft enough so that only he would hear.

A soft growl rattled in his chest. “Good.”

“My mom wants me to have a big wedding celebration down in Texas later. Will you come to Texas?”

His lips curved into a smile, and his eyes flickered gold. “I would be honored. It would be a pleasure to see where my mate grew up.”

Rylee’s heart swelled in her chest. She was getting her quick wedding today, no fuss, no muss, and then she and Wrath would be officially husband and wife. She would get to have a wedding back home with all the fuss her mother loved.

Her family would get to share today with her and the wedding in the future.

Win. Win.

She scribbled her name next to Wrath's on the marriage license and then turned to face the judge.

"Very good. I was told you have your own vows."

Wrath nodded.

The room fell silent, and Rylee took a quick glance at her parents. They were both teary eyed, but smiling. Ayla was wiping tears too. Kann and Knox were there. Penny and Katherine had snuck in when she wasn't looking. Patsy was dabbing her eyes with a tissue, and the judge was waiting patiently for one of them to start.

She took a deep breath and looked up at the man who'd changed her life. The man who'd shown her love like she didn't know existed.

I love you. She mouthed at him, not able to keep from grinning like a crazy person.

His dark eyes twinkled with gold flecks of magick. He took her hands in his and spoke, his voice dark and deep and delicious. "I love you, Rylee. With every breath in me and every beat of my heart. I vow to protect and cherish you until the end of my days. You are my joy and the light in my soul. I can't wait to build a life with you. Raise children with you. Grow old and laugh with you. You are mine, *shuarra*, and I am yours."

Tears pricked at the back of Rylee's eyes. "You are everything I didn't know I needed, Wrath. I love you so much more than I ever thought it possible to love another person. Every single breath. Every single heartbeat. I want them all to be spent with you. Laughing and loving and living an adventure we'll never regret."

The next few minutes were a blur.

They were married.

Wrath was kissing her again.

People were cheering.

Wrath was still kissing her.

And she was so happy she thought her chest would burst. She'd come to Mystery, alone and afraid, and Mystery had given her more than she ever thought possible.

It'd shown her true love wasn't just a fairytale in a book. Or stories people told each other.

True love was real. And alive. And scary. And exciting. And he kissed really, really well.

Thank you for reading *Been There Dragon That!* I hope you enjoyed Wrath and Rylee's story.

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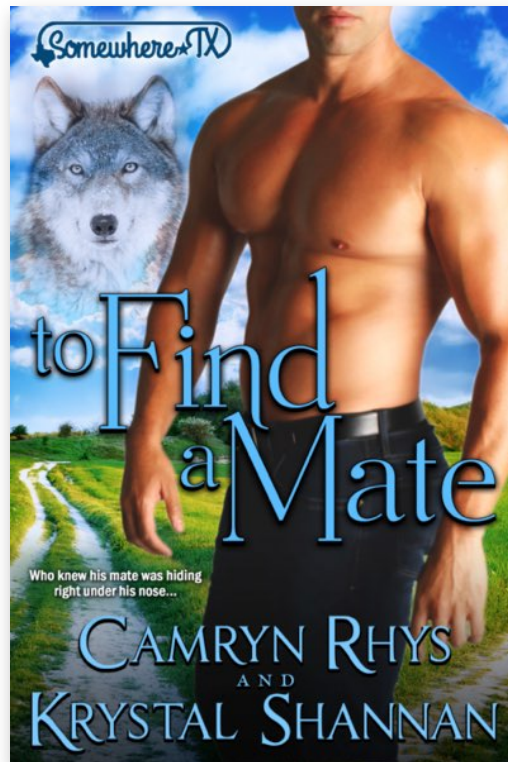


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CHAPTER ONE

Somewhere, TX

Adam VonBrandt heard footsteps in the hall and resumed his pensive-stare-out-the-window look. For good measure, he hoisted the heavy snifter of his brother's sixty-year Macallan Scotch off the windowsill. If this wasn't the perfect image of the tortured ex, he didn't know what was.

He hadn't exactly felt the mate pull with Dee Trewitt, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt to see her with those green tattoos on her wrists. Doubles. Mated.

There hadn't been time to have it out earlier—not with his brothers and sister and cousins and three other packs in the room. But she had gotten his *meet me in the library at*

midnight text. He'd seen the little *Read* icon show up under the bubble.

She should be coming.

The last time there'd been footsteps, it hadn't been Dee, and he'd been forced to listen to his brother's new girl toy whine about how Allan wouldn't play the mating game.

Fuck his brother.

Although the girl-toy was obviously off to try just that. His lucky brother.

Adam had expected to get fucked himself, until Dee showed up with the tattoos.

She could have texted him.

"Adam?" Her voice was a whisper, and he kept waiting for it to thrill him that they were meeting like this, but it didn't.

The desire for her body had left him when he saw her bond on her skin.

He swirled the glass of Scotch and the ice cubes clinked in the empty room. He didn't turn around. "Hi, Dee."

"Your text said to meet you?" She padded into the room, but stayed on the other side. They'd never had that powerful bond that Adam had heard about, so it wasn't like his physical proximity was going to pain her. But he got it. He didn't want to be near her, either.

"I'm not trying to seduce you." He toasted some imaginary, far-off concept. "I have too much respect for the mate bond."

Her sigh was so loud, Adam was fairly certain anyone in a ten-mile radius could have heard it. Gods, she really thought

he was that kind of douche? He set the glass on the windowsill.

“Why did you want to see me, Adam?”

“Not for a heart-to-heart.” He turned on a boot heel. “I just figured you’d want to explain why you didn’t even text me to let me know you’d picked out someone else.”

Dee’s shoulders went up and down. “I can’t explain it. I guess you have to feel the mate call to know what it’s like.”

Adam raised an eyebrow. “Like, Fate?”

“Yes.”

“In that case, you sure as shit should’ve told me.” He took a couple of steps toward her and she tensed. “I’m not gonna mess with Fate, Dee.”

“Then why did you want to meet in the library in the dark?”

“Because this isn’t a conversation you have in front of your dude.” Adam turned to his right, like the beefy cowboy was standing beside him. “Gee, Harry, I’ve had your new mate fifty ways from Sunday over the last ten years, and figured we’d get married someday. By the way, don’t forget to try the veal.”

A tiny smirk flowered across Dee’s face. “His name is William.”

“Because that was the most important detail in that little speech.” Adam pushed a hand through his hair. “Gods, Dee. Ten years.”

She shrugged again, like she was ready to be rid of him. “Let’s face it, Adam. We were placeholders until something better came along.”

He waited for some kind of sting to rise up inside, but it didn't come. Instead, he found himself chuckling. "You're saying he's hotter than me? Cuz... I'm not seeing it."

Dee's laugh was less tentative than her smirk had been. She was warming to him. "Always with the sarcasm." She walked to the high-backed chair and put her hand on the leather. "I'm saying he's my Fate."

"I get it." He wiped at the air, like it was the slate he wanted to clean. "But next time, text a guy you're having placeholder sex with, just as a heads-up that he's not getting laid this weekend."

A full-out laugh. Her eyes sparkled when she laughed again. "This really is about sex?"

He pulled one corner of his mouth up. "Like you said, we both knew we weren't Fated. No kidding around there."

Dee took in a long breath through her nose. "Yes, there's nothing quite like feeling Fate tell you who your match is."

"So I've been hearing."

The sparkle was back in her eyes. "He's my Fate. I can't change that, nor would I want to, honestly."

"I promise, this isn't a ploy to get in your pants." Adam picked up the snifter and took a long swig. "I'm sure there are plenty of girls here this weekend who would be happy to ride the A-Train."

Dee squeezed the chair. "You probably shouldn't say that to them."

"It worked on you." He let a little *for old time's sake* slip into his voice.

"Well, I'm special."

Adam pursed his lips. She'd been a consistent part of his life for ten years. Every other month, he was either up at the Trewitts' getting his horse trained, or buying a new horse, or going to a rodeo.

She'd been his sexual distraction from the generally unappetizing romantic life of Somewhere, TX, where all the wolves were family and all the townies were human. Humans could be messy.

But he wasn't sure if he thought she was *special* in the way he wanted her to be. She had been a great companion, and an occasional lover. They hadn't ever had the magick that she undoubtedly felt with William, or that Aaron and Tonya had.

Plenty of wolves never found a Fated match, and they still chose a mate and said the spells to bond. Adam always assumed he and Dee would be wearing the matching tattoos someday.

It should hurt more that she'd bonded with another man. Only it didn't.

Adam found himself swilling the last of the Scotch and rolling the glass in his hands. He turned back to the window. "What does it feel like?"

"What?"

"The Fate stuff. What does it feel like?"

He waited for her to answer, but part of him didn't want to know. In a family where everyone who was married was also Fated, he didn't want to know what wasn't in store for him.

"It feels like... a magick rope. Wherever you are, you're pulled toward them. It's like you're in their orbit, like you couldn't get away from them if you tried."

He nodded and set the glass down on the side table, turning to face her. "That's not us."

"No, it wasn't."

"And that's okay." He rimmed the glass with his finger.

"I love William, and I am glad for every day we have together." A distant look caught in her eyes and her voice went hot. "I think about him when I'm not with him, and I feel him wherever I'm at."

"You can feel him now?" Adam looked out the door, into the semi-dark hallway.

"I can. He's waiting for me to go run with him."

He turned back to the window. Outside, the whole landscape of the VonBrandt ranch was awash in the bright white glow of the moon. "You're going to shift?"

A smile crept over her features. "Well, we need to get out of the house."

Adam laughed and nodded. "Right. I get it." *Sexxors*.

Dee curled her tongue inside her mouth, like she was preventing herself from saying the obvious.

Let's not joke about the fact that you used to like to run with me and then have sex at the end...too soon.

He gestured to the window. "You should go, then. Don't keep William waiting."

With a long pause, she watched him. "You're sure we're okay? I mean, you and me? Are we good?"

"We're good." Adam hooked one thumb into his belt loop. "I'm gonna head home and get some shuteye. Big run tomorrow."

Dee approached him, careful. “Let me just...” She slipped her arms around him and hugged, hard.

He kept waiting for the lust to set in, to distract him, but there was nothing. The presence of those tattoos had cut off whatever had been tethering him to her. Adam hugged her back.

“It was good to know you,” he said. “In the biblical sense.”

She laughed, fuller and louder this time. It was almost like her comfort had returned, and Dee had let her guard down. Adam stepped away.

“You, too.” She clipped across the wood floor to the door and turned. “And watch out for Fate. She might have something in store for you, yet.”

He smiled and waved her off. It was certainly possible that Fate had plans for him, and he would be on the lookout for it.

After all, he had a house full of visiting wolves. At least half of them were female, and more than two-thirds of those were un-mated.

All he had to do was get within orbit of every single one of them and see what happened.

If Dee was right, he wouldn’t be able to keep it from happening, and since he had the benefit of singleness, with a side of solitude, he planned on doing everything he could, while the house was full of wolves, to find his mate.

Beeeeep! Beeeeep! Beeeeep!

Paige slapped the *off* button on her nightstand alarm clock and yawned. The bright red numbers glowed at her through squinted eyes. *6am*.

She had the day off from the bakery today, so she could enjoy her sunrise ritual on the big rock out in the back pasture before heading in to work anyway.

She flipped the switch on her lamp, bathing her dark bedroom in a warm yellow glow. The outfit she'd picked out the night before stared back at her from the armchair across her room—jeans, a fitted moss green t-shirt that really made her hazel eyes pop and complemented her bronzy-red hair. She always put a little more thought into her clothing choice on Fridays.

Paige shuffled across the room and climbed into her clothes. Then slid her feet into waiting sneakers and shuffled through her house. A half-eaten bowl of popcorn and a mound of cried-on tissues littered her coffee table.

Hillary.

She pulled her cellphone out of her back pocket and called her best friend—possibly only friend. Typically, they watched reruns of Dr. Who or Star Trek together, but Hillary had just broken up with her boyfriend George and had shown up on her doorstep yesterday afternoon with every Nicholas Sparks movie on the planet.

So she'd sat through hours of tortured-weepy characters and listened as her friend recounted each reason she should beg George to come back.

“Paige?” Hillary’s voice came through the speaker. “Why aren’t you at the bakery? Isn’t this your day to see Adam?”

A smile curved her lips. Hillary was the only one that she ever talked to about her crush on Adam VonBrandt.

She'd followed Meg from Baltimore to Somewhere six years ago to learn the skills she needed to open her own bakery.

"Somebody goofed and scheduled me off today. I'm going in after I watch the sunrise. I just wanted to check on you and make sure you hadn't caved."

Her friend sighed. "Nope. No caving. George is not the right man for me, and I deserve better."

"Yes, you do."

"Go watch your sunrise and then drool over your obsession. I'll talk to you later."

"Bye, girl." Paige tapped the red button on the bottom of her phone screen and shoved the cell back into her pocket.

She wasn't supposed to ever have Fridays off. Meg and Berg both knew this, but every once in a while it did happen.

Since she didn't have to show up for prep-time, she could enjoy her favorite spot out by the creek on the back of her property and watch the sun rise over the pines.

When her Granny Lewis passed away years ago, the sweet old woman left a huge chunk of change for all five of her granddaughters. Paige had used hers to buy part of what she'd always wanted—a farm. The rest of the inheritance was safely tucked away in a bank until she was ready to start her own bakery. But since seeing Adam VonBrandt had become the highlight of her week, she'd had no motivation to push forward to the next bullet point of her life plan.

Paige opened the back door and took a deep breath of the nippy November air.

There was enough light to see by, so she left the flashlight on the table next to the door and stepped out into the cold. She zipped up her coat and headed down the path she'd worn into the ground from her back door to the big rock next to the creek. It was about a ten-minute walk.

Paige slowed her pace as she came to the edge of the clearing where she liked to spend her mornings off.

The sound of two people moaning floated in the air and Paige's eyes widened.

She ducked behind a tree and held her breath. Her rock was already occupied this morning—by a *very* naked couple. *Holy crap!*

A few moments passed. The moaning had stopped.

She peeked around the pine tree trunk and froze. The people were...changing into—? That couldn't be right. The air shimmered around them, like the shine on a soap bubble.

Paige blinked and rubbed her eyes. When she looked again, there were no people. The bubble had popped and only two silvery gray wolves stood where the people had been. It couldn't be real... She held her breath and waited.

The wolves hadn't seen her, and she watched them trot off away from her. She waited until they were long out of sight and hopefully out of hearing, then turned around and walked straight back to her house.

That pot of soup she'd made for dinner last night was going into the trash. Someone at the market had to have given her some bad mushrooms or something, because she'd just hallucinated for the first time in her life. What a trip.

Paige turned toward the barn. Casper needed breakfast before she dumped out her leftover veggie soup. Then she could head in to town a little early. Some time in the kitchen would help clear her head.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



USA Today Bestselling Author Krystal Shannan lives in a sprawling ranch style home with her husband, teenage son, and two almost teenage daughters. Her home is full of love and laughter and lots of animals. In fact the welcome mat warns visitors that it's a zoo inside—chickens, rabbits, rats, guinea pigs, dogs and fish! You name it, they've probably had it in their home at some point.

Krystal writes stories filled with magick, fantasy, passion, and just enough humor to make you laugh out loud. Join the fun and escape to a whole new world.

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Published by KS Publishing

Cover design by Clarise Tan - CT Cover Creations

Dragon Illustration by John Molinero

Formatting by Kate Tilton's Author Services, LLC (www.katetilton.com)