



CIDER
FALLS
SHIFTERS 5

DECEPTIVE PROMISES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

R.E. BUTLER

**Deceptive Promises
Cider Falls Shifters**

Book Five

By R. E. Butler

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Chapter One

Ivar McIntyre sat up in the hospital bed and looked out the window. The room was in the back of the pack healer's house in the town of Cider Falls, where he'd been for the last week. Two of those days he'd been unconscious, thanks to his pack, which had followed his instructions to incapacitate him expertly.

There was a creak outside the partially closed door, which he recognized from having heard it every time Shelley, the pack healer, came into the room.

She knocked softly. "Ivar?"

"I'm awake."

He straightened in the bed a little, tucking the sheet around his hips. He was wearing a hospital gown and nothing else. His clothes had been cut off him when the security team had found him at the edge of Cider Falls near death.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

She stopped next to the bed and looked at the machine which was keeping track of his vitals.

"Much better, thank you."

She examined him, using a touch so gentle it reminded him of his mom, who'd been killed when he was a teenager, along with the rest of his people. Only his sister, Yva, had survived. At least he thought she was still alive. She'd been abducted when he'd been left for dead. He'd spent the last ten

years searching the world for her, tracking every clue, no matter how small or unlikely it was.

In his spare time, he worked for Vega Sonight, a purebred wolf who used Ivar for any and everything he needed.

Including what he was doing now—infiltrating Cider Falls and playing on their sympathies. They were guarded because he was a stranger, but they pitied him because they believed he'd been attacked.

Pushing away the thoughts of his long-dead family, he focused on the healer. Shelley was an unmated purebred wolf and wore the brand on her wrist of being an exile. She had healing magic, something that was pretty rare. Her hands glowed a soft pink as she checked out his injuries. He could feel the magic healing him as she moved, a warmth filling him from the inside out.

Cider Falls was full of exiles, both purebreds and hybrids. They even allowed humans to live and work among them. Rehlik the alpha was, as far as Ivar could tell, a good male who had a heart for his people. His trusting—yet cautious—nature was going to eventually get him killed. Vega wanted to take over Cider Falls, and that meant either Rehlik walked, or he was carried out in a body bag. After meeting Rehlik up close earlier, Ivar was sure the male would fight to the death to stay alpha of the town.

“Would you like to shift?” Shelley asked, straightening and giving him a smile.

He blinked in confusion. “What?”

“I mean, you’ve still got some healing to do. My magic can only do so much, and shifting is helpful for healing. Whoever attacked you did a number on you. The remnants of your injuries can be healed with a shift. I can call for some of the security team to shift and hang out with you in the woods.”

He hadn’t explored the woods in his shift. Prior to being carried into the town while unconscious, he’d simply walked in and skulked around in the shadows. He’d spent the last decade infiltrating anywhere he had an iota of hope of finding Yva. On order from Vega, he was supposed to infiltrate the town and learn what he could of the alpha and high-ranked males, then come up with a plan to take them all out so Vega could slip into position as alpha without anyone the wiser.

As an exiled male, Vega had been living in hiding with his pack, keeping mobile to stay off the radar of the Federal Shifter Alliance—FSA for short. Every shifter—from purebreds like Rehlik to hybrids like his second-in-command Trace—was subject to the FSA, which governed them. An exiled male or female had only three days to register with a new alpha or officially start their own group—which involved paperwork and money—in order to avoid being imprisoned. But exiles rarely knew where to go, and most ended up on the run and caught after a time. The FSA’s laws were archaic.

Ivar wasn’t exiled. There was no record of him or his group ever existing. His parents had ensured that no one knew about gryphon hybrids, so he didn’t have an exile mark and could move easily among purebred groups, which generally hated hybrids and exiles.

Being a shadow had its perks.

“I think that would be nice,” he said. It would give him a chance to use his heightened senses in the woods and get an idea of how the security team functioned.

“I’ll make a call. It shouldn’t be more than a few minutes.”

“Thanks, Shelley. For everything.”

“Of course. I’m just glad to see you awake. I was really worried there.”

He hadn’t had someone care about him since he lost his family. Vega didn’t really care about him; he cared about what he could do for him. Ivar was loyal to a fault and wouldn’t betray his alpha no matter what. Only his sister held his loyalty over Vega. If only he could find her. Then he could bring her to Vega’s pack and keep her safe.

He climbed out of bed, stifling a groan at the aches that shot through him. He stopped in the little bathroom to use the facilities and then found Shelley in the kitchen of the home that doubled as the pack’s hospital.

“You’re just in time,” she said. “Rehlik and Breaker are on their way. Did you want to eat anything?”

“I’m good for now, thanks.”

A few moments later, he met the alpha again and was introduced to Breaker, part of the security team. Ivar had seen the big male when he’d scouted the town. He was a hybrid, but Ivar wasn’t sure what sort.

“You look well,” Rehlik said as their trio walked away from Shelley’s and into the woods behind her home.

“I feel better.”

They walked in silence for several minutes, then stopped.

“We’ll run for a while,” Rehlik said. “Be cautious not to leave our territory, which is marked with red ribbons. Since we’re not sure who harmed you, we don’t know if they might be lying in wait for you. The security team is on alert and you’re safe here, but it’s always best to be cautious.”

Ivar stared at the alpha for a long moment, then nodded. “I won’t leave the territory.”

“When we’re done with our run,” Breaker said as he tugged off his shirt and laid it over a low tree branch, “I left clothes for you at Shelley’s so you can get cleaned up and dressed.”

“Thanks.”

The males stripped and shifted.

Ivar hadn’t been in his shift in ages. He couldn’t actually remember the last time he’d shifted. He was always too busy, either hunting for Yva or working for Vega. Shifting had always felt like a luxury anyway. He’d been paranoid as a teen to shift once his family had been killed because he’d never trusted anyone enough to show his hybrid to. But if he didn’t shift in front of Rehlik and Breaker, they’d be suspicious, so he really had no choice.

He took off the hospital gown and shifted.

His body was a black-furred tiger, and his head and forelegs were that of a snow owl. He had white feathers around his neck and on his tail.

Ivar realized that the males with him had frozen in shock at seeing him. He'd told Rehlik what he was, but the alpha was still clearly surprised to actually see him.

Ivar shook himself out, a few white feathers dislodging with the motion, and stretched, his tail whipping back and forth.

Rehlik was a large timber wolf. Breaker was a hybrid snow leopard wolf. His wolf was white with black spots.

The alpha let out a bark and trotted forward, Breaker and Ivar at his side.

Ivar's mind spun as the pace quickened, the wolves easily keeping up with his cat's long stride. He was thinking about Yva mostly, and the hopelessness he often felt at knowing she'd been kept captive all these years. He never entertained the thought she might be dead. That was a hell he didn't want to contemplate. He occasionally thought of Vega, who he knew was waiting for word from him. He'd have to figure out a way to contact him without arousing suspicion, and also fully scout the town.

Something stirred in him as he raced alongside the males, dodging fallen trees and shrubs.

It was like his heart was beating for the first time.

His beasts sat up in his mind, his tiger roaring in surprise.

Was it possible? No.

No, it wasn't.

Ivar was not feeling a mating pull to a female in Cider Falls.

Not only did he believe he didn't deserve one for the blood-stained life he'd led up to this point, but he was planning to destroy the town from the inside out.

And Yva took precedence over all else.

There was no male more unworthy of a true mate than him, that he was sure.

Mentally ignoring his beasts, who wanted to find out if what they were feeling was actually a pull to a true mate, he focused on keeping pace with the males and tracking his way around the woods. There was no time for anything but Yva and Vega, no time to fill the holes in his heart left by his murdered family and the life he'd led.

No time for anything, least of all love.

Chapter Two

Cymbre Daniels, falcon shifter and nanny extraordinaire, swiped up to close the dating app and sighed. She sank a little deeper into the couch and closed her eyes, listening to the quiet house. The baby was still sleeping and would most likely for the next half hour. The older child was at school and wouldn't be home until later that afternoon. She'd been nannying for the family since little Davy was four and the mom, Carole, was pregnant. The family was human, from the dad who worked in finance and traveled a lot, to the mom who was a pediatric nurse.

As a shifter, and an exiled one at that, Cymbre had wondered if they'd even accept her as their nanny. Humans didn't really understand shifters, and they absolutely didn't understand exiles.

What felt like a hundred years ago, Cymbre had been exiled from her falcon nest. She'd known about Cider Falls, the exile-friendly town led by Alpha Rehlik, and had traveled from her former home in Michigan to Kentucky to join up with the pack—keeping with the FSA's laws.

Most shifters didn't know about exile-welcome places like Cider Falls unless someone they knew happened to have the knowledge. In Cymbre's case, her alpha's mate told her about the town and gave her traveling money. It was a small kindness that Cymbre didn't deserve but was forever thankful for.

Thinking about her exile made her wrist burn, where the brand from a witch was etched forever into her skin.

She liked colder temperatures best, when she could wear long sleeves and not be constantly reminded that she was the reason people were dead.

Her phone buzzed, and she opened her eyes to look at the screen.

Her best friend and housemate, Arely, had texted.

How's the munchkin-watching?

Good. She's sleeping and I'm bummed.

Why are you bummed?

Because I can only find humans to match with on the shifter dating app.

Arely sent an emoji that looked like it was thinking. *Why only humans?*

I'm not sure. I guess because I put in my profile that I'm exiled. No shifter is going to want to date me when I'm branded.

That's not true. Lots of our people are mated and they're exiled.

Cymbre let out a grumbling sigh. *I probably shouldn't even bother. I don't think I'll get a mate anyway.*

Why not? You're pretty and fun and sweet.

Thanks, babe, but my past is too horrible. I might get a guy to be interested in a tumble in the sheets, but I honestly don't think I'll get a forever guy. I think my romantic-mojo is too tainted for that.

No such thing.

You're just an optimist.

Yes, I am, but also I believe every shifter gets a true mate, exiled or not. Your guy is out there somewhere. He's probably wondering where you are.

I'm right here, dang it.

Arely sent a laughing emoji. Just stay positive.

I'll try.

That sounds positive.

All right, seriously. Let's move on from my lack of love potential to whatever it was that you texted me for.

Diem asked if we wanted to have dinner with her tonight. She's making chicken and dumplings and I know that's your favorite.

Hell yes!

Cymbre did the cooking in the house for herself and Arely because her bestie was one of the school cooks and didn't like to come home from work and cook again.

She said we can come over after six.

Perfect.

Cool, I'll see you when you're done with work.

She sent a kissy-face emoji and Arely sent one back. She stared at her phone's home screen and the dating app, but then decided it was simply too depressing to even consider looking around on the site again. It wasn't that she had a problem with dating humans; she'd dated several over the years. She just wasn't sure she'd be able to tell if a human was actually

interested in her, or if he was only curious about dating an exiled shifter.

Her sensitive hearing picked up the sound of baby Riley stirring in her crib, so she stood and stretched, picking up her phone. As she walked back toward the bedroom, she deleted the dating app. It made her heart hurt too much to think that she might never find someone to spend the rest of her life with.

* * *

Cymbre and Arely walked through town to Diem's, who lived in an apartment above the bookstore she owned. The lion-wolf hybrid was sweet as pie and enjoyed sharing her love of books and reading with others. She could also cook like crazy and made the best chicken and dumplings Cymbre had ever had.

"Have you seen the stranger around town?" Arely asked.

Everyone knew about the half-dead hybrid male found by Trace and his mate, Jewel, who'd been a Hunter in the FSA before she'd been exiled for helping out a mated trio in Cider Falls. The male had awakened a week ago, and the gossip around town was that he was a big cat and bird hybrid, but Cymbre hadn't heard what combination he was. She was curious about him, but if he was sticking around and joining up with the pack, then she'd meet him eventually.

Her bird let out a little call of curiosity, which she ignored. She couldn't figure out why she was so lonely all of a sudden, like she'd had a hole in her heart that she hadn't realized was there until the last day or two.

“At least he survived,” Cymbre said. “I can’t imagine going through what he did physically.”

“There’s a lot of purebred groups out there that will try to kill a hybrid rather than just exile them and let them go.”

Cymbre knew that for a fact. Her alpha made sure she knew that he was well within his rights to kill her for what had happened to the nest, and it was only thanks to his good graces that she was allowed to walk away on her own.

“True,” Cymbre said. “Have you seen him?”

“Nope. I just heard a couple of the teachers talking during lunch today.”

“What was on the menu?”

“Corndogs with a garden salad and black and whites.”

Black and white brownies were a favorite of hers.

“Did you save me one?”

“Two, actually. I left them on the kitchen counter.”

“You’re honestly the best,” Cymbre said, hooking her arm through her bestie’s and smiling.

“I try.” Arely returned her smile.

Diem was waiting for them in the bookstore. “Lock the front door,” she said, straightening from where she was shelving a stack of new books. “I’m ready to close for the night and eat.”

Cymbre twisted the lock. There was a time when no one locked doors in Cider Falls, but that wasn’t the case anymore. Someone was causing trouble for their people—or several someones. The scuttle around town was that a male—most

likely—and his people were attempting to take out Rehlik and his mate, Weylyn, and take over the town for themselves. If that were the case, Cymbre bet the male was exiled and on the run from the FSA along with his people, and taking over was the only way to get a territory of their own without alerting the authorities to what they were up to.

Whoever it was liked to leave bear traps in the hunting grounds, even going so far as to leave them at the houses of a few people to try to harm them. They'd also blown up the gazebo in the center of town and nearly killed the alphas.

So now they locked their front doors at night and the security team kept a constant patrol to look for trouble.

She hoped like hell trouble stayed far away from her.

Their trio climbed the interior stairs to Diem's apartment. The moment they entered the front room, the delicious smell of roast chicken made Cymbre's mouth water. She set the table while Diem turned off the burner and placed the dutch oven on a ceramic trivet in the center of the table. Arely filled glasses with ice water and wedges of lemon.

Diem filled their bowls with the thick stew filled with tender chicken and wide handmade noodles.

"I had no idea how hungry I was until I smelled this cooking," Cymbre said. She lifted the spoon and blew on it gently. Biting back a loud groan at how good it was, she added, "You're such a wonderful cook. Who taught you to make homestyle dishes?"

Diem smiled, but her eyes were sad. "My dad. He was raised by his grandma, and when she got sick, she told him how to cook from her bed. He taught me when I was young, so

when he was working, I could come home from school and make dinner for us.”

Diem had been exiled as a teenager when she turned out to be a hybrid lion-wolf. The alpha exiled her, and when her father tried to take exile to be with her, she'd told him to stay in Rhode Island and run his business. Because her father and the alpha were close, he allowed them to stay in touch. They talked often and met up halfway for birthdays.

“Does he still cook?” Arely asked.

“He does. We video chat and cook together sometimes. He's got a girlfriend now. She's human, but he doesn't think she's his truemate, so he's only dating her for fun.”

“For fun?” Cymbre asked. “What does he mean by that?”

“I honestly didn't want to ask,” Diem said. “I was afraid he'd tell me he was just having sex with her. That's not anything I want to talk about with my dad.”

Cymbre chuckled. “I hear you.”

Conversation flitted between talk of their jobs to the book chosen for the book club to read, which met in the bookstore, to the stranger.

“Jewel came in today to borrow some shoes for a date with Trace and told me that Ivar went to the bar last night with Breaker and a few of the other males. The landscape guys asked him to help out today, but it seems that he's going to end up on the security team.”

“Why's that?” Cymbre asked, her falcon letting out another curious trill in her mind.

“Most likely so that they can keep a close eye on him. Because of the way he came to town, Rehlik doesn’t fully trust him yet. That will come in time. The patrols are going to keep watching to see if whoever hurt him will come back to finish the job.”

“Wonder if they’re the same people who are trying to get into our town,” Arely said.

“I wondered that too,” Diem said with a shrug, “but according to Rehlik, Ivar’s been on his own since his family was killed a decade ago and simply crossed paths with the wrong shifter group who attacked him. He wasn’t sure how he’d gotten here.”

“That’s awful,” Cymbre said. Her falcon let out a sad whistle.

Okay, birdbrain, we’re not having any kind of feelings for a male we haven’t even met yet. Stop making noises.

Curious chirp.

Snarl.

When the meal was done and Diem packed up two helpings of leftovers, the two females left the apartment and headed home. They shared a three-bedroom and had been roommates for nearly three years. Cymbre had come to Cider Falls first and taken the empty home as her own. When Arely had come to town, they’d immediately become friends and roommates.

“It’s been a good day, but I’m beat,” Cymbre said. “I have to get up early and pick leaves before I head to work.”

Arely unlocked the front door and gave her a strange look. “What are you picking leaves for?”

“Because Davy is doing a science project in school and needs different leaves for it. We have some in our woods that he doesn’t have in his neighborhood, so I said I’d grab them. Wanna join me?”

“Heck, no,” Arely said with a laugh. “But have fun. Maybe you’ll find your forever guy in the woods.”

Cymbre rolled her eyes. “Are you in cahoots with my bird? She won’t shut up lately. And I don’t think I’ll meet my forever guy in the woods.” *If I even get one.* “That would be like a million-to-one chance.”

“Miracles happen every day, babe. Who knows what tomorrow will bring?”

She tapped the lid of the chicken and dumpling container. “Tasty leftovers and work. That’s it.”

Arely hummed. “If you say so. I’ll be optimistic. It’s more fun to look at life through rose-colored glasses.”

“Good night, you loon.”

“Night,” Arely said.

Cymbre put the container in the fridge and turned off the light with a yawn. Sure, anything could happen tomorrow, but she really didn’t believe that she might randomly be in the woods and find her mate. Especially since she’d pretty much decided she wouldn’t get one anyway. What kind of male would want a female who’d caused the deaths of a dozen falcons?

Chapter Three

Ivar hadn't learned anything about Cider Falls yesterday that he hadn't already known from sneaking into the town prior to being carried in unconscious. The run through the woods had been entertaining to his beasts, but as far as reconnaissance, it hadn't been helpful. Then he'd gone on a walking tour of the town with Shelley, Jewel, and Novak—who were both on the security team—and then Shelley had cooked him dinner and he'd met with Rehlik and Trace again, who offered to let him work on the security team with Breaker.

He knew the leadership was still deciding if he was going to be able to stay in town. Which he very much needed to do so he could get as much intel as possible for Vega. He did his best to be unassuming and friendly so they'd want him to stick around. It wasn't exactly his wheelhouse. He'd spent the last ten years keeping people at arms' length. He'd told them only as much as he needed to in order to gain their sympathy, including most of the truth of his family—how they'd stayed off the FSA radar and then been ambushed and slaughtered, with Yva gone and himself near death. What he hadn't told them was that he'd tracked down the ones who'd killed his family and taken them out, one by one.

It was better that they didn't know he was a killer.

Well, they'd learn it eventually. But for his purposes, simply being a male all alone in the world in their eyes worked to his advantage.

On his to-do list was seeing the patrol schedule so he could pass the intel on to Vega. Ivar had watched the patrols, but they seemed to be random. He was certain there was a schedule, he just couldn't decipher what it was. Breaker had invited Ivar to move into his house today, and he thought that would be just the way to gather the intel he needed.

He walked out into the kitchen to find Shelley sipping from a mug and looking at what appeared to be an old recipe book.

"Good morning," she said with a smile. "Make yourself a cup of coffee."

"Morning. Thanks."

He put a pod into the coffee maker and slid a mug under the spout. As it brewed, he turned to face her.

"Thank you for letting me stay here. You've been really gracious with your time and home."

"It's my pleasure," she said. "It's what I do with my healing gift. When did Breaker say he'd be here?"

Ivar glanced at the wall where a large round clock ticked softly. "An hour."

"Good, then you have time to do me a small favor, if you want."

"Sure." He picked up his mug after adding sugar and took a sip.

"I need to gather wild blackberry leaves."

"They're in the woods, I assume?"

“They are. There’s a huge patch. The birds are too active in the summer to gather more than a handful of berries, but the leaves are what I need.”

“What are they good for?”

“A variety of things, including aiding in digestion and healing wounds. I can use my healing power freely, but it does drain me physically if I use too much of it at once. And I can’t really heal humans; the person I heal has to be supernatural for my healing to have full effect. So I like to keep natural remedies on hand for the humans who come for help.”

He stared at her for a long moment. She was really a kind person and genuinely cared for others. He didn’t want to think about what might happen to her when Vega came to take over. Well, she was a healer, so she’d be spared no matter what.

Shaking the thoughts from his head, he said, “Happy to help.”

She smiled at him and finished her tea. “When you’re ready, I’ll be out back gathering my tools.”

He took a few minutes to finish his coffee, then snagged a blueberry muffin from the basket on the counter. He tore off the paper wrapper and dropped it in the trash as he headed out to the back to join her. She held a basket and two pairs of sheers. Handing him one pair of sheers, she said, “It’s about a ten-minute walk.”

They started the trek to the blackberries.

“What did you do for work while you were on your own all these years?” she asked.

Now this was something about his past he could tell her truthfully. “Odd jobs, mostly. I didn’t have anything when I was first on my own, so I stayed in the woods and hunted for food. I can admit to stealing necessities from time to time, like clothes from wash lines or shoes left on back porches.” He shrugged. That had been a difficult time. He’d been young and grieving, wondering where his sister was and planning how to take out the pack that had killed his family. “I eventually found work as a dishwasher in a diner that paid me under the table, and once I saved up enough money, I got a tent and some supplies and mostly camped out. When it was cold, I went south. When it was warm, I went north. I never really let anyone get to know me or see me in my shift. It was too risky.”

She hummed. “That’s quite a life you’ve led. But you’re here, and if you want, you can stay in Cider Falls.”

“Rehlik has to approve it first, though.”

“Well, that’s true and I can’t control that, but I did tell him that I thought you were trustworthy and deserved a chance to join our pack and have a real life.”

He gave her a side glance. “You don’t think I’ve had a life?”

She stopped walking and he faced her. She was smiling in that gentle way she did.

“I think you’ve had a hard life, Ivar. And I think it’s okay to let your guard down. If Rehlik asks you to join the pack, I hope you will. I’m always happy to see new people come into the group, and I’ve enjoyed getting to know you.”

He was touched by her kindness once more, but he steeled himself against letting it get the better of him. He had a job to do—for Vega—and he wasn't going to let anything stop that.

“Now, about the blackberries,” she said.

She showed him the large patch of bushes and how to collect the leaves. They worked in silence to fill the basket, and he only occasionally got stabbed by pesky thorns.

“Damn it,” he grouched as another thorn scraped the top of his hand.

Shelley chuckled. “They're tricky buggers.”

He pulled the leaves out of the bush and walked over to the basket. As the leaves fell onto the pile, the wind shifted direction and the most enticing scent filled his nose.

It was like honey and flowers and sunshine.

And home.

His heart clenched so hard he nearly fell to his knees.

She. Was. Here.

He ground his teeth together and snarled internally at his beasts.

No. Absolutely not.

He was not going to chase a scent and find out where the female who called to every cell of his being was.

Staying rooted in place was his best choice. Finding a mate was not on his list at all; Yva and Vega were his focus.

But...

No!

* * *

The morning was chilly, but since fall was her favorite time of year, Cymbre didn't mind. She drove to the bar and parked in the empty lot, which was surrounded by woods. She had a plastic container with a lid to keep the leaves intact. She walked into the woods, tucking the container under her arm and buttoning up her jacket to ward against the chill.

She wandered around the woods looking for different trees, plucking the most perfect leaves she could find from the lowest branches.

After a good bit of walking, she finally found the one tree she was looking for—a white birch. It was Davy's favorite tree, and he had specifically asked her to grab a leaf for him if she could.

The tree had a wide central trunk with thick branches that rose up a few feet above the ground, shooting upward into a beautiful, tall tree. She walked around the tree, looking for the best leaves, but the ones on the lowest branches were turning dark brown in spots, which wouldn't do for Davy's project.

“Welp,” she said, “I gotta go up.”

She'd purposely worn her hiking boots, which she'd never hiked in before. She bought them for a Halloween party that she and Arely had thrown the previous year. Cymbre had gone as a lumberjack and the boots were a necessity to pull off

the look. Then she'd promptly put them in her closet and never touched them again.

Grasping a low branch, she hefted herself up, wedging one foot between branches to give herself leverage. After figuring out she needed to go higher, where the branches were closer together and the leaves more intact, she climbed up another foot.

Peering at the branch in front of her, she spied the perfect leaf. She reached for it, holding on to the branch with one hand and leaning as far out as she could. It was almost within reach.

Gripping the branch tighter, she pointed the toe of her boot and stretched out farther.

She touched the stem of the leaf but couldn't quite grasp it.

So close!

Stretching as far as she could, she could almost grab it.

And then her foot slipped, along with her hand, and she tumbled to the ground.

* * *

Cymbre closed her eyes, thinking she was going to hit the ground hard, but instead something caught her.

Someone.

Opening her eyes slowly, she found herself staring into the caramel-colored eyes of a male she'd never seen before.

His cheeks were covered with stubble, and his chest vibrated with a mixture of a big-cat purr and a call from a bird of prey.

Immediately she knew exactly who he was.

He was the reason her bird had been acting up.

He was her true mate.

“I...” she said, but then words failed her. He was just too damn sexy and made her brain misfire.

He put her gently on the ground and straightened. He was tall and broad-shouldered, thick with muscles. What she found most noticeable were the scars on his neck and forearms. He’d been hurt and hadn’t yet healed.

He reached up and pulled down the branch she’d been trying to get.

She plucked the leaf from it and chuckled, feeling super awkward.

Before she could think of anything to say that didn’t involve asking him if he’d like to get naked and roll around, he turned and walked away.

“Wait!”

He didn’t stop. His shoulders hunched and he lowered his head, but he didn’t turn around.

Had her true mate just saved her from a bad fall and then walked away without saying a single word?

What the hell?

Chapter Four

Ivar had made some miscalculations over the years since he'd been on his own, like the time he'd been chasing a male that Vega wanted punished, and he'd jumped from the roof to take the fleeing male down and ended up nearly impaling himself on a pile of metal scraps he hadn't seen.

But no miscalculation had been quite so large as catching the beautiful brunette when she'd slipped from the tree.

He'd been picking damn blackberry leaves with Shelley and ignoring the bewitching scent that kept assaulting him whenever the breeze blew his direction. Then he'd heard her make a strange sound and his beasts had overridden his desire to entirely ignore her. He'd raced through the woods, following the delectable scent, and happened to catch her as she'd fallen.

The fall wouldn't have hurt her. It would have, at the most, stunned her a little, maybe bruised her delicate flesh.

But some part of him was thrilled with the way she looked at him, as if he'd saved her life by pulling her from the very jaws of death.

The way she felt in his arms?

Heaven and hell.

She'd been reaching for something on a branch, so he'd set her gently on her feet and pulled the branch down for her. She was shorter than him by almost a foot, so it had been easy

enough for him to grab. Then she'd plucked a leaf from the branch and given him a smile so sweet and thankful that he wanted to fall to his knees and make her smile like that all the time.

Among other things he wanted to do to her.

The images flashing through his mind courtesy of his suddenly love-starved beasts involved lots of nakedness and a bed, and he'd had no choice but to walk away.

He couldn't even bring himself to say anything to her because talking to her would mean being in her presence a single moment longer than necessary.

As it was, he was furious with himself for even rushing to her aid.

He was no hero. He was the villain in her future, the one who would bring about the destruction of the town she called home. He had a job to do, and it was taking him far too long to get it done as it was. The female, no matter how beautiful or how perfect she felt in his arms, was a complication he did not need or want.

“Wait!”

He snarled to himself and kept walking, ignoring the hurt tone in her voice and the way the word she shouted at him tried to wrap around his heart and squeeze him to death.

He was a solitary male. He did not get to have a true mate and he did not want one.

Yva and Vega were alone at the top of his loyalty list—period.

Shelley gave him a curious look when he reached the blackberry bush.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

He nodded and lifted the basket he’d dropped, stooping to pick up the leaves that had fallen.

She cleared her throat, and he looked up at her.

“Her name is Cymbre. She’s a falcon.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I can smell her on you, so I’m guessing you found her in the woods and she’s your mate.”

“I don’t care.” His voice was low and filled with anger, directed at himself.

Shelley hummed. “I see. Well, I think we have enough leaves for my purposes today and it’s nearly time for you to meet up with Breaker to head to your new home.”

The walk back to her place was tense, and it was all he could do to keep his mouth shut so he didn’t ask about the female.

Cymbre.

No, damn it. He was not going to think about her unique and pretty name or her gorgeous green eyes.

Shelley stopped in the kitchen and took the basket of leaves from him. “Thank you for your help today.”

He let out a deep sigh and rubbed the space between his eyes where a headache bloomed from his bird squawking in his head. “Yeah. Glad to.”

She let out a little chuckle but then gave him a calculating look. “Your past isn’t going to matter to her, you know.”

Was Shelley psychic?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, I think you do, but if you want to play dumb, that’s fine. Cymbre is a sweet female, and any male would be lucky to have her in his life. And knowing what I do of her past, I can tell you that she would be the sort of female who would forgive whatever misdeeds a male had done just so long as he treated her right.”

“Shelley,” he said firmly.

She put her hands up. “Okay, okay. I’ll just say this one thing. We’ve all got demons and we’ve all got pasts that we’d like to ignore or forget. But you can’t move on if you’re holding on to the past, it’s a tether that will drown you.”

His beasts were entirely on board with him getting forgiveness from his mate, but the last thing he needed to do was bare his soul to someone who could screw up everything.

Focusing on his job and narrowing his thoughts to only finding out the patrol schedule, he squared his shoulders and thanked Shelley for her hospitality.

A knock at the door was the reprieve he needed.

Shelley called that the door was open.

“Hey,” Breaker said after closing the door behind him. “You ready, Ivar?”

Ivar nodded at Shelley and answered the male as he walked into the front room. They left the healer’s home and

got into a Jeep.

“My house isn’t far. I fixed up a spare bedroom for you.”

“I appreciate you letting me stay with you,” Ivar said, firmly pushing away the thoughts of the enticing brunette that kept crashing around in his mind.

“Of course. We need to get you some clothes.”

Now that was helpful. If he could get out of town and meet up with Vega, then he could tell him that he was making progress. Assuming he managed to get some time off from being watched and *was* actually making progress.

“You can borrow my clothes, but we can get you some of your own.”

“I don’t have any money,” he said. If he had access to his vehicle, he could grab his cell and wallet, but then he’d have to explain how he knew exactly where his things were—which were currently near Vega’s cabin in their temporary territory. He’d need to borrow a car to get out of town.

“We’ve got a store we like to use for clothing delivery. I’ll grab my laptop at the house, and you can shop for whatever you need. And don’t worry about money. We’ve got a fund for this kind of situation. There are a lot of hybrids who show up to town with nothing but the clothes on their backs. I did.”

“You got kicked out of your pack?”

“Hell, yes. They took one look at my white fur with black spots and ran me out of town.”

Vega’s pack was all exiled males, some hybrids and some purebreds. But none of them really talked about their

pasts. Ivar didn't have any friends in the pack, just males he worked with when he wasn't looking for his sister. It was strange to him that Breaker was willing to talk to him about his past when they'd only been around each other a short time.

“Were you on your own for a while?” Ivar asked.

“Nah. I'm from Georgia. When I was exiled, I was told about an exile-friendly commune in Florida by my uncle. He gave me bus fare and I went there for a few years. I saw online when Rehlik founded Cider Falls. I like Florida, but the commune lifestyle wasn't for me.”

“Why not?”

“Eh, too much everybody shares everything, and no one is really in charge. Sometimes an alpha-type would come in and try to take over and everyone would rise up and run them off. They liked having it be a democratic-style town where they voted on everything. It sounds good, but it doesn't work long term. A lot of shifters form up their own groups and leave.”

“Cider Falls is nice.”

“It is. I haven't ever regretted being here. I just wish we could figure out who's trying to get to us.”

Ivar didn't let it outwardly show that he was very interested in what Breaker knew.

“Who do you think it is?”

“All we know is there are a good number of them and they're damn good at sneaking around. The consensus of the security team is that it's a group attempting to drive us out of

town so they can take over. If they had good intentions, they would come in properly and talk to Rehlik about joining up.”

Treading carefully so he didn't give anything away, Ivar asked, “Why do you think they won't come in the right way?”

Breaker shrugged. He parked on the street in front of a small house and turned off the engine. “I think it's because they're exiles and on the run. If they tried to join up legally, they'd put Rehlik in a bind by making him need to decide whether to turn them in to the FSA or not. I don't think he would, though.”

Ivar glanced at the male as he got out of the Jeep. “But he's the alpha. Why wouldn't he turn them in?”

“He might, but he might also give them sanctuary. The FSA is a dinosaur and its laws are unfair. Everyone here hates the FSA and what they stand for, so no one would want to turn someone in. So long as they had good intentions, anyway. Which I don't think these people, whoever they are, do. They're attacking us and going after people when they're vulnerable. No one with any sense of honor does that.”

Well, the male wasn't wrong.

Vega might be the male Ivar allied himself to all those years ago, but he couldn't say that he thought Vega had honor. He was too dark, too much in the shadows of evil to be called honorable.

And that went for Ivar too.

Which was why he wasn't thinking about the beautiful brunette.

He walked with Breaker into the house, steeling his resolve.

Only Yva mattered.

Only Vega's mission.

Nothing. Else.

Chapter Five

Cymbre was shaking the entire walk back to her car. She couldn't believe that she'd been in the presence of her truemate and he'd flat-out rejected her. She searched her feelings as she sat heavily behind the wheel.

Had she been wrong? Was the big male not her truemate?

Her bird let out a distress call.

No, she was right. Since she'd never seen him before, she knew he was the stranger—Ivar—who'd been found near death at the edge of town. He'd been in Cider Falls for over a week, which was when her bird had first started acting up. Now that she'd seen him, been touched by him?

She wanted him.

Someone knocked on her car window, and she nearly peed herself.

She turned the key and put the window down, her heart hammering in her chest.

“Holy shit, Trace, you scared me.”

The second-in-command of the pack rocked back on his heels with a half-smile. His mate, Jewel, was at his side, holding his hand.

She gave him a nudge. “I told you she didn't hear you call her name. She looks like a doe about to bolt.”

“Sorry,” Trace said.

“We just wanted to make sure you’re okay,” Jewel said.

“Aside from losing a few years off my life with that scare? Yeah, I’m fine.”

Her heartbeat was finally tapering off.

“Did you come to the bar last night or something?” Trace asked.

“No, why?”

“We wondered if you were picking up your car.”

“Oh, no, I had to pick leaves for the kid I nanny for. He’s got a school project.”

The container of leaves was on the seat, with the birch leaf on top. She wanted to keep it. Ivar had helped her get it after all.

She quickly shook the thought away. He hadn’t wanted to stay with her. He hadn’t even asked her name or offered to sweep her off her feet in a romantic gesture worthy of a hundred romance books.

“Ah,” Trace said. “We just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

She opened her mouth to tell them that Ivar was her true mate and ask if they knew why he might walk away from her, but decided against it. It was humiliating on several levels, and she wasn’t ready to talk to anyone about it. Except maybe her bestie.

“I’m good. I should get going, though.”

“Be safe and have a good day,” Jewel said.

Trace echoed the sentiment, then the two walked into the bar. She put up the window and pulled out of the parking lot, heading toward her job. She pressed the button on the GPS screen to access her music library, blasting 80s rock to give herself something else to focus on besides the rock-hard muscles of the male who seemingly didn't want her.

It was going to be a long day.

* * *

"I think you should go find him," Arely said later that afternoon when Cymbre called her. She'd finally been ready to tell someone about what happened.

"He clearly doesn't want to see me."

"Maybe he was just shocked and didn't know what to say to you."

"So he left?"

"Hell, I don't know," Arely said. "You said you were too surprised to say anything to him. Maybe he was feeling the same way. Maybe he's at Shelley's kicking himself for being an idiot."

"Maybe."

"You sound like you don't believe me."

"Well, maybe he knows about my past and doesn't want to get mixed up with someone like me."

Arely snorted and then coughed. "Okay, calm down. Your past is that your alpha was an asshole. Hell, most

everyone in town could say that. And besides, who the hell would tell a new person in town about anyone's past, let alone yours? No one is in the habit of sharing people's stories, you know that. Town gossip is always mild, like how everyone is talking about the stranger. There's never any vicious gossip in Cider Falls."

"True. It's just..." She let her voice trail off.

"Just what?"

"It's just that I don't think I deserve a mate. I never thought I'd even get one, honestly."

"You've said that before. Why do you think that?"

The hunting territory for her nest flashed through her mind briefly before she had a chance to even shut the image down. Her bird let out a soft call of grief.

So much blood. So much death.

"Because there's blood on my hands."

"That's your former alpha talking. You're not responsible for how others react to your choices, you're only responsible for what you did. And you did what was right for you. And this stranger? This Ivar fellow? He's probably waiting for you to show up so he can apologize. He wouldn't be able to come find you because you know how tight security is with new people until they prove themselves trustworthy."

She hummed. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Well, now you have. So you can go over to Shelley's after work and talk to him. I can meet you there if you want some support."

A small part of her was hopeful now. Maybe what Arely was saying was true. Maybe he was just too shocked to interact with her in the woods and now he was stuck at the healer's home.

“Okay, I'll go after work. But you don't need to meet me there. I need to do it on my own.”

“All right, girl! I'll be waiting to hear the good news.” There was the sound of something crashing, then Arely let out a sigh. “Crap, Felicity just dropped a tray of biscuits for the breakfast sandwiches. I need to help her clean up and make new ones.”

“Have fun.”

“Good luck, babe.”

“Thanks.”

Cymbre ended the call. She'd been a more positive person before she was exiled. Then her hopeful nature had taken a backseat to the female who never trusted her instincts and didn't think she was worth loving. Fate seemed to have possibly changed its tune, and she now maybe had a chance at a happily ever after. For a female who thought she'd be alone forever? It was a strange and heady feeling.

* * *

Cymbre parked in front of Shelley's home and walked up to the front door. As she lifted her hand to knock, it swung open and Shelley let out a little surprised squeak.

“Oh! I didn't hear you knock.”

“I didn’t yet.”

“Ah, well, I have great timing it seems. What can I do for you, my dear?”

“I wanted to see Ivar.”

Shelley tilted her head. “He’s not here.”

Disappointment reared its head, but she ignored it. “Where is he?”

“He’s moved in with Breaker. Rehlik is being cautious with him since we don’t know him and he came to us in such strange circumstances. Otherwise he would’ve been given a home of his own. Why are you looking for him?”

“He...he’s my truemate.”

Cymbre cracked her knuckles and fidgeted as Shelley stared at her mutely.

“You were in the woods today.”

“Yes, I was collecting leaves for the boy I nanny for. How did you know?”

“I was in the woods with Ivar collecting blackberry leaves this morning. He was acting quite moody, and then he rushed off for a few minutes and came back even grumpier. I scented you on him and asked if he was okay, but he wouldn’t answer. How did he find you?”

“He saved me from a bad fall, actually.” Cymbre told her what transpired between them.

Shelley leaned on the doorjamb. “I can’t tell you why he walked away from you. I don’t know any male who would be in the presence of his truemate and not at least initiate a

conversation.” She paused like she was going to say something else, but then closed her mouth.

“What?”

She lifted one shoulder. “He’s a male with secrets. I’ve said as much to Rehlik. I believe he’s telling the truth about his family and being alone, but there’s something calculating about him. It could just be that he’s not used to being treated well by people and is in the habit of keeping himself closed off from others. When someone is on the run for as long as he has been, you’d expect him to not be trusting of others right away.”

“You think he’s dangerous?” Cymbre asked.

“No, it’s not that,” Shelley said, waving her hand. “It’s just that I think he’s not ready to tell us who he really is yet, which means we should be cautious. Rehlik is one of the most cautious males I’ve ever known, especially with Weylyn’s pregnancy, so of course he was going to be careful with Ivar anyway.”

Cymbre could relate to not trusting people. She didn’t tell anyone but Rehlik about her history when she came to town. It was months of living with Arely before she’d felt safe sharing the truth of her past. She’d expected backlash or disgust, but she simply got a hug and understanding.

Maybe Ivar didn’t know what that was like.

“Thanks, Shelley. I’ll go find him at Breaker’s.”

“Good luck.”

Cymbre walked to her car and climbed behind the wheel. It would take her only a few minutes to get to

Breaker's, and then she'd be able to see her true mate again.

Nerves ratcheted through her, but she pushed them aside and made a U-turn, heading toward her destiny.

Chapter Six

Ivar felt like he was going to barf. Ever since he'd walked away from his truemate, his beasts had been rebelling in his head. His tiger was roaring, his owl was screeching, and his stomach was so twisted up in knots he thought he'd end up with an ulcer after enduring an entire day with his beasts harassing him.

They were demanding he hunt the female down and tell her everything, including why he was in Cider Falls to begin with.

Hard pass on that.

He had a job to do and he couldn't—and wouldn't—jeopardize Vega's plans for anyone.

There was a knock at the front door and everything within him went quiet. He wasn't even breathing right now.

He heard the door open, then Breaker said, "Oh, hey, Cymbre. What's up?"

Ivar knew the moment the door was opened that it was his truemate. She'd found him, which both elated and troubled him.

"No shit? That's pretty damn awesome. Hey, Ivar? Come out here."

He refused to move, even one inch. He kept his feet firmly rooted to the carpet, because if he moved even a centimeter, he was going to run out and grab her and take her somewhere private.

“Ivar?”

He heard heavy footsteps a few moments later. Breaker looked into the bedroom. “You okay? I was calling you. Cymbre’s here. She said you’re her true mate.”

Ivar slowly released the breath he’d been holding. “I’m not one’s anything. Tell her to leave and not come back.”

Breaker’s brows went high. “Are you serious?”

“Very.” The word was all but growled, his beast furious at not being allowed to even get a glimpse of her. Because Ivar knew if he saw her, he was going to want to toss away everything he’d worked for.

Not to mention that she was gorgeous and didn’t deserve to be tied to a dangerous, fully-evil, beat-up male like himself.

Breaker stared at him for a long moment and then turned and walked away.

Ivar shut the door because he didn’t want to hear the conversation, but the wood did little to obstruct the words said between the female and male.

“I’m sorry, Cymbre, he doesn’t want to see you.”

“What?”

No way to miss the hurt in her voice. It sounded like her heart cracked in half.

“I’m really sorry. I don’t want to make excuses for him, so I’m not going to say what’s on my mind right now because I’ll sound like an ass.”

“What do you want to say?” Her voice was raw, like she was fighting back tears.

“That he’s only been in town for a week and he woke up here after being beaten nearly half to death. He’s got no one on this earth on his side. It may just be too soon for him. I’m sure that doesn’t make it hurt any less.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“Take care.”

The front door shut slowly, and Breaker sighed loudly. He knocked once and then opened the bedroom door. “Is there something going on with you that I should know about and alert the security team?”

Ivar’s brows rose. “What are you talking about?”

“I mean, you just let your true mate walk away. The only reason a male would do that is if he knows he’s in danger and doesn’t want to make her a target.” He paused and then said, “Or, I guess there’s another reason.”

Ivar kept his breathing steady so he didn’t give anything away, but his thoughts were rampaging in his head, worried that his cover was blown. “What other reason would that be?”

“Because you’re not who you say you are.” Breaker folded his arms, his muscles bulging and a soft growl echoing in the room.

Shit.

Ivar rubbed his thumb between his eyes. “You’re way off.”

“About which scenario?”

“I am who I say I am,” he said, dropping his hand. “I’m just not worth having as a mate. She’s beautiful and she deserves a male with a future worthy of her. That’s not me.”

“Isn’t that her decision?”

Ivar frowned.

Breaker continued, “I mean, isn’t it up to her to decide if you’re worth her time? Cymbre’s a great female and she deserves the truth. I just gutted her out there on the porch because you don’t know how to man up and face her.” His gaze hardened. “I won’t do that again. Next time she shows up here, you’re talking to her, even if I have to drag you out there myself. I’m not normally a violent male, but I won’t let you stay with me if you’re going to be an asshole to people I care about.”

Ivar heard him loud and clear.

“I doubt she’ll come back anyway, and she shouldn’t. I don’t want or need a mate.”

“That’s the saddest fucking thing I’ve ever heard in my life.” He shrugged. “The clothes we ordered for you earlier are at the security gate. I’ll head out there with you to pick them up when you’re ready.”

Breaker left him alone in the room.

Ivar sighed and sat heavily on the bed. He hadn’t expected Cymbre to show up at the house. She must’ve gone to Shelley’s looking for him. He didn’t regret saving her from her fall, but he did regret that she was hurting. Nothing to do about that, though.

He had another problem right now, one that was bigger than the personal stuff in his life: Breaker had been at his side the whole time he’d been on his laptop ordering clothes and toiletries, so he hadn’t been able to search for the security team

schedule. At the moment, he had no way to contact Vega and no information to give him even if he could.

When Ivar had formulated his plan originally, he'd expected to be awake and alert after the beating and to be able to slip away from town to feed information to Vega. Not only had Vega's pack members screwed up royally by nearly killing Ivar—something he was going to get plenty of revenge on when this was all over—but he'd been unable to go anywhere in town without an escort. Rehlik didn't fully trust him, and clearly neither did anyone else, judging from the way Breaker suggested he might not be who he said he was.

Ivar needed to do two things: get the security team schedule to Vega and figure out how to take over the town. The schedule was the first step. Once Ivar could see how security was mapped out, he could find vulnerabilities. Vega had planted bear traps at the homes of several high-ranked males using vulnerabilities they'd mapped out in the town's defenses, but now those defenses had been altered. Vega had tried to strike fear into the town's people, but all he'd done was let Rehlik know how closely the pack was watching the security team.

Vega normally wasn't so careless, but Ivar suspected that he was just getting annoyed at not being able to take over yet. Not that Ivar would be telling the male that he'd made a miscalculation, that Vega had done something theatrical instead of tactical and ruined their advantage.

Vega was not a male who liked to have his faults pointed out.

His beasts pushed at him again, images of the female assaulting him. She'd felt so amazing in his arms, even for the

few seconds he'd held her. Soft skin, enticing scent, perfectly made to make a grown male sink to his knees. She was heaven and hell wrapped up in a devastating package.

Breaker had been partly right: Ivar wasn't going to get involved with Cymbre because his life was dangerous. He wasn't such an asshole that he'd entertain the notion of being with her, knowing full well that he was planning to help his alpha take out hers. She'd hate him forever. It would be better if she hated him now than for him to break her heart more fully later on.

And he *would* break her heart, that much was set in stone.

No, Ivar was not a male who wanted or needed a mate, no matter how much his beasts railed at him.

He couldn't—and wouldn't—think about Cymbre anymore. She was a distraction that could get him killed. Or worse, get herself killed.

Rising to his feet, he scrubbed a hand over his face and shook out the thoughts of doing anything but the job he was sent to Cider Falls to do.

Get the schedule. Ditch his escort. Make Vega alpha.

And most importantly, find his sister.

Nothing else mattered.

Period.

Chapter Seven

Cymbre didn't sleep well that night. How the hell could she? Her falcon was in mourning for the mate who didn't want her.

Ivar not wanting to even see her at Breaker's had been humiliating. The look of pity in Breaker's eyes had nearly made her lose it, but she'd been determined not to cry. At least not there. She hadn't wanted Ivar to know how deeply she was hurt by his behavior.

She'd been rejected by her own people and that had felt awful. It had nearly broken her, actually.

But being rejected by the one male on the planet who was meant to be hers?

It felt like she was being carved apart by little knives.

She walked into her house and hung her bag from the hook by the door. "That you, Cym?" Arely called from the kitchen.

"Yeah."

"You alone?"

"Yeah."

"Ah, shit." Arely walked out of the kitchen and into the family room. She gave Cymbre a hug, which made her defenses crumble and the tears start to fall. "What happened?"

In between sobs, she managed to say, "He. Didn't. Want. To. See. Me." Saying the words out loud made her heart break even more.

Shattered, more like. A million little pieces that were never ever going to be put back together right again.

Arely grabbed a box of tissues and handed them to Cymbre, who took a few out and tried to get a handle on her emotions so she could talk. After a few quiet minutes, the tears ebbed and she could share what transpired.

“That fucker!” Arely said.

Cymbre chuckled and wiped her nose. “Don’t make me laugh, it’s not funny.”

“No, it’s not.” Arely rested her head on the back of the couch. “You said Shelley told you he had secrets, that he was keeping things back and it made Rehlik wary, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So maybe he has a reason not to want to get close to you. Maybe he worries you’ll be in danger.”

“Wouldn’t a male like him want to keep me safe, though? I thought that’s how all shifter males are.”

“Well, I suppose, but he nearly died himself a week ago. How could he say he’d keep you safe if he couldn’t keep himself safe?”

“Good point.” Cymbre sighed and leaned back against the couch. She picked at the tissue in her hands. “I didn’t think I’d get rejected. He couldn’t even see me to do it. He told Breaker.” Even though they’d been in a different room, she’d still heard Ivar’s growly voice tell Breaker he wasn’t anyone’s mate and she wasn’t to come back.

“Like I said, he’s a fucker.” A timer beeped in the kitchen, and Arely got up. “I made nachos.”

Cymbre looked over the back of the couch as Arely left the room. “You did? That’s what you make when one of us is sad.”

“Well, I *was* kind of bummed,” she said, peeking back into the room. “I thought you were going to bring him home tonight and I’d have to go bunk at Diem’s place while you two rattled the headboard.”

Cymbre made a face.

“Sorry,” Arely said with a grimace. “I wanted nachos because I thought things might be changing here in the house. But now nothing’s changing and you need the nachos. So I guess it’s a win-win.”

“Or a lose-lose,” Cymbre said. She sure felt like a loser. Even if Ivar had a good reason for not wanting to be with her, he could’ve at least told her to her face.

“Meh. He’s the loser. And I think he’ll come around.”

“How do you figure?”

“Because you’re amazing. He won’t be able to stay away from you because you’re truemates. The pull to you will be too strong.”

“That’s a nice thought, but you didn’t hear him.”

Arely shrugged. “Maybe not, but look how miserable Trace was when Jewel walked away. She said she was miserable too. I think the pull between mates is strong. Unless he leaves town because he’s a coward, he’s going to come to you eventually. Then you’ll make him work to get your love.”

“I like the thought, but I’m not sure I believe you.”

“Well, you can trust that I care about you and I want the best for you. Now I’m pissed at Ivar and about to go hunt him down and give him a piece of my mind.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Don’t worry, I probably won’t.” Arely disappeared into the kitchen.

If Cymbre had any confidence in herself right now, she’d stalk right back over to Breaker’s and force Ivar to look her in the eyes and tell her he didn’t want her. But she was afraid if she did, that the truth would come out—she wasn’t someone a male would want to be tied to. For a moment, she wondered once more if he knew her past and that was why he didn’t want to be with her, but as quickly as the thought appeared, she shoved it away. Rehlik wouldn’t tell Ivar about her history, and he was the only one who knew about her past that had been in contact with Ivar.

Arely appeared holding a platter of nachos piled high with cheese, seasoned meat, chopped tomatoes, and black beans. A container of sour cream was tucked under one arm, and two bottles of soda were under the other.

Cymbre sat up and grabbed the drinks and sour cream. Arely set the platter on the coffee table and sat down on the couch, scooting the table close.

“Let’s binge-watch something fun, like one of those reality shows.”

“Just not a romance-based one.”

Cymbre opened the sour cream and gave it a stir with a spoon Arely produced from her pocket, which had been wrapped in several napkins.

“Cooking or house hunting?” Cymbre asked.

“Cooking,” Arely said. “One of the ones where the judges crush people’s dreams. It’ll take your mind off things.”

It was a nice thought, but Cymbre didn’t think anything would take her mind off her aching heart. Nachos and TV might help, though.

* * *

Jewel Hastings, black bear shifter, mate and soon-to-be wife of Trace Powell, and former FSA darling, stared at the laptop screen and yawned. She’d worked the early shift with security, which had ended a few hours ago, but she was waiting for Trace to come home so they could have dinner together. And then hit the bed for some fun before she passed out from sheer exhaustion.

She’d worked hard when she’d been a Hunter for the FSA, but being on the security team for the Cider Falls pack was an entirely different thing. She wasn’t tracking down some exiled on-the-run shifter, she was trying to keep an entire town full of people safe from a crackpot who kept trying to harm them. If they only knew who he or she was and what they wanted, they could figure out how to defend themselves. The attacks were always so random and they’d never gotten anyone on camera, except for one female who appeared to be working with whoever was against them.

She opened her email. Since the beat-up male, Ivar, had woken up and shared his heartbreaking story, she’d decided to look into things. It was not entirely unheard of for a small

group of shifters to be under the radar of the FSA. It wouldn't be easy, but it could be done. The FSA was only so big and the country was large. A small group of hybrids could hide out and never be detected. It would start with someone deciding not to register their offspring, which also meant no physical trace of them anywhere—no birth certificate or driver's license or credit report. How Ivar's family had managed to be off-grid for decades was a mystery, and considering that they'd been taken out by another shifter group for their territory meant she'd never get to ask them.

She could ask Ivar, and she would when she got to know him better.

But first, she wanted to try to find his sister.

Because of her work with the FSA, she had access to back-channel search engines that most people didn't know about. She'd set up a few dozen alerts using the information she'd gotten from a chat with Ivar, plus what he'd told Rehlik as well. Ten years ago, his sister had been abducted and he'd been left for dead. They were gryphons—tiger and snow owl hybrids. His sister would have been taken for one of two reasons—either to abuse or to sell. Whoever took her may have intended to make her a sex slave or to sell her as one, or they may have wanted to sell her to someone who collected rare hybrids.

During her time as a Hunter, she'd run into sick people who did awful things like that. She'd been chasing an exiled hybrid a few years ago and crossed paths with human hunters who were trailing the same male she was. She'd forced them to back off and then taken the male in herself, saving him from being sold as some kind of collector's item. Who knew what

sick people like that did with hybrids? She shivered, thinking about how utterly devoid of emotion those humans had been. They really thought of shifters as animals, like a big game hunter might take out an elephant in another country for fun.

Bringing her mind back to the present, she scanned her inbox and hummed in surprise. There was an alert for a set of keywords: unique hybrid, female hybrid, real gryphon.

She clicked on the email just as the front door opened and Trace walked in.

“Hey, baby,” he said, striding toward her with a big grin.

She put the laptop on the couch and stood to meet him. He enveloped her in a big hug and lifted her off the floor for a moment. Their lips met and he snarled softly, his chest rumbling.

“Missed you,” he said gruffly, kissing her neck and hugging her tightly.

“I missed you too.” She closed her eyes and hummed happily. “How was work?”

“Sucked because I was away from you. How was your day?”

“Same.” She smiled at him. “I just saw an alert for some searches I set up.”

“Nice.” There was a knock at the door.

“Who’s that?” she asked.

He walked to the door and said, “I asked Farley to run over two specials for dinner for us.”

“Aw, that’s nice. I was going to make something.”

“No need, baby, I’ve got us covered.” He opened the door and took a large paper sack from the young male, then handed him a tip. “Thank your dad for me, kid.”

“You bet. Have a nice night.”

Jewel sat back down on the couch and pulled the computer onto her lap. Trace went into the kitchen while she looked up the results. By the time she had the page loaded with the results, he was setting two plates filled with roast beef and mashed potatoes with a pile of cooked baby carrots on the side.

“That smells amazing,” she said, her stomach growling.

“Not as good as you.”

She nudged him with a laugh. “You’re incorrigible.”

“Just for my sweetheart. So what’s the alert say?”

She scanned the page. “It’s a link to a social media post from last week.” She clicked on the link to the post. A person had taken a picture of a circus tent with a clown juggling bowling pins out front. The caption said, “Best circus ever. So many clowns, ack! LOL. Amazing side show with a bird man, some kind of cat-bird lady, and a guy who could lift a thousand pounds! And so much cotton candy too! Can’t wait to go back tomorrow!!”

“Those aren’t any of your search terms, though,” Trace said. “How did it even ping on your searches?”

“Because one of the comments said the cat-bird lady was a gryphon.”

“Wow. Where is the circus?”

“It doesn’t say. I’m going to do some digging on this person’s social media footprint and see if I can get more information. If I can find out where this person is, I can figure out what circus is in the area and make contact.”

“That’s pretty damn awesome. So this wouldn’t have shown up on a regular search? Ivar said he’s been searching for his sister for ten years and chasing leads.”

“No, I’m on the back-channels I told you about.”

He smiled. “Super-secret FSA stuff, yeah?”

“Pretty much.”

She put the laptop on the coffee table and picked up the plate. After taking a bite of meat and potatoes, she groaned. “This is amazing.”

“I love that sound you made,” he said with a chuckle. “Makes me want to put the plates down, but you’ll need your energy.”

She grinned. “I’ll eat quick.”

“Want to reach out to Ivar tonight?”

“Yeah, actually I do. Does he have a cell phone?”

“No. He said he didn’t know what happened to it, and he always used disposable ones to stay off-grid anyway, so no way to track it.”

She hummed. The FSA would have a cow if they knew there was an entire group of shifters, including hybrids, unregistered and hiding out. It actually made her appreciate how much dedication it took to pull off such a feat.

“I’ll call Breaker,” Trace said. “He can share the good news with Ivar.”

“Hopefully it’s good news. I mean, it’s definitely promising, but also since the person posting appears to be human, they might be mistaken. Or it could be some kind of trickery the circus is putting on.”

“Good point. You can make sure Ivar understands. It might be the break he needs to find his sister, though.”

They changed topics to discuss their respective days, and then Trace put the dishes away while she connected to Ivar through Breaker. The male was stunned and cautiously optimistic that she might’ve found the lead he’d been missing all these years.

After ending the call, she set the phone down and looked at Trace. He growled softly, his eyes flashing.

“I think we have some plans,” he said, his voice going low and making her skin prickle.

“Take me to bed, Trace. I’m all yours.”

Chapter Eight

“Hey,” Breaker said from the doorway of the bedroom. “Phone for ya.”

Ivar looked up from where he was putting away the freshly-washed new clothes. He didn't ask the question that was on his mind.

“It's not her, it's Jewel,” Breaker said, rolling his eyes.

“Oh.”

He put down the jeans and walked to the male. Taking the phone, he said, “Hello, Jewel.”

He'd met the dark-haired beauty after he'd woken up. She was a purebred black bear and mated to Trace, who was a hyena-warlock hybrid.

“Hi, Ivar. How are things going?”

“Well. You?”

“I just wanted to let you know that I got a hit on one of my online queries.”

His mind blanked for a moment, and then he realized she was talking about an online search for his sister. “You were searching for her?”

“Sure,” she said. “When you woke up and told us your story, I wanted to see if I could find her.”

He was touched. “I've gotten plenty of hits over the years too,” he said. They were always dead ends.

“Well, I have access to search capabilities you wouldn’t have,” she said.

He frowned, trying to ignore the bit of hope that bloomed in his chest. “What did you find?”

“Someone was at a circus and saw a person they described as a cat-bird. The search engine picked up a comment on the social media post saying it was a gryphon. So it could be nothing, you know. But it could be something.”

He swallowed hard. “What...what should I do?”

“Nothing right now. I need time to dig into things. The social media post has no location, so I’ll have to deep dive. I’ll keep you posted. I just wanted to let you know that I might have a real lead.”

“Why are you helping me? You don’t know me.”

“Well, first because I felt bad for you. You lost your whole family, and she’s out there alone too. But then I especially wanted to help after I heard you’re Cymbre’s truemate. I don’t want you to have to keep traveling and searching for your sister. We find her, bring her here to safety, and everyone can live happily ever after.”

His beasts were one hundred percent on board with that plan.

He, however, was not.

“Hold up. While I appreciate you looking for my sister, and I truly hope that your lead pans out, I don’t have a mate.”

“But...Cymbre—”

“Is a very nice female, I’m sure, but she isn’t anything to me.”

His beasts roared so loud in his head at the blatant lie that he nearly dropped the phone.

There was a significant pause, and then Jewel said, “I see. Well, I’ll keep you updated on what I find.”

“Thank you.”

The call ended and he stared at the phone for a moment before he handed it back to Breaker.

“Sticking to that, huh?”

“I’m just being honest. I’m not anyone’s mate.”

“Tell that to your eyes.”

“What?”

“They’re so bright amber they’re practically glowing. I think your beasts want you to go find Cymbre. What are you fighting so hard for?”

Ivar went with the simplest answer, hoping it would satisfy Breaker.

“I need to find my sister.”

“So you’re breaking Cymbre’s heart because you’ve got a mission? She could be there for you, you know. She’s a nice girl.”

Ivar’s upper lip curled and he let out a short growl. Then he stopped it short. Breaker wasn’t wrong, but it ultimately didn’t matter. He did have a mission and it involved taking out the alphas of Cider Falls.

“Can I use your laptop? I’d like to do some more searching.”

“Yeah, sure. Come on out to the family room. I’ll make some sandwiches for dinner.”

“Appreciate it.” He looked Breaker in the eyes. “I mean it. You’ve been more generous than I deserve.”

“We’re all in this together, you know? You’re here in Cider Falls and that makes you part of the town, even if you’re not a pack member yet.”

He followed Breaker to the family room, who used his fingerprint to unlock the laptop and then handed it to Ivar.

Ivar stared at the screen, his thoughts a mess as Breaker left him alone in the room to go to the kitchen. In all the years he’d been with Vega, the male had never once offered to truly help him find Yva. He’d never sent other males along with him to help search or used other resources to locate her. He’d always used Ivar for his own purposes. The only thing Vega had ever really done for Ivar was give him money for his search, but that money had come at a cost. Ivar had to hurt and kill to earn it.

He’d been in Cider Falls for over a week. The people of the town had been kinder to him in those days more than anyone else. They were wary of him still, and that was smart, but they weren’t keeping him locked up or telling him to leave town. Rehlik was a good male, and Ivar had heard that his mate was pregnant. Vega wouldn’t care about any of that. He wanted Rehlik dead.

Before he’d nearly been killed by his own pack, Ivar would’ve killed Rehlik for Vega without question.

But now that he’d been taken in, healed, and cared for? And add Cymbre to the mix too?

Fuck.

Ivar ground his teeth together and pushed his beasts away mentally. He could not back down now—he'd come too far. Vega was waiting for him, period.

Tilting his head, he listened intently to Breaker in the kitchen, ensuring the male was not heading into the family room.

And then he went to the search icon on the home screen and typed in “schedule.” Nothing came up. He tried “security,” to no avail. And then he typed “calendar,” and an online calendar opened, showing a color-coded screen. He opened a private internet page and logged into his email, then sent a screenshot of the calendar page to himself. He needed time to look at it before he sent it on to Vega, so he could give him some idea of how to utilize it best. He heard footsteps approaching and quickly closed out the calendar and deleted the search term.

He put the new email message into a folder, then turned his attention to his own search results, finding nothing new in the last week.

“Any luck?” Breaker asked.

“Nothing new. Jewel really must have access to things I don't.”

“Maybe the lead will pan out. I'll keep my fingers crossed.”

Ivar nodded. He put the laptop on the coffee table and took the offered plate, piled high with chips and two large chicken sandwiches.

A lump formed in his throat as he took a bite of the sandwich. He wouldn't have found the lead that Jewel did on his own, which meant he needed to ensure he got all the information from her before everything in town went to hell. It wasn't a nice thing that he was planning, it wasn't honorable by any stretch, but he'd promised to help Vega become alpha of Cider Falls and he was damn well going to do it.

After he got the information on Yva.

Chapter Nine

Cymbre stood in the aisle of the tiny grocery on Main Street in Cider Falls and pondered the list on her phone. She normally would've done her shopping at the big chain store on the way home from work, but because the pack was on high alert, Rehlik had asked anyone traveling out of town for work to only do the bare minimum alone. Which meant she needed to do her shopping in town for now. She had only thirty minutes before she needed to head to work, but she couldn't seem to focus.

The basket was digging into her arm thanks to the jar of alfredo sauce and the package of chicken breasts. Transferring it to the other side, she reached up for a container of parmesan cheese when she heard her name whispered in the next aisle over.

"It's a shame, you know?" a female said in a low voice.

"I know!" another female said. "I heard from my mate that he refused to even see her. Can you imagine how Cymbre feels to be rejected by her mate like that? I feel so bad for her."

"I'd never come out of the house again, that's for sure."

Cymbre's cheeks heated. Holy crap, people were gossiping about her! She knew without seeing their faces that the two females were Reba and Tasha. Tasha and her mate ran the grocery store, and Reba worked at the school. Cymbre didn't know either of them well, and after hearing their gossip, she didn't want to.

She wasn't one of those females who liked to confront people, and she wasn't going to start now. She put the jar of sauce back on the shelf and headed toward the refrigerator case to return the chicken.

As she walked toward the doors, the owner, Vance, called out, "Hey, Cymbre, where are you off to?"

"Work," she said with a clipped tone, stepping on the square black mat to trigger the door mechanism. She didn't hear if he asked her anything else; she simply walked to her car and got behind the wheel.

She needed groceries for herself and Arely, but she'd just order them for delivery and pick them up at the guard station on the way home. As she drove, she put the windows down and inhaled the sweet morning air. She was angry and hurt, but it wasn't just about the females gossiping so much as it was the fact that Ivar—her mate—was in town and refused to see her. She didn't even blame the females for gossiping. If she heard something similar about someone else, she'd gossip too. Probably not at the grocery store, though.

She sighed and focused on the drive, blotting out the pitying words of females who couldn't possibly know how devastating it truly felt to be rejected by a male who was supposed to be her forever guy.

Cut in half. Torn apart. Utterly ruined.

Her eyes pricked with tears, and she blinked them away with an angry grunt.

She was not going to let her whole day be ruined. It was hard enough to deal with her falcon's feelings, let alone knowing that people in town knew what happened between her

and Ivar—or the lack of it—and were talking amongst themselves.

There was a little boy to watch get on the school bus and a baby to tend to.

Nothing else mattered today. She'd simply do her job to the best of her abilities and not think about anything, or anyone, else.

* * *

“Are you okay?” Bethann asked as she took baby Riley from Cymbre’s arms and gave her a hug. “Oh, I missed you, baby girl!”

“I’m good, why?” Cymbre asked.

She wiped up a spill on the table and carried the towel to the sink to rinse it out.

“You seem sad.”

“Oh, well, I’m not trying to be sad.”

“Um, what?”

“Well, I am sad, but I’m trying to be outwardly happy so people don’t ask me why I’m sad.”

Bethann chuckled. “I’d say you failed. So you’re not okay? Do you want to talk?”

“It’s a situation out of my control.”

“That happens. What’s up?”

Bethann put Riley in her highchair and sat in front of her, picking up a jar of carrots and a small red plastic spoon.

Cymbre really didn't want to talk about the situation with Ivar, but before she knew what was happening, she'd spilled the entire story to her boss. She managed to get through it without crying, though, but she supposed that was because she felt fairly cried-out and exhausted.

Bethann looked at Cymbre. "So I don't really get this whole truemate thing. Is that like soulmates? Like love at first sight?"

If only.

"Kind of, but not entirely. Soulmates and love at first sight are a human thing, built on feelings and emotions. With truemates, it's as much an outward attraction as it is our animal natures being in sync with each other. I was feeling off for a few days, couldn't really put my finger on it. Then I met him and knew he was mine. That's what sucks."

"Does he know you're his too?"

"Yeah."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. She'd heard Breaker tell Ivar what she'd said about them being truemates. But she also knew in her heart that Ivar knew exactly who she was to him, what they were to each other.

"It would be easier if he didn't know, then I could just tell him and we could live happily ever after. That's not the case, though."

“That does suck. I’m so sorry. What are you going to do?” Bethann put the lid on the carrots and opened a jar of pureed chicken and rice.

“Sulk.”

With a laugh, she said, “Hey, I could fix you up. There’s a really cute guy at my work who’s single. His name is Paul.”

“That’s sweet, but it wouldn’t be right to date someone when I have a true mate.”

“But he doesn’t want you, right? I mean, he’s being an a-s-s.” She whisper-spelled the word ass, which made Cymbre chuckle.

“He is. But if I went on a date with a guy who wasn’t Ivar, then I’d just be lying to myself anyway. My falcon won’t let me be with anyone else but Ivar in a forever kind of way. It wouldn’t be fair to Paul, or any other guy.”

Bethann hummed as she fed Riley, who did not like the chicken and rice as much as she’d liked the carrots.

Davy said, “When you fly, do real birds know you’re not a real bird?”

Cymbre looked at him in surprise; he’d never really asked her about being a shifter. “Non-shifter birds usually stay away from shifters in general. I couldn’t join up with a flock of natural falcons because they’d fly away from me.”

He nodded like that was the answer he’d expected and went back to eating.

“So what are you going to do?” Bethann asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to pine for someone who doesn’t want me, though. I wish... I wish I knew why he was

against mating me.”

“Maybe it’s not about you at all. Maybe he’s vowed to find his sister first and he’s worried it’s dangerous.”

“If that were true, though, you’d think he would actually tell me and not just leave me hanging like a single sock on the clothesline.”

“You’d think so, but guys aren’t always the brightest,” she said.

Bethann’s husband, Carson, walked into the kitchen. “Hey!”

“Present company excluded, of course,” she said, tilting her face for a kiss.

Cymbre greeted Carson. She shouldered her bag and said goodbye to the kids.

“Thanks for the chat,” she said to Bethann.

“I hope he comes around soon. You’re not a sock.”

Cymbre smiled and walked out of the kitchen.

“What do you mean she’s not a sock?” Carson asked.

Cymbre didn’t hear Bethann’s response. She shut the front door and walked to her car. Bethann might be right, that Ivar wasn’t going to get involved with anyone, even his true mate, until he found his sister. He might have a totally noble reason for ignoring her, but it didn’t change how hurt she was by the whole situation.

As much as it pained her, until he sought her out, she was going to leave things as they were.

She might not want to be a sock, but she sure as hell felt like one.

Chapter Ten

Ivar sat at the back of the bar Tuesday night. He'd been in Cider Falls for two weeks now. Even with the patrol schedule in his email, he hadn't been able to study it. He could've just forwarded it directly to Vega, and he probably should've done that, but now he was stuck waiting for an opportunity to use Breaker's laptop again.

He'd spent the day in the security booth, which sat in the center of the main road into town with Breaker and Jewel.

She'd made minor headway into chasing down the lead. She now knew the social media post had been made in Tennessee, but she hadn't been able to pinpoint the location yet.

"Don't lose hope," she'd told him before the shift had ended.

"I haven't yet," he said.

Breaker had invited him to the bar—Brewz—which was co-owned by Rehlik and Trace. Ivar had scouted the bar for Vega before and relayed that he thought the bar would be a good place to lay an attack if what he wanted was to devastate the pack and drive them out. Most everyone hung out at the bar from time to time, from the highest-ranked males to the mated couples who left their children home with babysitters to enjoy a night out.

But Vega hadn't wanted to take out a huge chunk of the pack. He just wanted Rehlik out, keeping as many original pack members as those who wanted to stay. Everyone knew

that in order to hold onto your own territory, an alpha needed a large group of people supporting him. If a shifter group's numbers were too small, they were easy prey for other alphas wanting to take over. Since there didn't seem to be all that many exile-welcome towns in the States, Cider Falls was a gem worth having, and Vega wanted to control it.

Ivar's gaze roamed the bar.

He counted a half dozen members of the security team, several of them playing pool. Females danced in small groups on the dance floor. Servers bussed tables and carried trays of drinks and appetizers. The whole place smelled like beer and onion rings, mixed up with the different scents of the people in the crowded space. Big cats, lots of wolves, bears, even a gorilla if he was scenting right, not to mention the various hybrid mixes.

"So, she lives with Arely," Breaker said.

Ivar blinked in confusion.

"Who does?"

"Your truemate."

Biting back a snarl—because he didn't need to piss anyone off or look aggressive—he shook his head but didn't say anything.

"Fine." Breaker snorted. "Lie to yourself, but you're not fooling anyone."

Ivar took a drink of beer, setting the bottle down a little too hard on the table and making a clanging sound. "I'm not trying to fool anyone. I have responsibilities."

“To your sister? So you won’t take your truemate until you find her?”

That was the simplest answer he could give, even though it was only a half-truth.

“Yes.”

“Cymbre would help you in your search. There isn’t anything tying her here except friendships.”

“Why are you so interested in my situation?” Ivar asked.

Breaker shrugged. “I think you’re being a jackass.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s true. What else would you call a male who has his truemate in the same town as him but refuses to even see her? Speaking of that, why won’t you see her? You could at least be less of a jackass if you talked to her.”

Because if I talk to her, I’ll want to be with her and throw out all my responsibilities.

Because the moment I talk to her, I’ll want to make her a priority, and then who will look for Yva?

“It’s better this way.”

“So you’re leaving town, then?” Breaker took another drink.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s no way in hell you can be in town and stay away from her. Which means you’re taking off, sooner rather than later. Hell, I can see in your eyes that you’re halfway out the door in search of your sister in your mind, and it’s just a matter of time before you leave.”

Which was why he needed to figure out the security team schedule, send it to Vega with a plan to take over, and get things moving. The longer he spent with the townspeople, the more he liked them, and he couldn't do his job if he actually cared for the people.

Ivar drained his beer and put the bottle down. "Are you working tomorrow?"

"Wow, change the subject much?" Breaker laughed. "And yes."

"Oh."

"Why? You can stick with me again if you want. You'll need to make a choice about your future—staying here or moving on—and talk to Rehlik and Weston, who head up security, but we can always use more manpower to keep the town safe. If you stayed, you could join the security team and mate Cymbre, crank out a half dozen babies and live a good life here."

"A half dozen?"

"Sure, why the hell not?"

"Because I'm not anyone's true mate." He slipped from the stool. "I'm going to walk back to the house. Do you need to come with me like an escort?"

"Nah. We haven't seen any evidence of the people who hurt you trying to come into town. Rehlik said we should keep a lookout still, so I'd caution you to be careful, but our security team kicks ass, so no one will get to you."

"I'm not worried."

Breaker smiled like it was a compliment, but it hadn't been. Ivar wasn't worried about someone attacking him, but the townspeople should be.

He said goodbye to Breaker and walked out of the bar. When he was a few feet from the bar, he stopped and inhaled deeply, letting the night air saturate his lungs. His beasts were silent for a long moment, and he enjoyed the quiet in his head.

And then the door to the bar opened and closed, and a wave of delicious scent washed over him, all honey and flowers.

His tiger growled, his owl screeching happily.

Cymbre.

* * *

“Hey! I wanna...I wanna talk to you!”

She wasn't drunk.

Okay, she was a little drunk.

Or a lot.

She'd had a pregame drink—or two—at the house before coming to the bar. She'd been in Rehlik and Weylyn's office at the bar, talking to Weylyn about what a shitty situation she was in, when she'd gotten the feeling that her truemate was nearby. Abandoning her vodka cranberry on the desk, she hurried from the office in time to see Ivar stalking from the bar and heading outside.

He'd been in the bar while she was there, and she hadn't even realized it!

So she did what any female would do—who was three sheets to the wind—and charged out of the bar after him.

He was standing in the parking lot, his head tilted back, his eyes closed, and his chest expanding as he breathed deeply.

He looked so very peaceful at that moment, and so super-delicious sexy that she wanted to climb him like a tree.

When the door shut behind her, it made a breeze that ruffled her hair, which made Ivar turn with a growl and face her, his eyes glowing amber and his fangs peeking from his parted lips. He was purely male shifter in that moment, and she was ready to be claimed.

All her carefully thought-out conversations for when she finally met up with him went flying from her mind.

Instead, her eyes filled with tears.

“Why don't you want me? Is it—is it because I got so many people killed?”

* * *

Ivar couldn't have been more surprised by the words that came out of the beautiful Cymbre's mouth than if she'd also spoken them in French.

Her words were filled with anguish, her sorrow palpable.

He'd never seen a female so thoroughly broken before.

But what she'd said didn't make sense.

Although the smart thing to do was walk away and leave her crying in a puddle in the parking lot, he threw smart out the window and closed the distance between them. He stopped a mere foot away.

“Cymbre.”

She shivered when he said her name, hiccupping and crying a little harder.

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“You don’t want me. You said it to B-Breaker.” She pulled her sleeve down her arm and wiped her tears, but more fell anyway. “You’ve been in town for two weeks! That’s way too long to stay away from me if you wanted me. You must’ve heard what I did to my people and why I’m here. I always—” She blew out a breath. “I always knew I wouldn’t get a true mate because I was evil. But then I found you and you don’t want me. It’s too harsh, too cruel.”

“What do you mean that you killed people?”

She was petite and curved in all the right places. She certainly didn’t look like a killer.

And he knew killers.

He grasped her arm gently and pulled her to Breaker’s truck. He put the tailgate down and lifted her onto it, since she looked like she was about to fall over. She was a little drunk, but she also looked so sad and defeated. He’d done that to her. Put that sorrow into her life.

His heart pricked.

It felt like, for the first time since his family had been killed, that he had genuine concern and care for someone. This

was not how it was supposed to be. He was supposed to get into town, figure out how to get Vega into power, and get back on the road and find Yva.

“Ivar?”

“I’m here,” he said with a low voice. He kept his hands at his sides because he felt like he’d already touched her too much. She was addictive in small doses, let alone if he let himself fully be with her in the moment. “What were you talking about?”

“I was arranged to be mated. It’s what falcons do. I was the daughter of the second-in-command of our nest.” She sighed and rubbed her eyes with the heels of her palms. “My alpha picked a male who was high-ranked from another nest. We were arranged when I was little. I barely even remember meeting him. When I was finished with school, the alpha said it was time to join us together, but I wanted to do other things before I settled down. I’d never been allowed to travel anywhere without my family, and college was out of the question because females didn’t need higher education. We were meant to be mates and mothers, and nothing else.”

His owl let out an angry call in his head. Females were to be treasured, but not have their wings clipped.

“We met with the other nest. I had already told my parents I didn’t want to go through with it, but they wouldn’t listen. They kept saying I’d grow to love him, that maybe he’d let me go to college or let me travel.” She made an irritated sound. “Can you imagine how that feels? That I had to trust a male I didn’t know to make all my decisions? That I’d have to hope that he ‘let’ me do the things I’d dreamed about since I

was a kid?” She shook her head, a low, mournful sound coming from her throat.

Ivar knew the sound. It was her bird’s mourning call.

When she didn’t speak again, he let her have a little time to collect her thoughts. After a few minutes, she said, “He was good-looking in an arrogant kind of way, the sort of male you’d see in a sharp suit in a magazine. But I wasn’t attracted to him at all, and I could tell by the way he apprised me when we met that night that he thought of me as property. He wouldn’t have ever let me have a life outside of the house.” Cymbre lifted her head and stared at Ivar, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

“A male of worth would support his female, not keep her proverbially chained to the stove.”

She let out a mirthless laugh. “I think he wanted to do that, actually. He was destined to be the next alpha, and alpha females were expected to be seen and not heard, angels in the kitchen and wildcats in the bedroom, cranking out as many babies as their mate saw fit. I could see it in his eyes. I knew I’d die a little every day in that life. So I said no. I told him, his alpha, and my alpha—and my parents—that I’d never mate him. That I’d rather live alone for the rest of my life than be with someone who would keep me underfoot. I turned to leave, and he grabbed me and spun me around. His fingernails had elongated into sharp talons, and he dug deep holes into my skin.” She gripped her left arm and made a pained face, like she could still recall how it felt.

Ivar wanted to hunt the male down and dig some claws into him too.

Her eyes got a faraway look. “I dream about that night a lot. My dad intervened and took me away, and our nest followed. The alpha was furious and said he’d deal with me in the morning. My parents locked me in my room that night, and I fell asleep crying.”

Her story continued, fresh tears falling, as she told Ivar how she’d woken up to the smell of smoke and the sound of screams. Her house was on fire. The door, which was still locked, was hot to the touch, so she’d used a chair to break the window and found half the homes in the nest on fire. People were fighting all around, and there were bodies everywhere. She went around to the front of the house to find her parents and saw the male she was arranged to mate standing over their lifeless bodies.

“I ran away,” she said, her voice getting a hollow tone. “My alpha found me the next morning, passed out by a stream. I don’t remember falling, but I had a sprained ankle and couldn’t walk. He brought me to the ruins of my childhood home, next to the bodies of my parents, and blamed me for their deaths. Our nest lost dozens in the fight. The other nest took me breaking the arranged mating as a sign of aggression and retaliated. He chained me to the porch next to their bodies while he waited for the witch to show up to brand me.”

Ivar’s heart cracked.

She’d been through so much, through no fault of her own.

He grasped her hands and gave them a squeeze. “Where is this nest, the one with the arranged mate?”

She tilted her head and blinked luminous eyes at him. “He’s dead.”

“Did you kill him?”

She shook her head. “I came right here and joined the pack. I knew about Cider Falls because I’d been wondering if I could choose to be exiled and find a new place to live instead of the arranged mating. After I’d been here a few weeks, Rehlik reached out to some contacts and discovered that the nest attacked mine again a few weeks later. I think they were looking for me, honestly. My alpha died in the fight and so did the male I’d been arranged to mate. The alpha of the other nest was badly injured, and the next in line of my old nest ran him and his people away and took over. I wasn’t sad that they were dead—that male and my old alpha—because they’d been part of the problem. But I know what I am, I know what I did, what I caused.”

He snarled, his tiger coming out. He knew his fangs had elongated because they pricked his bottom lip.

“You were a victim and you stood up for yourself. Your alpha is dead and so is the male who tried to claim you, otherwise I’d be on my way there right now to take them both out.” He let go of her hands and cupped her face. “But you, Cymbre, are no killer. You have a right to say what your future is.”

She tilted her head. “It doesn’t feel like it.”

He dropped his head to his chest and sighed. He felt his beasts push the last thoughts of Vega from his mind as she leaned slowly toward him.

He could’ve pulled away, could’ve walked away, but in a way he wasn’t able to.

Their lips met and everything inside him quieted for a profound moment. There was only her and him, right now in the moonlight, with only the sound of occasional passing cars and the muffled music from the bar.

Maybe he should've walked away, but he didn't.

Chapter Eleven

The first brush of his lips against hers and Cymbre was entirely lost. He smelled amazing, like leather and spices, and she could hear the call of his owl mixed with the purr of his tiger. Their lips parted, their tongues dancing and tasting. He pulled her roughly against him, caressing her with his calloused hands.

She shivered again, anxious for more contact.

She touched his arms, running her fingers up under his short sleeves and feeling the taut muscle under his warm skin.

“Um, oops.”

Cymbre pulled back from the kiss, her head swimming a little. Mostly from the kiss, but also all the drinks earlier.

She peeked around Ivar and saw Arely, keys in hand.

“Hey,” Cymbre said. “This is Ivar.”

“Clearly,” she said with a snort. “I’m Arely, the roommate. I didn’t mean to interrupt, you just surprised me. I was... going to go to Diem’s for the night. Do you guys need a ride?”

“Actually,” Breaker said, coming to stand next to them. “Ivar can take you home in my truck if Arely will give me a ride home.”

“You bet.” Arely unhooked a house key from her key ring and handed it to Ivar.

Cymbre wasn't even sure if Ivar wanted to take her home, and she didn't have time to really ask before Breaker put his keys next to her on the tailgate and walked away with Arely.

"Guess you're stuck with me," she said.

"Indeed." He fisted the keys and helped her off the tailgate. She wobbled on her feet, suddenly wishing she'd dressed cuter. She'd worn jeans and a plain T-shirt, with her favorite canvas shoes that were black with sunflowers.

He shut the tailgate, then took her elbow and led her to the passenger side of the truck. It was one of those big trucks that she wouldn't have been able to get into without a stepladder, but Ivar simply lifted her into the seat and shut the door.

He was so freaking strong!

When he was behind the wheel, she asked, "Do you know where I live?"

He glanced at her and shook his head.

"Okay, I'll navigate." She told him to turn left out of the parking lot and take the first right.

She pressed the button to put the window down to get some fresh air. The air was stifling in the truck, and part of that was how turned on she was. And also still kind of drunk. She'd had a total meltdown in the parking lot, but it also kind of felt like a dream, like she'd been watching someone else word-vomit the worst moment of their lives onto a male they kinda, sorta, definitely wanted to see naked.

He hadn't shied away from her, though.

Far from it—he'd wanted to know locations so he could get vengeance for her.

Be freaking still her beating heart!

* * *

Ivar didn't know what to say because he was internally arguing with his beasts, who very much wanted to take the alluring Cymbre to bed and never leave, to mate her over and over until she was well and truly his forever.

But she was drunk, and he was an asshole who wasn't who he said he was.

The worst sort of double agent, who betrayed people not because it benefitted some greater good but because he was beholden to someone else.

This situation sucked hard.

He heard her breathing deeply in sleep right after she told him to turn onto her street and go to the house with the red front door.

Relaxing a little, he rolled his neck and slowed the speed so he could see the front doors. Ten houses from the corner, he saw the red door on the left and pulled into the driveway.

He got out of the truck and leaned against the closed door, inhaling deeply and filling his lungs with the fresh night air. It had been tough being in a close space with her. She smelled too damn good and it was messing with his mind.

He opened the passenger door and lifted her from the truck, kicked the door shut, and carried her to the front door. He held her against himself with one arm, ignoring how good she felt against him, and unlocked the door with the key Arely had given him. He shut and locked it behind him, hung the key on the hook, and carried Cymbre through the front room.

It was easy to follow her scent through the home and locate her room. Setting her gently on the bed, he took off her shoes and set them on the floor, then brought up the blanket from the bottom of the bed.

He straightened and stared down at her. Her story was one of heartbreak and betrayal. She'd been put into an untenable situation as a child, had her feelings disregarded, and been staring down the barrel of a future that wasn't her own. He couldn't imagine facing the choice between exile or a future with someone who would rule over you like some kind of king, controlling every aspect of your life down to what you could do with your free time. She'd made the right choice for herself and people had died, including her parents. She couldn't possibly have known that by refusing to mate that male, she was dooming her parents and her nest. It was easy to see why she blamed herself and considered herself a killer, but she wasn't. He wanted to comfort her, but he really didn't know how. His mom had comforted him as a child, but that wasn't quite the same as a male comforting a female who was meant to be his.

Leaving was the right choice, and he knew it all the way to the center of his being. He should walk right out of town and straight to Vega's to show him the copy of the security team schedule he'd emailed to himself. They could plan the takeover together.

But two things held him back: Yva and Cymbre.

He couldn't guarantee what would happen to Cymbre during the takeover. Could he get her to safety during what was certain to be an epic battle between Vega's pack and the Cider Falls pack? He wasn't sure, and that made something deep within him roar in anger.

Loyalty to Yva and Vega had been his driving force for so long he didn't know how to do anything else. He'd never loved a female before, never cared about one aside from Yva. If he walked from Cider Falls now, there was no way he'd get Jewel's information on Yva, and the only good lead he'd possibly ever have would be gone forever.

Leaving should be the easier choice, but he couldn't seem to make himself do it. His feet were firmly rooted to the spot, watching his mate as she slept off the alcohol. She was gorgeous, but she was also really sweet and kind. She was tenderhearted and clearly well-liked by the people in town. Ivar wasn't well-liked by anyone. He was useful to Vega, a tool to wield to get what he wanted. Cymbre looked at him like she couldn't quite breathe right unless he was with her.

He could relate.

He should leave. But he wasn't going to.

Instead, he was going to crash on the couch and think about the future. There was much to think about.

* * *

Vega Sonight, rightful alpha of Cider Falls, paced in the cabin and waited for news from the males he'd sent to locate Ivar. The male had been gone for far too long and hadn't contacted him or anyone else in the pack. No calls or texts, not even a damn email. He'd known the males had given him a good beating, but he'd heard from the males who dropped him off near the territory line of Cider Falls that he'd been conscious enough to drag himself to where the security team would find him. What if something had gone wrong and he was dead or still injured?

That was going to throw a big wrench in his plans.

Vega needed to know the town layout and security schedule so he could plan the perfect attack. It would happen at night, when most everyone was asleep, that much he was sure of, but he needed more information.

He needed Ivar, who'd helped him plan countless battles.

Rip walked into the front room.

Vega faced him and then wrinkled his nose. "You stink like a human."

"I covered myself in cologne to disguise my scent. I wanted to come find you immediately."

"What did you find out?"

"Ivar was in the bar, sitting at a table with another male. They were having a beer and talking."

"Was he a security team member?"

Rip shrugged. "I don't know. What I'm saying is that he seemed pretty damn chummy."

“How long did you observe him?” Vega asked, dismissing the dig at Ivar’s behavior since Rip didn’t like the male and took every opportunity to talk down about him.

“A few minutes, then he got up. I was concerned he’d come down the hall where I was hanging out and see me, so I ducked out the back and came here.”

Vega chewed on that for a moment. “So he’s alive, at least, and moving around in the town freely. That’s good news.”

“But why hasn’t he reached out?” Rip chided.

“It’s only been two weeks. I know he needs time to infiltrate. I’m certain I’ll hear from him soon, one way or another.”

Rip opened his mouth like he was going to protest, and Vega waved him away.

“Don’t you have patrols to get to?”

The male nodded with a grimace and stalked out of the cabin.

Vega didn’t share it, but he was concerned. Ivar had been gone too long and should’ve found a way to check in by now. That he hadn’t, when he was clearly free to move around the town as he pleased, wasn’t a good sign. If Ivar didn’t contact him soon, Vega was going to have to rethink his plans.

Chapter Twelve

Cymbre woke in the morning, aware of two things: she was still dressed, and she didn't remember getting into bed.

She sat up and tugged the blanket off her legs. Her mind spun as she thought back over the events of the night, and then it came back to her in stunning clarity. She'd told Ivar everything about her past and then apparently passed out in the truck when he'd brought her home.

"Ivar?" she called, wondering if he'd simply put her to bed and left.

She heard him coming down the hall, his footsteps echoing.

"Morning," he said gruffly. He held two mugs in his hands, steam rising from them. "I heard you stirring a few minutes ago and made coffee."

"Milk and sugar?" she asked.

"Yes. It's how I take it. I hoped it was the way you did too." He came into the room, looking delicious in his rumpled clothes, and handed her the mug.

"It is, thank you." She took the mug with both hands and brought it to her lips for a sip. She hummed in surprise because it was exactly how she liked it—more sweet than not, with just the right amount of milk to turn it a medium-beige.

"You're welcome."

She patted the space next to her. "You can sit."

“I should go.” He didn’t take his eyes off her, but his body tensed like he was ready to walk out.

She froze, the mug halfway to her mouth. A protest formed in her mind, but before she could say anything, he sat next to her. “But I won’t.”

“Why should you leave?”

“Because I’m no good for you.”

She took a slow drink, her thoughts roaming. “Because I’m not a good person?”

He gave her an incredulous look followed by a snarl. “I didn’t say *you* were no good, I said I wasn’t. I’m not a good person, Cymbre. You have no idea of the male I was before I came here. But you’re a *very* good person. A really wonderful, sweet female.” He drank from his mug, his beasts making that mixed-up sound of bird and tiger.

“So tell me about your past. I told you mine.”

“I don’t want you to think differently of me.”

“So you’d rather run away than deal with it? Than talk to me? I bared my soul to you last night, and you’re still here. Why would you think I wouldn’t do the same for you?”

He rested the mug on his thigh and stared down at it, like it could tell him the secrets of the universe.

“My sister was taken ten years ago by the people who killed my family. I’ve been searching for her ever since, chasing leads, hurting people to get information. Jewel’s been searching for her on my behalf and has what could be the most credible lead I’ve ever had.”

She'd heard through the grapevine that he was all alone and searching for his sister. She didn't think he was telling her everything, but she wasn't going to push. He was a male used to being on his own and not trusting anyone because he'd been hurt so gravely before.

She heard the finality in his voice.

"When you get the information, you're going to leave," she said.

"I have to find her."

"I can come with you."

He shook his head. "It's often dangerous where I go. It wouldn't be right for me to take you away from your friends and put you in harm's way. Yva's always been my priority. I'll do whatever I can to get to her. Not knowing what happened to her is an ache that's never healed."

She leaned on his shoulder. "I'm sorry you've been alone, but you don't have to be alone anymore. We've got people in the pack who are great trackers. You don't have to be a one-man army to get your sister. You can have help. You can have me."

He exhaled deeply, the sound ending with a growl. "You don't know how badly I want that to be true, but I don't know how long I'm going to be gone. I don't know what I'm going to face. I don't want to tie you to me when I have to leave. Cymbre, for the first time in my life, I want to put someone else besides Yva first, and it's killing me. My sister needs me, but part of me is demanding I stay here with you."

Her eyes pricked with tears, and she was glad she wasn't looking at him because she was liable to start crying.

“If you have to leave, then don’t mate me. Just...stay with me for a while.” She put her arm around his shoulders and squeezed.

She tilted her head to look at him; he was staring at her intently, his eyes flashing amber.

“You’re mine.”

“I am,” she said. “You’re mine too. I would hate if you left—I mean, I’ll definitely cry and maybe beg you not to go, but I’m not going to try to keep you here when you have a sister to rescue. I don’t have siblings, but Arely is like a sister to me, and I’d walk through fire for her.” She straightened and touched the space over his heart. “You can come back to me. I’ll wait.”

His brows furrowed. “You will?”

“Where am I going to go? You’re my truemate, Ivar. There isn’t anyone else for me. Even if you walked away—really walked away? I’d still be here. I’d be pissed, don’t get me wrong, but I’d still be here. I think that’s what being a truemate really means—being there for the other person, no matter what. No matter how hard it gets.”

He turned back to look at his coffee, swallowing audibly. “I don’t deserve you, and you don’t deserve to be treated like this.”

“Let me be the judge of that. I’m just glad that you didn’t run away screaming last night after all I told you.”

He shook his head again. “You did nothing wrong in your nest. They’re wrong, the whole damn lot of them. If your alpha wasn’t dead, and that male you were arranged to mate, I’d kill them myself.”

She believed him.

Rising to her feet, she finished the coffee and set it on the nightstand. “You’ll stay until you hear about Yva from Jewel?”

“I will.”

She held out her hand. “Then come join me in the shower. We may not have a lot of time together before you go on your odyssey. Just promise me one thing.”

He finished his coffee and set the mug next to hers. He rose to his feet slowly, towering over her. “Anything.”

“Don’t go alone, okay? Don’t go looking for your sister by yourself. Take Breaker or someone else with you.”

He seemed to think about that for a long moment, and then he nodded. “You will really be okay with me leaving?”

Was she being a doormat? Maybe a little. Her falcon was just happy he was here with her right now, frankly. The old saying about letting something free to see if it came back to you flashed through her mind.

And maybe by the time he knew where to go find his sister, he’d let her come with him. Or she could do something daring like hide in the truck and not show herself until they were too far to turn back. She’d spent the last couple of days feeling rejected and sad. Now that he was with her and accepted her for all her flaws? Well, there wasn’t anything she wouldn’t do for him, including letting him go to find his sister. He had a noble reason for leaving her; she just hoped he’d find Yva and then come back to her.

“I’m not, actually, because I miss you already and you haven’t left yet. But I understand that you need to find her. Just come back to me when you do.”

He opened his mouth and then closed it. Another nod, but no words.

It seemed like he was keeping something to himself, but everyone had secrets. She was confident he’d tell her in time. Right now, as she took his hand and led him to the bathroom, she was only concerned with seeing him naked. They were mates, and they were going to get naked and soap each other up, and that was good enough for her.

For now.

Chapter Thirteen

Ivar had one brief moment of indecision as he stared at Cymbre's outstretched hand. This was the point of no return. If they had sex, he was never going to let her go. He slid his hand into hers and all indecision fled. As their hands linked, his beasts let out simultaneous calls for her, his tiger roaring its approval, his owl shrieking in joy.

She gifted him with a smile that made him feel warm all the way through.

The bathroom was done up in soft colors, from the beige walls to the jade green bathmats. Cymbre opened the shower door and turned on the water, then faced him.

She let out a chuckle and said, "I want to brush my teeth."

He relaxed. He hadn't realized how tense he felt until that moment.

"Me too."

She rustled items in the cabinet and withdrew a pink toothbrush. "Sorry for the color."

"The function is what matters."

They stood side by side and brushed their teeth. He set the used toothbrush in the holder, which was shaped like a palm tree with holes in several fronds for the brushes. "I like tropical stuff," she said. "I've never been anywhere tropical, but I always thought it would be fun to visit white sandy beaches and be out in the sun all day."

He pulled his shirt off and dropped it onto the tile.
“Maybe we can do that someday.”

Holy hells bells, was he making plans? Future plans?

Searching his feelings quickly, he realized that he liked the idea. He'd never made plans for anything but the next big search for Yva.

Cymbre made a soft sound of surprise, and he froze with his hands on the button of his jeans.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Your...your scars,” she said, her voice tinged with sadness.

“It’s been a rough few years.” He never really thought about the scars, but he knew where each one came from. Most were from the original attack when he lost his family. His healing ability had corrected a lot of damage, but scars had remained. Some were from his search for Yva, some were from fights for Vega.

She reached out a tentative hand and brushed her fingers over a series of long scars across his heart.

“That’s from when I lost my family,” he said. “A wolf tried to claw out my heart.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah,” he said with a chuckle. He picked up her hand and kissed her fingertips. “They don’t hurt now. They’re a reminder that I survived and will continue to survive.”

They stripped, their gazes on each other. With each inch of flesh she bared, he grew more aroused, more in touch with

his beasts. She was perfection, from the waterfall of dark hair to the red polish on her toes. And every damn inch in between.

He felt like his cock was going to rip from his body and go to work on its own if he didn't get down to business with the brunette beauty.

Gripping the shower door, he opened it and stepped under the spray. She followed and closed them in.

Steam surrounded them, the heat enhancing the sweet scent of her arousal.

After wetting his hair, he switched places with her and reached for the honeysuckle bodywash on the shelf. He squeezed a good amount into his palm and set the bottle on the shelf.

Rubbing his hands together, he settled them on her shoulders and moved down her arms.

She shivered.

"I'm sorry my hands aren't softer," he said with a low voice.

"What do you mean? I like them."

No one had ever said that to him. Or that they liked anything about him.

"They're rough."

"I don't mind. In fact..." She stopped talking when he ran his soapy fingers up her ribcage and cupped her breasts.

"In fact what, sweetheart?" he whispered, leaning in to feather kisses along her jaw.

“They feel good.” She braced herself with one hand against the wall and pulled him close with her other. They kissed as he lathered her body, paying careful attention to her breasts and nipples and the sensitive area of her hips.

She rinsed off and switched places with him, using the same sweet-smelling body wash on him.

He didn't mind her soft hands on him at all, until she tried to travel south and he had to stop her.

“Hold on, your hands are dangerous.”

He quickly washed himself while she watched, biting her lower lip.

When all the suds were gone and the water was turning chilly, he shut it off and opened the door. Towels were folded on the toilet lid. He grabbed one for each of them, rubbing his hair dry first and then his skin.

She hung up her towel and then turned to face him, skin pink from the shower and her eyes glowing with the amber of her falcon. The subtly sweet scent of her arousal made his beasts roar in approval.

She said his name softly and moved close, running her fingers along his pecs and making his skin prickle. Touching him like he was made of glass and worthy of reverence, she traced his muscles and touched the scars on his abdomen and arms. It wasn't a gaze of pity that met his, but one of awe.

“I think,” she said softly, “that there isn't a female on the planet who will be more protected than me.”

He let out a growl from his tiger and hauled her close, her breasts plumping against his chest. “No one's ever said a

truer statement, sweetheart.”

Swinging her up into his arms, he carried her into the bedroom and climbed up onto the bed, setting her in the center.

He stretched out next to her and tipped her face to his. He wanted to say a hundred things, he wanted to tell her everything—every damn thing—but then she kissed him and everything in his mind switched gears to bringing her pleasure. She was not only going to be the most protected female, she was going to be the most satisfied one as well.

Her hands curled over his shoulders and gripped him tightly. He slipped a knee between her legs and settled over her, keeping his weight carefully off her so he didn't crush her. He kissed down her neck, sucking lightly on the place where her pulse thrummed under her skin. Trailing along her collarbone, he kissed his way down to her breasts, enjoying the way she writhed under him and sighed his name. He closed his lips over one nipple and sucked it gently while he played with the other, switching back and forth until she was moaning.

Making his way down her stomach, he licked a circle around her navel and nipped a path to her hip. He pushed her legs apart and settled between her thighs. He glanced up the length of her body and caught her gaze as she bit her bottom lip.

Parting her with his thumbs, he flicked his tongue over her clit, enjoying how she gasped.

He moved his hands to slide underneath her, lifting her to his mouth so he could tongue her core. He alternated playing with her clit and lapping at her heat, barely holding onto his own climax.

She thrashed under him as she came, crying out his name.

He lapped at her honey as she tumbled down from the heavens.

He wanted to feast on her for days, to stay parked between her thighs forever.

“Ivar,” she said, her voice hoarse from pleasure. “Make love to me.”

As if he would deny her anything.

Making his way up, he kissed and nibbled her heated flesh before settling into the cradle of her hips and sinking to the hilt.

He froze as everything within him went quiet, even his beasts which had been noisily excited to make love to their beautiful mate.

Shit, he needed to keep her safe at all costs, even at the expense of his own life. He'd only ever wanted to lay his life down for Yva, but right now? He'd lay waste to a city to keep Cymbre safe and sacrifice himself in the process if it meant she could have a long life.

Lowering his head, he inhaled slowly and opened his eyes to find her gazing at him with adoration.

He flexed his hips and withdrew, deciding right then that he would change the course of his life...for Cymbre.

She deserved the best mate, and he might not be that male just yet, but he would be.

Kissing her, he began to move in and out of her depths, loving when she wrapped her legs around his hips and met his

thrusts. They moved like they'd known each other for years, fucking like old lovers but tender in their kisses and touches.

She reached a hand between them and rubbed her clit, and the sensation of her knuckles rubbing along his lower abdomen made his eyes cross with pleasure. He moved faster, slamming into her, holding onto his sanity by a thin thread.

Tossing back her head, she came with a sharp cry, and he followed her into bliss. He came so hard that his vision went dark for a heartbeat, his beasts roaring and calling so loud in his mind that he thought he might go deaf.

With a groan, he withdrew and settled to her side, laying a kiss to her cheek. She snuggled against him immediately and let out a soft happy sigh.

“It’s never been good like that for me before,” she said quietly. “I think it’s supposed to be that way with mates.”

“I feel the same way. I feel like it was my first time, actually.”

She giggled. “I was thinking the same thing.” She gave him a sweet smile and kissed him. “I wish you were my first, but I’ll settle for you being my last.”

He nodded, feeling humbled once more by her sweetness. “Absolutely. You’re my last too.”

* * *

Ivar listened to Cymbre as she dozed next to him.

He was tired, because he'd slept for shit since he'd met her in the woods. Now that he had her in his arms, he wanted to rest, but his mind was racing. He'd told her he wouldn't take her with him when he went to find Yva because it was too dangerous and he wouldn't risk her safety. Which was true. But he'd also been thinking about how he'd need to leave at some point to confer with Vega and plan his takeover.

But now, with his not-yet-claimed mate snuggled up next to him without a care in the world, hope, for the first time, fully bloomed within him.

Maybe things really could work out. Maybe he could have a real home and a mate; maybe he could find Yva and bring her here to live.

A mate and a home, a real job that didn't involve hurting people, and a safe place for his sister. It sounded too good to be true. The last time he'd had a place to call home, he'd lost everything in one dark night. But Cider Falls wasn't like the nest he'd grown up in, and it was a place he could stay forever. With Cymbre.

He still needed to find Yva, but he could now have people at his side to help him find and bring her home.

Alone wasn't a word he could use to describe himself anymore.

First, he'd figure out what to do about Vega. Then he'd take Cymbre out on a date.

He'd never been on one of those.

He pulled her a little more firmly against him and closed his eyes. He was smiling as he drifted off to sleep, thoughts of Cymbre on his mind.

Chapter Fourteen

The following night, Cymbre used a straightener to tame the wavy ends of her hair. She hadn't been on a real date in ages. When she'd first come to town, she'd dated a few of the males, just thankful to be able to choose who to date and not forced to spend time with someone she didn't want to. But once she'd settled in and realized that no one in town was her true mate, dating for fun hadn't seemed so fun anymore.

When she and Ivar had woken from their nap the day before, they'd tumbled in the sheets again and then gotten dressed and gone out for a bite to eat. She'd called it a date, but he said it wasn't a real date. Then he promptly asked her if he could take her out to dinner and she'd happily said yes. They'd gathered his things from Breaker's, and she'd contacted Arely during the day to let her know the good news.

They weren't mated yet. But she didn't mind waiting and getting to know him, plus he was still hoping to hear good news from Jewel about his sister's whereabouts. She knew he might be leaving soon, but he'd promised to take someone with him for support, and that had eased the ache in her stomach. She was still going to miss him hard, but at least he wasn't heading into danger alone.

After work, she'd hurried home to wash off the paint from her craft with the kids, and then she'd stood in front of the closet for far too long trying to decide what to wear.

The front door opened. "Hey, babe, you still here?" Arely called.

“Yeah, I’m in the bathroom.”

Arely appeared in the doorway a few moments later.
“You look great!”

“Thanks. I haven’t been on a date in so long. I’m nervous!”

“But he’s your true mate.”

“I know. It’s hard to explain.”

“Are you guys coming back here tonight?”

Cymbre put the straightener on the counter and turned to look at her bestie. “I’m glad you’re here because I wanted to talk to you about that.”

“You have a mate. You should take the house.”

“It’s your house too.”

She waved a hand dismissively. “If I had a mate, you can bet I’d kick your butt out of here, in the nicest way possible, of course.”

Cymbre laughed. “I wouldn’t mind.”

“Yeah, but you’re the one with the mate. Jynx offered to let me stay with her, and Diem said I could have her spare bedroom. It might be nice to be close to the school. If I stayed at Diem’s I could walk when the weather is nice.”

“You could probably get one of the empty houses too,” Cymbre said. “Or Ivar and I could pick one.”

“Nah. This is a great house for a mated pair—it’s got rooms for babies. I’ll graciously leave so long as your kids get to call me Aunt Arely.”

Cymbre hugged her. “Of course! The same goes for your kids.”

“You bet. I just have to find my pesky true mate first.”

They chatted about their days, and then Cymbre went to find her favorite heels and Arely went to pack a bag for the weekend.

There was a knock at the front door a few minutes before six, and Cymbre’s heart leaped into her throat. He was here!

“Have a blast, babe,” Arely called from her room.

“Thanks!”

Cymbre walked to the door and paused for a moment, smoothing her hands down the front of her skirt and tugging the short hem. She opened the door and found Ivar wearing slacks and a black dress shirt with a jade green tie. He held a bouquet of wildflowers in one hand and a leaf in another.

She took the flowers and then looked at the leaf curiously.

“It’s from the tree you fell from,” he said.

“Oh!” She took the leaf and grinned. “I’m going to press it in a book and save it forever.”

She invited him in and took the flowers to the kitchen. After filling a vase with water, she set the flowers inside. “They’re beautiful, thank you.”

“You’re beautiful.” He pulled her close and kissed her. “I missed you.”

“Uhm,” she said, her brain misfiring.

He chuckled and kissed her again. “Kissed ya senseless, huh?”

“A bit.” She grinned. “You always do, though. And I missed you too.”

“Ready for dinner, sweetheart?”

“Definitely.”

He escorted her to a Jeep she didn’t recognize.

“The twins at the garage had this for a loaner. Breaker was going out tonight and needed his truck, so he reached out to Archer and Gunner and they said I could use it until I get a vehicle of my own.”

“I didn’t even think of that. We could’ve taken my car.”

“I’d need my own anyway at some point.” He shut her door after she hopped in and then climbed behind the wheel. “So how was your day?”

“Messy. I let the kids paint pictures, and they are not the neatest when it comes to painting. How was yours?”

“Good. I hung out with Breaker at the guard shack again. Rehlik wants to meet with me on Monday.”

“So you’re going to stay in Cider Falls?” Her heart clenched a little. What if he said no because of the search for Yva?

He reached for her hand and brought it to his lips. “Yes. I want to stay here with you and build a life together.”

“And Yva?”

He nodded, glancing at her for a quick moment. “If Jewel’s lead pans out, Breaker said he’d go with me. I still

don't want you to go with us, but I will come back to you."

"I hope you find her."

"Me too. She'll love you."

They reached the restaurant a little while later and sat at an intimate booth in the back.

She opened the menu and perused the offerings, eventually settling on a steak and baked potato.

"Sounds good to me," Ivar said. "But I'm going with the big porterhouse."

When the waiter had taken their orders and brought back drinks, they were alone. The restaurant wasn't crowded, and no one was seated near them.

"Can I ask you about your family?"

"Of course."

"How old were you and Yva when you were attacked?"

"I was seventeen, she was sixteen."

"What happened? I mean, you've told me that your people were attacked, but how did you even come to be in hiding like that in the first place? You were never registered with the FSA or anything. I didn't know people could do that."

He took a drink and set the glass down, the ice clinking against the side.

"I don't think it's normal, but tigers are pretty rare in the States, and black-furred ones like my dad's family line are even more rare. My grandparents were the last ones registered with the FSA. When my dad was born, he was born at home and not in a hospital, and his mother had seen a healer and not

a doctor, so there were no records of her even being pregnant. They decided then that they were going to keep their future children safe by never registering them. They had two more kids—my uncle Adam and my aunt Winnie. When Winnie, the youngest, was eighteen, they left and basically went into hiding. They traveled in campers and stayed off the FSA radar by never shifting around anyone and keeping to themselves.

“Owls are solitary. When the kids are able to shift as teenagers, they’re supposed to find a place of their own.”

“What about the FSA?” she asked.

“According to the FSA, there’s one large nest of owls, but hardly any of them are actually there. It’s like a person using a PO Box for mail because they don’t want anyone to know where they live.”

“Smart,” she said.

“Yeah. So my mom was out flying and ran into a wall of tigers out hunting, and I guess she and my dad pretty much crashed into each other. They knew they were mates and she stayed with them. My uncle mated an orange tiger who was exiled. She pretty much just went into hiding with us. My aunt mated an exiled wolf. I had some young cousins too.”

The food arrived, and the conversation stopped while they cut up their steaks and ate. She was curious about living in hiding like he had and how their people came to be attacked. After a little while, he started talking again, starting with the night that everything was lost.

They’d been out as a group hunting. Yva and his uncle had stayed behind with the younger cousins who couldn’t shift.

“I remember smelling a wolf I didn’t recognize. I turned to call an alarm when I was hit from behind. I was knocked unconscious for a few minutes. I woke up alone in the woods. I raced back to where we’d been staying and found the pride under attack by wolves.”

“Did you ever know why they attacked?”

“It was my aunt’s mate. They’d come looking for him. He’d apparently gotten the alpha’s daughter pregnant and didn’t want to mate her, so the alpha exiled him. The male who was supposed to mate her was pissed and vowed revenge. They’d been searching for him for years. When the pride defended him, the wolves attacked everyone.” His face shadowed darkly. Cymbre reached out a hand and squeezed his.

“You can stop. You don’t have to tell me if it’s too hard.”

“No, it’s okay. I want you to know.” He blew out a breath and pushed his empty plate to the side. Grasping both her hands firmly in his, he said, “The first thing I saw was my mom’s body next to the young kids. My dad was bleeding out in front of her, his side so torn up that you couldn’t see the fur for all the blood. I screamed in rage and the wolves turned on me, biting and clawing me. I fought as hard as I could, but I thought I was going to die. Then I heard Yva scream for help. She’d been hiding and one of the wolves had found her. They carried her away into the woods. I struggled to get free to help her, and that’s when the biggest wolf knocked me down and tried to claw my heart out. The last thing I remember is terrible pain and then nothing.”

Her heart broke for him and how much he’d endured.

“How long were you unconscious for?”

“A few days while my body healed what it could. I woke up and tried to follow Yva’s scent, but it had rained and washed away most of it. I buried the pride members while I healed, and then I went on the hunt. I found several of the wolves a few weeks later at a dive bar. They wouldn’t give up the location of the pack, so I killed them.”

He stared at her, his gaze searching her face.

She was surprised to hear him be so blunt, but not so surprised by what he’d said. Of course he would hunt the wolves down; he was looking for Yva.

“Go on,” she whispered.

“I eventually found the pack. I took them out one by one, trying to find out what they did with Yva. I could find no trace of her in the pack’s belongings, and even the alpha wouldn’t tell me where she was, not even when I was slowly killing him.”

“What did you do?”

“I took what I could from the pack, including an ID that looked enough like me so I could use it and whatever cash I could find, along with one of their vehicles. I started searching for Yva online, looking for her image and description, and then when I knew she was old enough to shift, I started looking for gryphons. My search was derailed for a while when I was captured by several humans and forced to fight other captive shifters while people bet on who would survive.”

She let out a gasp. “What? I’ve never heard of something like that happening! That’s horrifying.”

He nodded. “I think it’s a common occurrence, it’s just under the radar.” He paused and then said, “I was able to get

free after a while and kill the people who'd captured me, but I lost a lot of time searching for Yva. I would occasionally find a lead somewhere, a mention of a gryphon or cat-bird hybrid. Sometimes I felt like I was getting close, and sometimes I wondered if I was being a fool."

"A fool for wanting to find her? Not even a little bit."

"It's been ten years." He lowered his head and sighed.

"I hope you find her. Maybe she's been looking for you all these years. You were never registered with the FSA or had ID that would be searchable online. It's possible you both just are not out there enough to find each other."

"She'd love you, I know it."

"Yeah? I'm sure I'll love her too. She'll be my sister, after all. I never had one."

His eyes shone brightly with emotion, and he squeezed her hand so tightly that one knuckle cracked.

"Sorry," he said sheepishly.

"It's okay," she said, squeezing back just as hard. She released her grip on one hand and signaled the waiter. "Let's get out of here."

He paid the bill and walked her out to the Jeep. As she settled on the seat, he said, "You're not angry?"

"About what?"

"Tonight was supposed to be about new beginnings with us. It was our first date. It got really heavy in there." He looked away. "A lot of stuff was said."

She tipped his face back to hers. “I asked because I wanted to know your story. I wanted to hear what happened so I could know you better. I told you my terrible history, so it’s only fair I heard yours. You did what you had to do to survive, and no one would blame you. Least of all me.”

He nodded and shut the door. When they were on the way, she leaned against his shoulder and sighed. “Thank you for telling me what you did tonight. I know it wasn’t easy, but I feel so much closer to you now.”

He kissed the top of her head. “You’re a great listener.”

The scenery blurred by. Cymbre yawned.

“I hope you’re not too tired,” he said.

“Tired for what?” she asked.

“Dessert.”

She almost mentioned that there was a box of snack cakes in the cabinet, but then she realized he was talking about having sex.

“I’m definitely not *that* tired. I can’t wait.”

Chapter Fifteen

Cymbre couldn't sleep.

It wasn't that she wasn't exhausted and fully satisfied in a sexy way; it was simply that when she closed her eyes something nagged in the back of her mind.

Ivar had bared his soul to her over dinner. He'd told her things she'd never heard of happening to shifters, purebreds, or exiles.

That people would abduct purebreds and hybrids and fight them against each other? It was unconscionable.

Not to mention that his sister had been taken too, and he didn't know what happened to her or why she was taken.

People could definitely be cruel.

Ivar's life before he came to Cider Falls had certainly been full of blood and pain, but he'd shared details with her and seemed to lay himself bare for her.

But...he didn't talk about the last few years of his life.

That's what was bothering her.

Whenever he talked about his past, he didn't ever talk about being attacked and nearly dying before coming to Cider Falls. It was always his past before that.

Why didn't he ever talk about the attack that brought the two of them together?

With a sigh, she rubbed her eyes and tried to shake the doubt-filled thoughts.

After a few more minutes of no sleep coming, she slipped quietly from the bed, grabbed her phone from the charger, and headed out to the family room. She sank into the comfortable couch and opened a game on her phone, hoping that a little distraction would get her to a place where she could get back to sleep. Being in Ivar's arms was the best feeling in the world. But now that she'd poked around her subconscious about what was bothering her, she didn't feel quite so satisfied as she had when he'd brought her to two amazing climaxes just hours earlier.

Her past wasn't pretty, but she'd never purposely killed someone like he had.

But she was okay with that. Shifters had a sense of right and wrong related to vengeance, and she fully understood his need to take his life back from the people who had stolen everything from him. She understood what he'd done or at least could empathize with the desire his beasts had for vengeance.

What she wondered now, as she put her phone down because she couldn't concentrate on matching the colorful squares in the game, was if he was having second thoughts. After they'd made love, they'd talked in that dreamy way about their future, about settling down and getting mated, having kids. When she'd been staring into his dark eyes, she'd seen something in the depths that had made her previous fears resurface.

When she talked about the future, he was hesitant. He clearly had doubts, but of what?

With her or with something else? Would she wake up one day and he'd be gone to find his sister, leaving her waiting

and wondering?

She curled around one of the big throw pillows and closed her eyes. She was too tired to keep running circles around things she couldn't possibly know right now. The future wasn't as bright as she thought it was when they were at dinner. Something had changed between them; she just didn't know what.

* * *

Ivar watched as Cymbre got into Arely's car and then Arely backed out of the driveway. The twins had come for the Jeep earlier that morning, so Cymbre left her car for him so he could check in with Rehlik and work security if he was asked to. He waved, but she didn't wave back, her head straight and her gaze out the windshield.

Something had changed overnight, and he didn't know what.

He'd woken up before dawn and found the bed empty, the sheets cold. He'd listened intently, wondering where she was, and followed the sound of her deep breathing to the family room. She was curled up on the couch, hugging a pillow.

He couldn't fathom why she'd been on the couch when they'd fallen asleep together after making love. But then he'd wondered—maybe he'd fallen asleep, but she hadn't.

When she'd woken a little while later to get ready for work, she'd told him that she couldn't sleep and had come out

to the couch and fallen asleep unintentionally. But when she spoke, the smile on her face was definitely not real and didn't reach her eyes.

She was hiding something.

He'd opened his mouth to ask her what was up, but she'd shut him down with a dismissive wave and hustled to the bathroom to get ready for work.

The kiss goodbye had been a peck, with a promise to see him soon.

He'd been left feeling entirely adrift.

He waited until he couldn't hear the car anymore, and then he turned to walk inside.

Had she changed her mind? Had what he'd told her at dinner last night been one too many terrible things and now she was out? He searched his memories for all he'd told her and then what they'd shared once they were back in bed.

She'd talked about mating and starting a family.

For the first time in his life, he wanted that, but he had major doubts.

The biggest doubt was Vega and his plans. The others? Mainly related to his bloody past and how he couldn't find his sister without leaving Cymbre behind.

He wondered if she thought his soul was too damaged, his heart too black from all the killing to be a male worth having.

He'd definitely thought that about himself. But before she came into his life, he hadn't expected to have a mate. What

fate in the universe would give a killer like him someone to love? But he had her. Unless she was out of his life for good.

He sighed and turned away from the door.

His phone—which had been given to him by the security team—was beeping as he walked into the bedroom. The screen showed a text from Novak, who was on the security team.

I heard you're meeting with us this morning. I just wanted you to know that we're meeting at the bar at ten. If you need a ride, I can pick you up.

I think I'll walk, but thanks. See you there.

He glanced at the time on the screen. It was a little before seven, which left him with three hours to sit around and grouse about what was going on between him and Cymbre.

Or...he could actually do something about it.

He knew he needed to either take Vega out or sever ties with him first and then talk to Rehlik, otherwise the big timber wolf alpha was liable to put him in custody and then he wouldn't be able to deal with Vega.

Once he took care of all these details, he could tell Cymbre everything and beg for her forgiveness. He'd tell her every single thing he'd done in the name of helping Vega. He only hoped she'd be willing to forgive him.

If not, he'd never give up trying to win her back. He'd had a taste of paradise and he wasn't about to go back to a time when he didn't know what it was like to be with her.

Chapter Sixteen

“Hold on,” Cymbre said as Arely approached the stop light.
“Go right.”

“Um, that’s not the way to your job.”

“I know. I need to go back and talk to Ivar. I just texted Bethann and she said she’d decided to take the day off anyway so I could show up whenever I was able to. I want to drop you off at the school and then use your car.”

Arely clicked on the right turn signal.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” she said. “What are you going to say to him?”

“I have no idea. I just...need to find out what he’s hiding.”

“Are you so sure he’s actually hiding something, or is he just holding back?”

“What’s the difference?”

Arely shrugged. “Hiding something means he doesn’t want to tell you something, but holding back means he’s not ready to tell you. They’re different.”

“I hadn’t thought about it. I just have a weird feeling.”

“Sure. You’re falling in love with the guy, and you think he’s keeping something from you. Anyone would feel weird.”

“I’m not falling in love with him.”

“Ya are.”

Cymbre laughed. “No, I mean I think I’m already in love with him. I already fell.”

“Aw, that’s sweet.”

“Unless he’s hiding something terrible.” Cymbre chewed on her thumbnail as she watched out the window. What if it *was* something terrible?

“You’re thinking the worst. Remember the old saying? Hope for the best.”

“The other part of that saying is to expect the worst.”

“I’m focusing on the first part. Be hopeful. You found your forever guy. That’s worth holding onto hope for.”

Cymbre didn’t answer her bestie. Instead, she stewed in her thoughts, wondering what was going on with Ivar.

After she dropped Arely off at the school, with a promise to text her whatever details she found out from Ivar, she headed back toward town. He had a meeting with Rehlik, but she didn’t know where it would be. She could ask at the security gate to see if one of the males knew where he was.

As she was coming up to a four-way intersection, she saw Ivar driving her car and making a left, heading out of town.

“What the...?” she whispered to herself.

She picked up her phone and dialed Ivar’s.

Straight to voice mail.

Putting her foot on the gas, she followed him, allowing for several cars to separate them so he didn’t know she was behind him.

Where was he going?

* * *

Ivar parked Cymbre's car on the outskirts of the temporary territory Vega had set up and killed the engine. A glance at his watch showed he only had about ninety minutes until he needed to be back in Cider Falls for the meeting with Rehlik. While he'd driven to Vega's territory, he hadn't officially decided what he was going to do. Keep up the ruse with Vega and return with Rehlik later, or take out Vega himself and save everyone the trouble.

He had no doubt in his ability to end Vega's life. And he knew Vega would have to be killed simply because he would not leave the area voluntarily and he wouldn't stop trying to harm the people in Cider Falls to drive them away. At some point, Vega could very well succeed: Rehlik could die along with any others who fought by his side.

Ivar's allegiances had changed once he'd been with Cymbre. After he'd shared nearly his entire life history with her—save for his dealings with Vega—he'd felt so close to her. Because Rehlik was her alpha, he was now Ivar's as well, and he didn't feel any loyalty to Vega at all. It was interesting what love could do for a male.

He climbed from the car and shut the door. He took a moment to open his senses and feel out what was in the area. He could hear the footfalls of the patrol, but there would only be two males walking the perimeter. They were moving away from him, so he'd timed his infiltration well. Moving as

silently as possible, he made his way through the woods to the cabin that Vega had found abandoned and taken over. There were two males standing guard at the front door, and Ivar suspected there would be at least one at the back as well.

The question was: did he take out the guards and go after Vega, or did he simply stroll into the yard as if he was coming for his check-in?

“You’re in deep shit, asshole,” a low, rough voice said from behind him.

Ivar had never liked Rip. The male was always gunning for him, always looking for weaknesses. And even though Ivar had been unconscious, he was fairly sure that Rip had done the most damage to him when they’d beaten him up.

His stealthy entrance into the territory had not worked as well as he’d hoped, which changed what he was going to do.

Switching gears from taking out Vega to continuing the ruse of still being on his side, Ivar turned to face Rip.

“I’m not the one that nearly killed a male in his own pack,” Ivar said.

Rip snorted in derision. “It appeared to work, right? You were able to infiltrate Cider Falls. In fact,” he said, leaning in close, “I saw you all chummy with the males in the bar. I think it’s safe to say that your loyalty is in question.”

Ivar didn’t show any emotion as he stared the male down, but internally he was reeling. Someone had made their way into Cider Falls without being seen and had gotten close enough to the bar to see him inside? How the hell had that happened? After the bear traps had been set at the high-ranked males’ homes, security had been very tight and thorough

around town. No one was a match for Ivar—he could get in and out of anywhere—but apparently so could someone else in Vega’s pack.

“Back off,” Vega said.

Ivar glanced over his shoulder to see Vega standing at the open back door. He nodded at Ivar, then turned on his heels and walked inside.

“You better hope I don’t see you alone at some point,” Ivar said, putting as much menace and promise into his voice. “Because when that happens? You and me are going to settle this once and for all, and I have every confidence in my ability to snuff out your life.”

Rip’s eyes bled to amber. “You can try.”

“Ivar!” Vega growled his name from inside the cabin.

“I won’t try, I’ll succeed.” Without another word, Ivar turned and stalked into the cabin.

Immediately, Ivar knew he had to keep up the ruse of being on Vega’s side. Not only was Rip right on his heels, but there were five other males in the cabin. Today was not the day Vega was going to die.

“So tell me why you haven’t checked in with me, haven’t made arrangements to get information to me?” Vega asked. He sat at the kitchen table and kicked the opposite chair out.

As he sat, Ivar said, “First, I’m fine, thanks for asking. And second, you allowed your males to beat me so badly that I nearly died. My phone was lost somewhere along the way. I was unconscious for two days. When I woke—without an

exile mark—they didn't trust me. I didn't have access to a phone or computer and I couldn't leave without someone at my side. It was only now that I could come to you.”

A male named Zander came into the cabin holding Ivar's cell phone.

“We followed his scent to a vehicle and located this phone.” Zander tossed the phone to Vega, who caught it and gave Ivar a curious look.

“So?” Vega asked.

“They just gave it to me. It's a temporary one.”

“You should've contacted me immediately.”

“All the numbers were in my old phone. No one memorizes numbers anymore.”

Vega grunted and set the phone on the table. “You're here now. Tell me you have a plan to take out Rehlik so our pack can take over.”

“I do.”

Vega's brows rose. “Do tell.”

He held out his hand for his phone. Vega glared at him for a long moment and then pushed it across the smooth surface. Ivar opened the mail app and forwarded the security team schedule. Although he didn't want to share it, he knew he had to do something, or he wasn't going to make it back to Cider Falls. He could kick ass and had many times over the years, but not seven to one. He wasn't sure he'd make it out alive, and he very much wanted to get back to Cymbre.

“I just sent you the security schedule. I studied it along with talking to the team members and watching for the last

few days how they do things. There are vulnerabilities in the team, and I know the perfect time to strike.”

“I suppose it’s dawn, right?” Rip said, his upper lip curled.

“That’s an asshole answer,” Ivar said. “The time to strike is in the middle of the night shift, around three a.m. The males walk slower during that time; they get tired, so they’re not as thorough. There are more males on weekend nights than during the week. The best night to strike is Tuesday, when only two males patrol. We slip in, take positions at the homes of the high-ranked males, and in a coordinated effort take them out while they sleep. By the time the pack realizes they’re being attacked, it will be too late. Their entire leadership group will be dead, and you’ll be in power.”

Silence stretched out in the kitchen for several minutes. Ivar had infiltrated a lot of shifter groups over the years and had worked as a mercenary for cash when he wasn’t chasing leads on Yva or recruiting for Vega. He’d come up with the plan on the drive to the cabin, knowing that it was actually a pretty damn solid takeover plan. The fact that it was Friday, and he suggested they wait until Tuesday, gave him time to get back to Cider Falls and tell Rehlik the truth.

“I’ll be damned,” Vega said, his face splitting into a wide grin. “That’s the fucking best thing I’ve ever heard.”

Rip’s mouth fell open at Vega’s happiness. “There’s no way he’s still on your side. I saw him. He’s turned!”

Vega slammed his arm against Rip’s stomach, making the male double over with a grunt.

“As I was saying,” Vega said. “It’s brilliant. The question is, can we move the timetable up. Say to Sunday?”

Ivar shrugged. That was still two days’ notice. “We can. It may not be as easy to infiltrate, but what’s a few more bodies?”

“Indeed,” Vega said. “What do we need to make this happen?”

“Keys to the high-ranked males’ homes and a good map of the area. I’ll head back to town this morning. One of the pack members is a locksmith and has keys to everyone’s house. I’ll break in and take his extras and scout the locations, then I’ll email an updated map to you.”

Rip straightened with a wheeze and rubbed his stomach. He gave Ivar a death glare and stalked from the cabin.

“He’s just jealous,” Vega said. “Because you did what you were tasked with and he won’t be the one allowing us to succeed in our takeover.”

Ivar rose to his feet. “I’m going to head back to Cider Falls. You have my new number. I’ll be in touch as soon as I have the information you need.”

“Thank you.”

Ivar walked out of the cabin, keeping his face blank for the males standing around outside. Rip stood to the side looking furious, which gave Ivar no small amount of pleasure. When he reached Cymbre’s car, he sat behind the wheel and smiled. He’d pulled it off. He’d spoken to Vega, set him up for failure, and was now heading back to Cider Falls to speak to Rehlik and help him formulate a plan. Then he would tell Cymbre everything and beg for her forgiveness.

He was a changed male. She would have to believe him.

* * *

Cymbre was tucked behind a large tree within hearing distance of a dilapidated cabin. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Ivar was helping a pack get ready to take over Cider Falls and kill the high-ranked males!

Her eyes were filling with tears, but she refused to cry. Not only because it would give away her location, but also because that bastard didn't deserve her tears.

She'd been duped! And so expertly. At least they hadn't mated officially, otherwise she'd have a mating mark tying her to a terrible male forever.

She peered around the tree and watched Ivar stride from the cabin and leave the area after a short but tense stare-down with another male in the yard.

Pulling her phone from her pocket, she opened the map app to share her location with Rehlik and then text him what was going on. She had to stop Ivar from hurting anyone and destroying the pack she loved.

A hand gripped her throat so tightly that she couldn't even get out a squeak of alarm. Her phone dropped. She tried to pull the hand away from her neck, but the fingers felt like they were made of steel.

As her vision blurred, she saw the male Ivar had met up with outside the cabin. He sneered at her, his eyes amber.

“Well, well, well. You smell like Ivar. I think that makes you very valuable.”

He squeezed tighter and her vision hazed at the edges. Her lungs burned. No matter how she kicked, twisted, or hit, she couldn't ease the grip on her throat, and eventually she succumbed to the darkness.

Chapter Seventeen

Ivar returned to Cider Falls ten minutes before his meeting was scheduled with Rehlik and the high-ranked, waving at Jewel and Rare, who were in the security booth. He'd left town under the guise of picking up supplies for a special dinner for Cymbre, so he'd stopped at a grocery on the way back and gotten steaks to grill. He wasn't sure he'd get a chance to make her a special dinner, frankly, because the moment she knew he'd been sent to town to take out the leadership, she'd be pissed. But on the off chance she did let him talk to her, at least he could make her some food.

He stopped at the house and put the groceries away, then took off on foot for the bar.

"Hey, I have something for you," Jewel called out from the booth as he passed by.

"Sure, what's up?" he asked as he changed direction.

A motorcycle approached from out of town at a quick pace. He frowned as he watched the bike veer to the side, heading for him.

The bike swerved, cutting away from him and spraying him with dust and rocks. He covered his face with his arm and felt something hit his legs.

He looked down to see a rolled-up piece of fabric.

The motorcycle sped off out of town.

Ivar bent and picked up the fabric, immediately recognizing the brown-and-white striped sweater Cymbre had

worn when she'd walked out of the house.

His heart sank as he realized he recognized the motorcycle—it belonged to Zander, from Vega's pack.

Vega had Cymbre!

“What the hell was that about?” Jewel asked.

He squeezed the fabric until his knuckles cracked, his beasts raging. “Cymbre's been kidnapped. I need Rehluk. Now!”

* * *

Cymbre woke with a start. She gasped, and the inhalation made her throat ache. She tried to bring her hand up to rub her throat, but she couldn't. Her wrists were tied together and anchored to the leg of an old pot-bellied stove. It looked like it weighed about a thousand pounds, so there was no way she could get herself free.

She was seated on a raised brick platform, and her head had been leaning against the stove, which was, thankfully, not burning.

And her sweater was gone. She was wearing only the tank top, and the chill in the cabin made her skin prickle.

Someone walked to her. She saw faded leather shoes first, then dark cargo pants, followed by a black long-sleeved shirt. The male staring down at her looked to be in his late thirties, with sandy-blond hair and green eyes. His cheeks were covered with a few days' worth of stubble, and those green eyes held a hint of crazy.

“Wh-who are you?” she asked, her voice cracking and then aching.

“I’m Vega Sonight, future alpha of Cider Falls.”

She’d never seen him before in her life. She glanced around, finding herself in a dilapidated cabin. There were other males milling around, but a few were near this Vega character and staring at her like she was their enemy.

Which, she supposed, if he was planning to take over Cider Falls, meant that she was.

Her brain spun for a moment as her gaze stopped on a male who looked to be in his mid-twenties. He had dark hair pulled back in a tail and a long beard.

He was the one that attacked her!

“Ah, there she goes,” the bearded male said with a chuckle. “I think she just remembered where she knows me from.”

Vega’s mouth quirked up at the side. “Yes, well, you’re lucky that I’m letting you live. For now.”

She didn’t feel very lucky. What she did feel was rage that Ivar had betrayed her. After all she’d heard when she’d been spying on Ivar, she now knew that Vega was the one causing all the trouble in Cider Falls. The traps, the bomb, the destruction—it was all so Vega could take over. But not simply take over the pack and town, but kill Rehlik. And since Ivar was working for such a bad guy, that meant he was a bad guy too.

She laid her head back and closed her eyes so she didn’t reveal the tears that filled them. How had she been so wrong?

She felt like a fool. A fool who was going to get killed at some point, unless she got herself free or someone came to her aid. But no one knew where she was, and Ivar certainly wouldn't come for her.

Vega cleared his throat, and she opened her eyes. She was utterly destroyed inside with sadness. Vega glanced at the males and then looked at her in a smug sort of way.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked.

“Well, mainly because the FSA's rules are archaic and asinine, but also because Cider Falls is perfect for me, except for the fact that Rehlik is there. I take him out, assume his identity, and take over.”

She stared up at the eyes of her kidnapper. In order to assume Rehlik's identity, he'd have to kill him, and he'd have to kill Weylyn too, because there was no way she'd go along with things. How many people would die in Cider Falls trying to protect the town and go against Vega? And just how many people did he have on his side, besides the bastard whose name she'd never say again?

“Why me?”

Vega hummed. “It wasn't my choice. Ivar targeted you.”

One of the males snorted. “He probably saw you for the pathetic unmated female you are.”

She was *not* pathetic!

“Fuck. You.”

The male took a menacing step toward her, but Vega put his hand up. “Not right now. We're waiting for Ivar to report back to us, remember?”

The male let out an annoyed grunt and cracked his neck. “I’ll be waiting.”

Turning their attention away from her, Vega and the males moved into the other room, leaving one male to stand at the doorway and watch her. She tested the rope tying her hands together.

“Don’t bother,” he said. “It’s far too thick for you to break, not to mention that it’s threaded with wire to make it more durable. Save your strength. You’ll need it for later.”

That sounded ominous.

She was in trouble, and she wasn’t sure she was going to make it out alive.

* * *

Rehlik snarled in fury and punched Ivar square in the face.

The male stumbled back, blood immediately dripping from his nose. He pressed his nose with his fingers and repeated himself. “I know you’re pissed, but I’m telling you the truth.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Rehlik demanded as Ivar—who’d turned out to be a damn spy—gripped a sweater.

“Tell me you’re lying, damn it,” Trace said.

“I’m not lying. Cymbre must have followed me this morning and then gotten captured by Vega. I need help to get

her back. I can't go against the pack alone. Please! If they find out I turned against them, they'll kill her."

Rehlik couldn't remember being so pissed. He wanted to throttle the male.

Trace shook his head. "First you tell us that everything we know about you is a lie, and now you want us to trust you and go waltzing into a trap?"

Rehlik glared at Ivar as the male wiped the blood from under his nose. "Everything about my past is true. I am a shadow and not on the FSA radar, and I have been searching for my sister since my family was killed and she was taken. What I didn't tell you was that I was working for Vega. I joined up with him after my family was killed because he promised to help me find Yva. I wasn't loyal to anyone but my sister and Vega. Until I met Cymbre. I fought that knowledge because of my other loyalties, but once I admitted what she was to me, I decided to take care of Vega myself, to stop him from hurting anyone else."

Rehlik's wolf made a suspicious sound, which spilled out of his throat. "If you went to take him out, then why isn't he dead?"

"Because all his males were around. I thought I could ambush him, but he was surrounded. I can't take on the whole pack alone." He looked at Rehlik and Trace with pleading eyes. "I came back here to tell you the truth and help you get rid of Vega. He's a virus that will take out everything here to make a place for himself."

"Take him in the bar and fucking watch him. I need a minute to think," Rehlik said, gesturing to Breaker and Novak. The two hustled the male out of the office.

Rehlik collapsed onto the couch where he and Weylyn had just been fooling around before Ivar had rushed in and told the most devastating news Rehlik had heard. Not only had they allowed a spy to be in their midst for two weeks, but Cymbre was potentially gone. The problem was that he didn't know if Cymbre was actually kidnapped or not.

"I just got off the phone with Arely," Weylyn said. She spun in the desk chair and stood, coming to sit next to Rehlik. "We both tried to call Cymbre, but her phone is off. Arely attempted to find her phone with an app, but it's showing that location services are turned off. I think Ivar's telling the truth."

Rehlik kissed the top of her head and inhaled her sweet scent. "What makes you say that?"

"He was scared."

"He should be," Trace said, cracking his knuckles.

"No, I mean he was genuinely scared for Cymbre, not for himself," Weylyn said. She sat up and faced Rehlik. "When the bomb went off? You were panicked about my safety. Ivar looks like you did, like he couldn't breathe right because he doesn't know if his mate is okay. He may be an asshole and a spy, but he cares for Cymbre and I believe that means his loyalties have changed."

Rehlik sighed and rubbed his temple where a headache was blooming.

"I think Weylyn's right," Weston said. "I do think he was telling the truth about planning to take out Vega, and when that failed, he wanted to come to you for help. It would've been far better if he'd told us before he left so we could help him in the first place."

Rehlik snorted. “Yeah. Now everything’s screwed up.”

“I hope Cymbre is okay,” Weylyn said.

Rehlik nodded and rose to his feet after kissing Weylyn. “I want all hands on deck. We need every single male and female who’ve done security or have any fight training at all to meet at the gazebo in ten minutes. We’ll split the group so we don’t leave our people defenseless.”

“We could bring everyone who stays behind here in the bar,” Weylyn suggested, “so they’re in a secure place. And keep the kids at the school, of course.”

“Good idea. Let’s make some calls. I’ll reach out to Isak to lock down the school until this is settled. No telling what Vega will do now that he realizes Ivar has turned on him.” Rehlik motioned to the door and then called Isak, the dean of the school. After quickly explaining what was going on, Isak instituted an immediate lockdown to keep the kids and adults safe. While Weylyn sent out a blast text to every family in town asking them to come to the bar immediately, Rehlik stared at Ivar as he walked into the office.

He looked like a broken male, stricken with worry for his mate.

“I don’t like you right now,” Rehlik said. “In fact, my wolf wants to tear you apart for what you attempted to do. You took advantage of our kindness to try to take me out so your asshole alpha could take over my identity.”

Ivar lifted his head and looked at Rehlik but didn’t say anything.

Rehlik continued. “That being said, I do believe your loyalties have changed and that you want to save Cymbre. I

want to put Vega down once and for all. We will go as a group with you. Your priority is to save Cymbre. Mine is to take out the pack's enemy." He took a step closer to the male and let out his wolf enough so his eyes would change to bright amber. "If you're lying and this is a trap, I will kill you. Slowly."

"I'm not lying and I'm not setting you up. I want my mate back, and I'll take out whoever I need to in order to get her to safety."

Rehlik nodded. "We're meeting at the gazebo. Let's go."

He gave Weylyn one more kiss goodbye, during which she tearfully made him promise to come home to her in one piece. He rested his hand on the swell of her baby bump and growled softly. "I will always come back for you."

He gave her a hug and whispered goodbye to their baby, and then he walked out before he was tempted by her sniffles to stay and comfort her.

Today was the very last day that Vega was going to cause the Cider Falls Pack—and Rehlik—any more trouble.

Chapter Eighteen

Ivar sat in the second row of an SUV driven by Breaker, with Trace in the passenger seat. He wasn't restrained, but he'd been thoroughly threatened to not move a muscle. He wasn't sure they'd trust him enough to help him save Cymbre, but at least he had that going for him. As long as Cymbre was safe, he didn't care what happened to him.

Ahead and behind their vehicle were others, filled with the best fighters in the pack.

Breaker glanced in the rearview. "You really snowed me, man."

"Sorry."

Trace snorted.

Ivar sighed. "I know you don't trust anything I say right now."

"Damn straight," Trace interjected.

"But," Ivar continued, "thank you for helping me save Cymbre."

Trace growled softly and turned in his seat. "I'm pissed as hell. My power is generally good at sensing bad intentions, so you really did pull one over on us."

"It's because I came in so injured."

"You really had your pack beat you all to hell?" Breaker asked.

“I told them to make it look realistic, but a few of the males don’t like me and they nearly killed me because I’d given them a free pass.” And he fully intended to get his vengeance on those males, *after* Cymbre was safe.

“They must’ve really hated you,” Breaker said.

“Well, I was Vega’s go-to male for recruitment and meting out punishment. I wasn’t really in the pack ranking, but I was a threat to them.” Because no one ever knew when Vega was going to lose his shit and send Ivar to hurt someone. “But they’re not my pack.”

“You’re not part of Cider Falls, not yet,” Trace pointed out.

“I was actually thinking that Cymbre is my pack now. Although gryphons call their pack a pride. My family is gone. Cymbre’s the first person who ever made me feel like I could have a family again, and Cider Falls is the first place to ever make me want to join a pack.”

He’d never felt anything for Vega’s pack but a sense of loyalty to the alpha himself. That loyalty was entirely gone now.

“Do you think Cymbre will forgive you?” Breaker asked.

“Assuming she knows you were working as a spy,” Trace said.

Vega had sent her sweater to Ivar as proof that he knew that Ivar had turned on him. There was no way the male wouldn’t crow to Cymbre about him spying.

“I’m sure she knows,” Ivar said. “She followed me, so she was suspicious.”

He just hoped like hell that she was safe.

I’m coming for you, sweetheart.

* * *

Cymbre seethed in her bonds as she listened to Vega and his males plot to take out Rehlik and the high-ranked males using Ivar’s intel. He’d been very helpful, apparently, in giving them the security team’s schedule and helping to make a plan.

All the while using her.

Making her think she was special, like she’d gotten through his defenses and been a female he could call his own.

Well, fuck him.

Her bird let out a sad trill.

Nope, she was not going to feel sorry for herself. What she could do was try to get free and get to Cider Falls to warn the others. If only the rope wasn’t so tight. If she was a wolf or a big cat, she could force her claws out, but her falcon’s talons weren’t available to her, so she might as well be human.

Closing her eyes, she tried to think what she could do to get free. The stove was too big to move, the rope too thick and too tight. Her hands were numb and red, and the numbness was spreading up her arms.

Someone approached and she opened her eyes. It was Vega.

“Your mate was very helpful, you know.”

“Why don’t you just shut up?” she demanded. She didn’t want to hear any more about how amazing a spy Ivar was. Clearly, he’d fooled her expertly.

“Aw,” Vega said, mock pouting.

“Shit. Shit!” one of the males said from the kitchen.
“Vega, get in here!”

Vega turned and rushed to the kitchen.

“They’re coming,” the male said.

“Who?” Vega asked.

“Ivar and the Cider Falls pack. Our cameras caught them coming through the woods, and they’ll be here in minutes.”

Vega snarled. “He must’ve rallied them to come to get her. Damn it, I thought we had more time.”

“We shouldn’t have sent that shirt,” one of the other males said. “You taunted him and now he’s come with reinforcements.”

What the hell were they talking about?

Vega let out a furious growl. “No, this is better. Instead of us fighting on their turf, they’re on ours. Get everyone. It’s time to take out Rehlik.”

“And fucking Ivar,” a male said, cracking his knuckles.

Wait, what?

“Yes, he’ll get his,” Vega said, his voice filled with menace.

Had she heard that right? Vega wanted to kill Ivar? Her heart clenched and worry cascaded over her, but she immediately pushed it away. No, she must've misheard. Vega had spent the last two hours taunting her with the things Ivar had done in his name, from killing alphas to destroying packs so Vega could use their resources. It had to be more taunting from him, more trying to get her worked up so she'd do something foolish. Ivar had betrayed her in the name of trying to help his alpha take over Cider Falls. Plus, Vega was clearly a whack-job; there wasn't any reason to trust what he said. She had a feeling that he didn't often tell the truth, which she supposed she could say about Ivar as well.

If she ever saw him again, she'd be sure to tell him that she hated him.

Although it probably wouldn't affect him at all, since he'd tried to seduce her so he could stick around in Cider Falls and continue to spy, and it had worked, damn it.

The males rushed from the cabin, save for Vega, who stayed behind. He slowly turned to face her, his eyes the amber of his wolf.

The smile he gave her was all malevolence and pain-filled promises.

“Now, little captive, it's time to destroy everything—and everyone—you love.”

Chapter Nineteen

“If you try to warn anyone, or help any of your pack members...” Rehlik threatened in a barely audible voice.

Ivar moved stealthily through the woods between Rehlik and Trace. All around them, males and females from the Cider Falls Pack moved just as silently, heading toward the cabin.

“They’re not my pack,” Ivar murmured. Only Cymbre was his pack now; only she mattered.

He’d never felt so connected to his beasts as he did in this moment. He wasn’t doing a job for Vega, taking out someone for another’s personal gain—he was fighting for someone he loved. And he did love Cymbre. It might’ve only been a short time since he’d met her, but she was everything to him now. He’d spent a decade simultaneously chasing a ghost and working for a madman.

His life was now aligned with Cymbre, his heart entirely hers.

He just had to get to her in time.

The upper-ranked males had begrudgingly believed him. He knew if they thought he was walking them into a trap that they’d try to kill him, but he also knew he’d been dodging death for a long time and they wouldn’t be able to take him out. There was too much at stake.

He swept his gaze around the woods as they moved, and that’s when he saw it, a little lower than eye level: a tiny

camera. If the sun hadn't hit it just right, he would've missed it.

"Shit," he said, freezing.

"What?" Trace asked.

He pointed to the camera. "They know we're here." Rehlik let out a low growl. Ivar put his hands up. "I didn't know about the cameras. They're new."

Weston, who stood on Rehlik's other side, tilted his head. "People are coming toward us, and they're not being quiet."

Ivar let out his claws and faced away from Rehlik. "I need to get Cymbre to safety, then I'll take out Vega."

"No," Rehlik said, putting his hand on Ivar's shoulder. "I'll take him out."

Ivar glanced at the male and found his eyes were bright amber, his power as alpha rolling off him in waves. That was the difference between Rehlik and Vega—Rehlik was a true alpha, born to the position. Vega was a usurper, always taking without earning.

With a nod, Ivar raced off toward the males heading their way. The Cider Falls Pack was at his back. He heard the crackle of Trace's warlock power and saw the faint purple glow that emanated from his hands, and the howl of the pack members who'd shifted into wolves to fight.

It was going to be a long and bloody battle, but the only thing that mattered to Ivar was that Cymbre was safe and Vega was put down for good.

* * *

Vega slashed a claw through the rope that anchored Cymbre to the stove and hauled her up by her arm. She let out a squawk of pain as his claws dug into her skin. He dragged her into the kitchen, a growl rumbling in his chest.

She tried to keep him from dragging her anywhere, but no matter how she struggled or tried to get out of his grip, he pulled her easily.

The door in the kitchen splintered and broke open, with Ivar standing in the doorway looking like some kind of avenging angel.

Vega wrapped a clawed hand around her throat and squeezed, his sharp nails digging into her skin. She lifted her bound hands and tried to pull his hand off her neck but couldn't. As his grip slowly squeezed more tightly, she struggled to breathe.

"Let her go," Ivar growled. "This is between you and me."

"No," Vega said. "You betrayed me after I did so much to help you over the years. I took you out of the gutter and gave you a home and pack. You owe me your life."

"I owe you nothing," Ivar said, his voice dark with fury. "You took my grief and turned me into a killing machine. Cymbre is my family, and Cider Falls is my pack."

Her ears buzzed and her vision went blurry as her oxygen was cut off entirely.

"Your treachery killed your mate," Vega said.

Cymbre started to drift away, and then there was a sharp pain in the center of her chest and warmth down her abdomen.

And then there was nothing.

* * *

Ivar watched in horror as Vega squeezed Cymbre's neck so hard that he thought he'd break it, and then he lifted his free hand, claws extended, and stabbed her in her heart. It happened so fast that he couldn't stop the male from killing his mate. Vega threw Cymbre's body at Ivar, who caught it with a cross between a sob and a roar.

He fell to his knees with her cradled in his arms. Blood poured from the wound and dripped to the floor. He pressed his hand to the wound, which made blood pool around it. Her heart was slowing, and there wasn't anything he could do to stop it. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he whispered, stroking her hair. "I love you. I never...I never meant for you to get hurt." He curled over her and let out the mourning call of his beasts.

He felt the air move near him, and he rolled out of the way as Vega slashed his claws at him, narrowly missing him. Vega raced through the broken door. Ivar crouched next to Cymbre and laid his head on her chest. He listened as her heart beat one final time, and then there was only silence, only his beasts mourning in his head, only his breaking heart.

Ivar lifted his head and let out a war cry, determined to be the one to make Vega breathe his last breath.

* * *

Trace Powell used his warlock power to send two attacking wolves crashing into each other, then flung the pair high into the trees. His power crackled along his skin, his hands glowing purple.

His mate, Jewel, had stayed behind in Cider Falls to protect the mates and children. He knew she could've held her own in this fight because she was a badass warrior, but she'd asked to stay in town and he'd been grateful for it. He would've worried too much about her.

Something panged inside him, a deep moment of grief that almost took him to his knees.

He looked around and saw a male run from an old cabin, followed shortly by Ivar—covered in blood—looking murderous. Without really knowing why, Trace ran to the cabin and found Cymbre on the floor. There was a gaping hole in her chest and her skin was ash gray. He knelt next to her and pressed his fingers to her pulse, opening his senses to listen intently. He held his breath as he listened, hoping she wasn't entirely gone.

“Come on, Cymbre,” he whispered. “Don't give up.”

“Fuck,” Rehlik said, coming to stand next to him. “Is she?”

Trace didn't answer while he listened. Then he both felt and heard a heartbeat. He exhaled sharply. “Yeah. Just barely.”

“Can you?”

“I’m going to try my damndest, but there’s not much time.” He glanced at his friend. “Ivar took after who I assume is Vega. Go help him. He may feel like he has nothing to live for and do something stupid.”

“On it. Be careful.”

“Always.”

As Rehlik left him alone in the cabin, Trace sat back on his heels and let out his warlock power, assessing the damage to Cymbre. Through his power, he could see how close to death she was. Vega had sunk his claws into her heart and twisted, ripping the muscle to shreds. She’d been openly bleeding, her heart pumping blood out of her body like a waterfall. He called his power forward and laid his hands over her heart. He closed his eyes and focused all his power on repairing the damage and bringing her back from the brink.

This power? The ability to pull someone from death’s door? It was why warlocks were feared and deemed too dangerous to commune with. His pack hadn’t seen him as an ally, hadn’t wanted him to use his power to help. He’d been shunned, his studies stunted, made to feel inferior. It wasn’t until he came to Cider Falls that he’d been treated like a male of worth. He’d rarely had a need to use his warlock power since he’d come to the pack. Shelley had healing power of her own and it didn’t cost her as much physically to use it as it did him. Healing Cymbre would drain his power significantly, leaving him vulnerable. But he was willing to do that for a pack member.

For Cymbre, he’d use every ounce of his power.

He just hoped it was enough.

Chapter Twenty

Ivar raced after Vega. He was a male with a singular purpose now: to make Vega suffer for taking Cymbre from him.

Vega was fast, but Ivar was faster. He'd spent his adult life honing himself into a killing machine, and today all that work would pay off.

He was a male filled with vengeance.

With a push, he leaped forward and slammed into Vega, taking him down. Vega grunted and tried to throw Ivar off, but he sank his claws into his shoulders and pulled his upper body off the ground.

"You took her from me. You'll suffer before you die," Ivar said.

Vega slammed his head backward and nearly brained Ivar, who managed to duck to the side and take the blow to his cheek instead of his nose. With a grunt, he was dislodged from Vega's back as the male whipped to his feet and bared fangs and claws at Ivar.

Rehlik joined Ivar, brandishing his claws like knives. "This ends today," Rehlik snarled. "Your attempts to kill me have failed, and now you'll meet your maker."

Vega, seemingly unconcerned that he was now outnumbered, crowed out a laugh. "It was my pleasure to take Ivar's mate from him. I'll do the same to yours too, after I've had some time with her."

Ivar and Rehlik attacked at the same time, their movements coordinated as if they'd been fighting together for years. As they grappled with Vega, males showed up to defend him, and Rehlik split off to take care of them. Ivar poured all his anger into the fight. The only thing he was living for right now was vengeance. He'd failed to keep Cymbre safe, and he wasn't going to be able to live with himself if he didn't kill Vega.

Vega grabbed Ivar and swung him in a circle, slamming him into a tree trunk. They were both bleeding and wounded, but Ivar wasn't going to stop.

He shook off whatever injuries he'd just sustained and spun, narrowly missing the fist Vega threw his direction. He moved to strike with his claws, but Vega deflected, moving out of the way just in time. Ivar snarled and kicked out, catching Vega in the back of the leg as he turned to flee.

When Vega went down, Ivar was on him in an instant, his hands on his head and ready to twist.

Someone slammed into Ivar and pulled him off Vega. As Ivar rolled on the ground, he came up as fast as he could, claws and fangs out.

Rip, bleeding heavily from a wound in his side, limped toward him with a smile missing a few teeth.

"We have unfinished business," Rip said.

Ivar watched Vega struggle to his feet. If he took off again, Ivar might lose him in the woods. Then he'd always be a threat.

With a menacing step forward, Ivar faked right and took off toward Vega, carrying the male forward until he slammed

him into a tree. He spun the dazed male around to face him and grasped a handful of his shirt.

He slammed him back against the tree.

“You took her from me.” Slam.

“You made her suffer.” Slam.

“You can’t be allowed to live.” Slam.

Vega’s eyes rolled back in his head, his hands no longer trying to push Ivar away.

Someone clawed at Ivar’s side, but he ignored it. And this time when he grabbed Vega’s head, Ivar twisted it sharply and his neck broke, ending his life.

He should’ve suffered longer, but Ivar’s strength was failing.

The male attacking him was gone suddenly.

Ivar sank to the ground, his head swimming.

Rehlik appeared, bleeding and bruised, and helped Ivar to his feet.

“Let me die here, where I had my vengeance for my mate’s death,” Ivar said. He didn’t want to live in a world where Cymbre wasn’t.

“You’re not going anywhere, and neither is Cymbre,” Rehlik said, hauling him close and half-carrying him.

“What?” His mind was spinning. He couldn’t have heard the male right.

“Trace was healing her when I left to help you out. And good fucking thing I was here too. That male on your back was trying to take out your heart.”

Ivar's head dropped to his chest and he saw the claw marks on his skin, his shirt ripped to shreds. He didn't even feel anything. He was fully numb.

Then his brain kicked into gear.

"What?"

Rehlik chuckled. "I'm saying that Trace thought he could save her life. She wasn't dead when you left her. She was still hanging on by a thread. Let's see what's up."

Ivar tried to hurry ahead of the male, but he couldn't make headway on his own.

"I'm hurrying, trust me," Rehlik said.

Other males joined them, including Breaker, who said, "We've got a handful of survivors from the other pack, including a female. What do you want us to do with them? They surrendered."

"I'll deal with them. News on Cymbre?" Rehlik asked.

Breaker cleared his throat. "Yeah."

"Tell me," Ivar said.

"She's alive," Breaker said.

* * *

Cymbre came back to life with stunning clarity. One moment she was floating in nothingness, and the next she was having the most intense pain of her life, all centered around her chest.

"Holy shit!"

Trace chuckled. “You’re okay, Cymbre. You almost weren’t okay, but you’re definitely good now.”

She touched her neck and then her chest. Her shirt was wet with blood, but when she peeked through the rips, she saw no injury.

“I died.”

“Almost,” Trace said. He settled on his heels and looked at his bloodstained hands. “If I’d been a minute or two later, you would’ve been too far gone.”

“You’re a healer?”

He let out a sigh and rubbed his temple. That’s when she noticed his eyes were ringed with dark circles and his cheeks looked hollow. “Not in the traditional sense, not like Shelley. I can heal, but it takes a severe physical toll on me. I only heal when I absolutely need to, like in your case. I wasn’t about to let you die.”

“Thank you, Trace,” she said.

“Hey, you’re alive!” Valeria said, coming to the door. “You look like shit, Trace.”

Trace chuckled and Cymbre smiled at the security team member.

“Hey, find out what’s up with Ivar and Rehlik. They went to find the alpha of the other pack.”

“Don’t bother,” Cymbre said.

“What? Why not?” Trace asked.

“He betrayed me, used me,” she said. She sobbed a little and then shook herself out. “I just want to go home.”

“Cymbre, he’s a changed male, I promise.” Trace said.

She shook her head. “I don’t want to see him. Ever. Take me home.”

Frowning, Trace opened his mouth to argue, but then she gave him her most withering look and he closed it abruptly.

He sighed. “Okay, but we’re going to Shelley’s. I want her to check you out.”

“Whatever. Just get me out of here. And keep that male away from me.”

“So no checking up on anyone?” Valeria asked.

“No, thanks,” Cymbre said.

Cymbre and Trace ended up helping each other up as they were both weak. She couldn’t believe that he’d brought her back from near death. She was thankful to be alive and safe now, but she was still pissed to be in the situation she was in. If Ivar had simply told her the truth from the get-go, she wouldn’t have felt the need to follow him and gotten snatched.

As they stepped out of the cabin, she took in the sight. Out in the yard, the fight was over. Vega’s pack—the handful who were still alive anyway—were on their knees with the Cider Falls security team guarding them.

“I need a ride back to town,” Trace said loudly.

“I’ll drive,” Rare said. He jogged toward them and offered his arm to Cymbre so she wasn’t leaning so heavily on Trace.

He helped her into the second row of an SUV. Trace sat in the passenger seat and Rare got behind the wheel.

“Any word on Rehlik and Ivar?” Rare asked. The male was pretty banged-up but seemed in good spirits. His quick healing would take care of his injuries, or Shelley would help.

Cymbre didn’t want to hear anything about the male, but she did hope that Rehlik was okay.

“Breaker was checking on them, but I left before I heard. I trust they’re okay.”

“There’s no way that asshole can stand up to both Rehlik and Ivar.”

“True.”

“Where we going? Cymbre’s?” Rare asked.

“No, Shelley’s.”

“Got it.”

Rare accelerated, heading toward Cider Falls.

Cymbre closed her eyes. She’d almost died today because she’d aligned herself with a male who’d double-crossed her. Her infatuation with him had almost cost her everything, and the pack had nearly suffered greatly too.

Well, Trace and the others might think Ivar was some hero, but she knew what he really was—a spy and a traitor, a male willing to use his truemate to take out her own people. That was not a male she was willing to be with anymore. She was just damn thankful he hadn’t marked her.

A little mirthless laugh bubbled up in her throat. She tried to stifle it but ended up doubled over laughing.

A moment later, that hysterical laughter turned to uncontrollable sobs.

Life was fucking unfair.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ivar jumped out of the truck before Breaker had stopped in front of Shelley's home. Trace was on the front porch speaking to his mate, Jewel.

"Hold on," Trace said, putting his hand up.

Ivar stopped short at the bottom step. "What's wrong? Is Cymbre okay?"

"She's just fine. Shelley's keeping her for observation overnight since she lost a lot of blood and nearly died."

Ivar stepped up onto the porch, and Trace blocked the door.

"I want to see her."

"She doesn't want to see you," Trace said.

The words were like a punch to the face. "I need to tell her I'm different now."

In fact, he had a ton of things to tell her, including that he was in love with her and how sorry he was that he'd lied.

Jewel gave him a pitying look. "She knows but she doesn't care. I'm so sorry."

Ivar wanted to push through Trace and Jewel, but the warlock shook his head slightly, letting Ivar know without words that there was no way he was getting inside the house to his mate.

He stepped back to the corner of the porch next to a decorative gnome with a sunflower hat. "Will you tell her that

I'm here?"

"She doesn't want to see you," Jewel said gently. "She feels betrayed, and that's not a feeling that will go away easily, if ever."

Ivar straightened his shoulders and clasped his hands at his back. "I'm not leaving. Please tell her I'm here and that I won't leave until she speaks with me. In the meantime, I'll stand guard. It's what a good male would do for his female."

Jewel and Trace exchanged silent looks, and then Jewel stepped into the house.

"Do you need to see Shelley? You're pretty banged-up," Trace asked.

Ivar shook his head. "I'll heal."

"Suit yourself."

Ivar could hear some whispering within the house. A few minutes later, Jewel came back out, shutting the door behind her.

"I'll save you the colorful words she used," Jewel said, grimacing, "but suffice it to say that she's not interested in talking to you or hearing what you have to say." She paused and then continued, "She may not come around, Ivar. She's deeply hurt. I mean, Vega nearly killed her because she followed you. Whether you meant it to or not, your actions caused her harm, and I don't know if or when she'll get over that."

"We're truemates," Ivar said. "I'll win her heart back."

It was a promise to himself and his beasts. Even if it took the rest of his life, he was going to earn Cymbre's love

again.

He had nothing else to live for anymore, only her.

Even his quest to save his sister was going to take a backseat to his mate. Cymbre was now the most important person in his life, and he was going to do everything in his power to get her back.

* * *

Cymbre peeked between the blinds in the patient room and saw Ivar.

He'd been standing there all night. She didn't think he'd moved a muscle, let alone eaten or slept. He'd come to Shelley's twelve hours earlier and had refused to leave, even though she told Jewel she didn't want to see him or talk to him.

He was stubborn.

And a liar.

No matter how much her falcon longed to be with him, Cymbre refused to forget that he'd come into Cider Falls to help Vega take over. That was callous on a hundred different levels.

He knew they were truemates, and yet he'd remained loyal to Vega.

He'd endangered her life—not only when she'd been kidnapped, but also simply by continuing to work for Vega

while he toyed with her heart. It didn't matter if he'd changed because they were mates; the change had come too late.

She sighed and decided to stop staring at him.

It was a couple of hours before dawn, but she could see him in the porch lights, his face shadowed with stubble, his eyes searching the surroundings for danger.

She did *not* think it was awesome.

And she certainly didn't think he was the sexiest guy she'd ever seen.

Grumbling inwardly, she let go of the blind and stalked back to the bed. She'd tried to rest like Shelley told her she should, and despite Cymbre saying she'd be better off at her own home, she was stuck here at least until after the sun rose. Which meant she had a few more hours before she could go home and get fully away from Ivar. If he would just leave, she'd be able to sleep, she was sure of it.

And he probably would leave anyway. He had Yva to locate.

Her heart panged. She flopped onto the bed and pulled the sheet over her shoulder, rolling to her side and facing away from the window. She wasn't going to think about Ivar anymore or how miserable she was without him. What she was going to do was remember that she'd nearly died because he was a spy.

Closing her eyes, she willed herself to rest.

* * *

“Knock knock,” Arely said.

Cymbre was sitting on the bed in the patient room, waiting for Shelley to do a final exam before releasing her.

“Hey,” Cymbre said.

Arely held a container with two to-go cups in one hand and a paper bag in the other. “I brought you breakfast. How are you? I was scared to pieces when they told me you’d been taken.”

She set the items on the bedside table and gave Cymbre a gentle hug.

It made tears come to Cymbre’s eyes, but she blinked them away.

She’d spent the night crying and had only managed a few minutes of sleep. Her falcon wouldn’t let her rest, and she couldn’t stop the emotions that bubbled up inside her whenever she thought about what had happened.

“I’m good,” Cymbre said.

Arely handed her a coffee. She sat on the bed next to Cymbre and opened the bag, which contained cheese Danish.

Even though Cymbre didn’t really feel like eating, she knew Shelley wasn’t going to let her go until she’d had something to eat. She reached into the bag and took out a Danish, taking a bite before sipping the coffee.

“This is good—what is it?” Cymbre asked.

“It’s a sugar cookie latte, the coffee special at the garage deli. I thought it sounded good, so I got one too.”

“It’s really sweet, but I like it.”

Arely took a drink and smiled. “It *is* good. I bet it’s awesome iced too.” She put her cup on the table and took the other Danish. “So tell me everything, babe.”

Cymbre took a bite of the sweet pastry and chewed slowly. When she’d swallowed and taken a drink of coffee, she started the story at the beginning, when she’d grown suspicious of Ivar and followed him. By the end of the tale, she’d cried twice and swore she could feel Vega’s claws sinking into her chest again. That was a pain she didn’t think she’d ever forget.

“Damn, girl,” Arely said. “You really went through it. I’m so sorry for everything that happened, but I’m glad you’re here and safe now.”

Arely gave Cymbre a one-armed hug.

Cymbre wiped the tears from her cheeks with a tissue and balled it in her hand. “I hate him.”

“Sure. Anyone would. I kinda hate him myself.”

“But I love him too.”

Arely hummed. “Love is complicated. How can you love someone you hate, or hate someone you love? What are you going to do?”

Cymbre shook her head. “I have no fucking clue, honestly.”

“Have you talked to him?”

“No.”

“Why haven’t you talked to him? Shelley told me he’s been standing out there for twelve hours.”

“I’m afraid if I talk to him that I’ll forgive him because my falcon is driving me batshit crazy over him.”

“And you don’t want to forgive him?”

“How can I?” Cymbre sighed. “He preyed on the kindness of the people I love. He had multiple chances to tell me the truth, and he didn’t. Instead, I nearly died.”

“True. But he’s your truemate.”

“I’m not sure I am. He’s obsessed with finding his sister, so I’ll never be his priority so long as he doesn’t know what happened to her. It’s more than what happened to me, it’s that I don’t think I can build a life with a male who didn’t trust me enough to tell me the truth and who will always have one foot out the door.”

Arely rested her head on Cymbre’s shoulder. “I understand. I don’t think he’s going anywhere, though.”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t have a truemate anymore.”

Resignation filled her.

It didn’t matter if Ivar was sorry for what he’d done; she wasn’t going to forgive him.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ivar overheard the conversation between Arely and Cymbre, and his heart broke. She was so angry and sad. And she had every right to feel as she did. But he just wished she'd let him talk to her. There was so much he wanted to tell her, so much on his heart.

Arely walked out of the house and shut the door quietly.

She stopped next to him, rocking on her heels.

“She’s well?” he asked.

“Of course,” Arely said. “I know you overheard us, so you know how pissed she is.”

“She should be. I hurt her.”

“You also saved the pack,” Arely pointed out.

He turned to face her. “I helped Vega terrorize everyone.”

She stared at him for a moment, and then said, “I won’t pretend to understand what it’s like for you to have gone through what you did with losing your family and then joining up with someone like Vega. But everyone in Cider Falls has lost something. A lot of us have made choices we wouldn’t have if life had dealt us different cards. You lied and you came here to help Vega take over. If Rehlik—who had the most to lose in this scenario—has forgiven you, then I think it’s just a matter of time before Cymbre does as well.”

He wanted to believe her, but he wasn’t feeling particularly hopeful. “Thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome. I think she’s coming home soon. You’ll be camping out at our house?”

“I want to make sure she’s protected.”

Arely nodded and smiled. “See you later.”

An hour later, Rehlik appeared with Trace. “Come for a walk with us,” Rehlik said.

Ivar opened his mouth to protest, but quickly realized that they were attempting to get him away from the house so Cymbre could leave without seeing him. He sighed and closed his mouth with a nod. Following the two males away from the house, he glanced over his shoulder and saw window blinds moving, which let him know that Cymbre had watched to make sure he left.

It was like getting kicked.

They reached the security building at the road into town, which was currently manned by Valeria and Jamison. He’d met Valeria, a cougar-wolf hybrid, and Jamison, a purebred lion, when they’d come to take out Vega and his pack. The two nodded at Ivar but didn’t move to leave the small building.

“Do you want to stay here?” Rehlik asked, turning to face Ivar.

“At the security building?”

“No, in Cider Falls.”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because of your sister,” Trace said. “From what you shared with us of your life for the last decade, you were part of Vega’s pack but rarely with them because you were always on the road looking for your sister.”

“True,” he said. “But things are different now. Now I have Cymbre.”

He grimaced, wondering if he really did have her. They weren't mated, they weren't anything. They were true mates in name only, not officially.

“We'd like to offer for you to join the pack, but there are two problems. First,” Rehlik said, holding up one finger, “is that you're a shadow without any documentation, so I really can't officially make you part of the pack. We can do the ceremony and everything, but it wouldn't be official because I can't take a chance on adding you to our membership rolls with the way the damn FSA is watching every move we make.”

Ivar had heard that the FSA came down hard on Cider Falls after they lost their Hunter Jewel when she chose Trace as her mate.

“I don't want to cause any trouble for you, so being a not-official member is fine. What's the other problem?”

“Cymbre,” Rehlik said. “I wouldn't turn anyone away from membership who has good intentions. I believe that you've changed, that you're not the male who came here knocking on death's door. But Cymbre was here first.”

Ivar stuck his hands in his pockets and looked down at the road. “I understand. If she doesn't want me here, then I shouldn't be here.” He lifted his head. “Has she asked that I leave?”

Trace pursed his lips. “Not yet, but we feel that she might. We just wanted to let you know where we were in the whole scheme of things.”

He didn't want to lose the opportunity to talk to her. If she told them to make him leave, he'd do it, but he'd never stop trying to win her back. It killed him that he'd had loads of opportunity to tell her everything and he'd failed.

"Okay. I'm going to post watch at her house," Ivar said.

"You know it's safe now, right?" Rehlik asked. "Vega is dead and some of our people delivered the remnants of Vega's people to the FSA to deal with, since they were all exiles who hadn't ever joined up with a group as they were supposed to."

Ivar was glad to hear that Cider Falls was safe from harm from Vega's pack, but that didn't change the fact he couldn't stay away from Cymbre.

"I know," he said.

Trace nodded. "I get it. But if she says you need to leave her alone, we expect you to comply."

"I will."

Rehlik looked at his watch. "I'm certain she's at her house now, so you can go. If you need anything, let us know. We'll see how it all plays out between the two of you."

"And we'll hope for the best," Trace said.

Ivar appreciated their kindness more than he could articulate, so he simply nodded and walked away, heading for the house Cymbre and Arely shared.

* * *

Ivar stood on the front porch, hands clasped behind his back, ears open and gaze alert. He could hear Cymbre moving around in the house, but he hadn't seen her. Arely had been at the house when he'd arrived, but was on her way to work.

"I'll bring you dinner along with what I bring home for me and Cymbre."

"Thanks. Is she not going to work today?"

"She's taking the rest of the week off."

He was alarmed to know she was taking time off work because he knew she enjoyed being a nanny. "Why? Is she not healed fully?"

"She is now, but you know she almost died, Ivar."

"I know."

"I don't think it's too off-the-wall to think that she might like to take some time off after what she went through."

"You're right," he said with a sigh. "She's not scared anymore, though, right? She knows it's safe now?"

"She does. I mean, she understands that, but she's still got some residual anxiety." She lowered her voice. "I think she likes knowing you're out here, but I don't think she'd say that out loud to me or anyone else."

"Thanks, Arely."

"Have a good day of being bored standing out here."

He nodded and watched as she got into her car and left. He rolled his shoulders and settled into watching. He was used to this. He'd spent years honing the skills to observe without being seen. But he wasn't trying to hide from Cymbre; he

wanted her to know that he was there until she didn't want him to be there anymore. There was no one else on earth who mattered more to him than her.

* * *

A few hours later, as his stomach rumbled from missing lunch and he ignored the hunger pangs, Jewel walked up with Trace.

“How's it going?” Jewel asked.

“Fine.” Well, not fine, really, but it was as good as could be expected when he was hanging around outside his mate's house and hoping she'd let him talk to her so he could explain himself.

“I have some news,” Jewel said.

He glanced at the door to the house. Had Cymbre called Rehlik and asked him to make Ivar leave?

“I've found Yva.”

He blinked, his brain going offline for a moment.

“Yva? You did? Where?”

“She's in Clayton. Remember that post about the traveling circus I found? Well, I kept digging and finally located them. They appear to be made up of exiled shifters. The unique hybrids are in a sideshow attraction, and they use purebreds for other shows. Like they have a lion tamer who uses lion shifters. It's pretty wild.”

Trace cleared his throat, and Jewel smiled.

“Sorry, I’m rambling. I just find it fascinating that an entire circus of exiles is operating under the FSA radar. But anyway, I found Yva. I saw a post someone did a year ago about a real gryphon, and it’s her, I’m sure of it—black tiger and snow owl. I found their schedule online, and they’re in Clayton for the week, and then they’ll move on.”

Jewel held out a piece of paper with writing on it. Ivar stared at it.

He’d been waiting for real news of his sister since she’d been taken. He’d dreamed of finding her again and being a family once more.

He looked over his shoulder to the front door.

Inside was his truemate. He’d never thought he’d even get one, and he hadn’t really cared until he’d met her. He’d always thought Yva was the missing part of his heart, but he realized then that the missing part was Cymbre.

“I don’t need that,” he said.

Jewel’s eyes went wide, and her brows lifted. “What? But you’ve been looking for her for ten years.”

He shook his head. “I wasn’t just looking for her, I was obsessed with finding her. Looking for her was the reason I joined up with Vega in the first place—because he had resources I needed to locate her. I couldn’t let go of the fact that I’d failed her and she’d gotten taken. But then I almost lost Cymbre, and I realized that the most important person in the world to me is my truemate, not my sister.”

“So you’re not going to find out if it’s really her?” Trace asked, his voice tinged with skepticism.

“I’m not going anywhere unless Cymbre is with me. I’m finally putting my obsession with Yva to rest. Only Cymbre matters now.”

“Wow,” Jewel said. She took the piece of paper and slipped it into a pocket in her phone case. “If and when you need the information, I have it. Good luck.”

“Thank you.” He reached out and shook her hand. “I mean it. Thank you for looking for my sister.”

“It was my pleasure.”

Jewel and Trace left, and Ivar was once more alone on the porch.

He always thought when he finally had Yva’s whereabouts that he’d be elated, but all he could think about was that Cymbre wasn’t with him to share the news. He’d really fucked up, but he was determined to be a changed male. No more obsession with finding his sister. The only person he was going to worry about was his gorgeous mate and getting her back in his arms.

However that happened, he hoped it was soon. He’d never missed someone so much.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Cymbre listened in disbelief as Ivar told Jewel he didn't want to know where his sister was.

He'd chosen her above his family.

She huffed and turned from the front door where she'd been eavesdropping. Then she stopped and chewed on her bottom lip.

What did it mean?

A chill went down her spine as she recalled his words, "Only Cymbre matters now."

She could hear the truth in his words. He honestly felt that way.

So how the hell did she feel about that?

Well, she didn't want him to give up his search for his sister. Even though Cymbre had hated the thought of him taking off to find her, and had claimed to Arely that it was one of the reasons she wasn't going to give him another chance, his family was important to him. So important that he'd aligned himself with a terrible alpha and done horrible things in his name. All so he could find Yva.

Before she could stop herself, she opened the door.

Ivar spun in surprise.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

“Making sure you’re safe and hoping you give me a chance to tell you everything.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “No, I mean, what are you doing not taking the information on Yva from Jewel? Why would you do that?”

He stared at her in silence.

She forgot how sexy he was. How just being in his presence devastated her senses and made her want things she’d told herself she didn’t want any more with him.

A home. Family. Love.

“Because my priorities changed when I met you, Cymbre.” He took a cautious step toward her. Even though part of her wanted to still be furious at him for what had happened, her resolve was weakening.

“Not immediately,” she pointed out. “You stayed away from me until I harassed you in the bar’s parking lot.”

He grinned. “You were very cute.”

“I was drunk.” And she didn’t think it was great that he thought she was cute.

“You told me about your past and it got to me.” He shrugged. “I should’ve told you right then that I was working for Vega. I fucked up.”

“Yeah. Why didn’t you?”

“I was afraid to lose you. And then I almost lost you anyway.” He scrubbed a hand through his hair. “I thought you died in my arms. I wanted to die too. And now you’re alive but you hate me. And I deserve it. I’m so sorry that you were hurt

because I was too scared to tell you the truth and go to Rehlik for help to take out Vega. I will never forgive myself for that.”

She could relate to being worried that the past was going to ruin everything.

“But why don’t you want to find Yva?”

“Because you’re my mate.” He stepped a little closer now. Only a foot separated them.

She tilted her head up to look at him. “If I said you needed to leave me alone forever?”

He scowled. “I’d leave, but I’d still try to win you back. I don’t know how I’d do it, but I wouldn’t give up on you. On us.”

“What if I told you to go find Yva and I’ll be here when you get back?”

He shook his head vehemently. “I’m not leaving without you.” He took her hand and placed it over his heart, then covered it with his other hand. “I love you, Cymbre. When I thought you were dead, I thought I’d missed the chance to tell you how I feel. The trajectory of my life changed when I held you in my arms. No more obsessing over Yva, no more working for bad guys and doing bad guy shit. I just want to be your mate and build a life with you.”

“What’s bad guy shit?”

His lids lowered and he let out a growling sigh. “Killing.”

“Ah. Damn.”

Silence stretched between them while she mulled over his words.

“When Trace saved me, he told me you were a changed male, but I didn’t want to hear it. I was so angry.”

“You had every right to be. You nearly died because I’m an asshole.”

“But you came for me. You tried to save me. You took out the male attacking my pack. And then you stood guard outside Shelley’s house while I healed and now here. Did you even sleep?”

“I dozed a bit.”

“Standing?”

“I wasn’t about to lay down and leave you vulnerable.”

“I only really feel vulnerable right now.” She chewed on her bottom lip.

“Tell me how to fix it.”

She released her lip and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Tell me you love me again.”

“I do, Cymbre.” He rested his hands on her hips and gave them a squeeze. “I love you more than anything.”

“I love you too.”

He lowered his head and brushed his lips against hers. She pulled back and said, “I forgive you. For everything. I wanted to stay mad at you and never see you again, but my falcon wouldn’t let me say those words. I’m glad you stayed.”

He pulled her close and kissed her again. She could hear the happy rumble of his tiger and the hoot of his owl, and her falcon responded in kind.

She took a step backward toward the open door, pulling him with her.

“We’ve got some making up to do, Ivar.”

“Yes, please,” he said with a sultry grin.

“And then we’re going to find Yva.”

“Nope,” he said.

She paused. “What?”

“I’m not going anywhere until we’re mated officially and I’m part of the pack.”

“The full moon isn’t for a week. You want to wait that long?”

“Cymbre,” he said, cupping her face. “You’re my true mate. You’re the only person on the planet who matters to me. Yes, I’d like to find Yva and make sure she’s okay, but first we need to get our life in order. Only after we’re mated will I be okay with chasing that lead, but *only* if you’re with me. It’s you and me from now on.”

“I like that,” she said.

“Good,” he said. He swung her up into his arms and kicked the door shut. “Are you feeling well enough to let me rock your world, mate?”

“Yes, please,” she said, kissing him.

He carried her back to the bedroom, and this time when they made love, he marked her with his fangs on her neck. They fell asleep after that, tangled together under the sheets, arms around each other, the way it was supposed to be with true mates.

She wished things hadn't been so rocky between them, but she actually wouldn't change anything that had happened.

Her past was just as dark as his, filled with death and loss. She'd found sanctuary in Cider Falls, and he'd fallen in with a psychopath who used his rage and grief to turn him into a monster. He was a different male now, though, claiming her love as the balm to his soul.

She'd never told a male she loved him. She was glad she'd saved those words for her true mate. Ivar deserved all her love, and she deserved his.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ivar waited outside of the home where Cymbre nannied as she said her final goodbyes. The week had passed quickly as the full moon approached. Tomorrow he and his beautiful mate would become official and he'd be a pack member, even though it wouldn't be on the records because he was a shadow. Over the last week he'd met with Rehlik and all the high-ranked males and was now a member of the security team. He liked to patrol in the woods, and twice a day he'd take to the sky and fly overhead, looking for anything out of place. Even though Vega was dead, and the remnants of the pack were incarcerated with the FSA for the foreseeable future, no one was taking the safety of the town for granted.

Cymbre walked out of the house. He could hear her sniffing.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said as she reached him. He took her in his arms and hugged her tightly.

"It's okay, this is really for the best," she said with a sniffle. "I didn't want to keep leaving town for work, and I know I'm going to love working at the daycare at the pack school. I'll just miss the kids."

They'd had dinner with Rehlik and Waylen on Monday, and Rehlik had told them about an opening at the school daycare. It was for school staff as well as pack members with little ones. She'd reached out to the parents of the kids she nannied, and it turned out that the mom was going to start working from home soon anyway, so the timing was good.

She leaned away and kissed him, then used a tissue to wipe the tears from her face.

“Let’s go home,” she said.

He opened her door and then shut her inside. As he jogged around to the driver’s side, he saw the young boy at the door, waving.

Ivar waved back, then sat behind the wheel. Cymbre put the window down and said, “Bye, Davy!”

He backed out of the driveway and put the car into gear, accelerating away from the house. “I’ve got an idea.”

“Oh?” she asked as she put the window up.

“I’d like to take you out tonight.”

“A date?”

“Yep.”

“I’d love that. Where?”

“I found a steakhouse that’s supposed to be amazing. It’s not dressy, but it’s not super casual, either.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“I figured since we’ll be busy tomorrow getting ready for the ceremony that it would be nice to have a night out.”

“Very true.” She took his hand and rested it on her thigh.

They talked about the ceremony the following night and the jobs they’d been assigned. He was tasked with two: cleaning up the gazebo and town square where the ceremony would take place, and patrolling the woods and town.

“I’ll be with Diem all day,” she said. “She’s in charge of the food for the party afterward.”

“Are you happy about that?”

“Definitely. It was either helping to cook or decorating, and I’d rather cook. Arely is going to decorate since she cooks all day at her job.”

“Speaking of Arely,” he said.

“Yeah, she texted me when she was on her break and is going to live with Diem for the time being. There’s a home that’s nearly ready she can move into, but it’s about two weeks away from her being able to move in.”

“Did you tell her that it was okay if she stayed with us?” he asked.

“She doesn’t want to. She said if she’d found her true mate first that she would’ve politely kicked my butt to the curb.”

He laughed. “I’m glad she’s not upset.”

“She’s not. And she’s the one who brought it up, don’t forget. I think when she caught us in the kitchen that she decided it was best to move out.”

He grinned at his mate. They’d been too caught up in each other to hear the front door open, and Arely had gotten an eyeful of the two of them enjoying each other.

“At least now we don’t have to worry about anyone walking in on us.”

“Definitely.”

He pulled into the driveway next to Arely's car. She walked out of the house with a box.

"Hey guys," she said. Ivar got out of the car and took the box from her, carrying it to her car.

"I was going to offer to help," Cymbre said. "I didn't think you were going to come over until tomorrow."

"No worries," Arely said. "Diem and I are having a movie night and I wanted to grab the hot air popcorn maker. I was also asked if I'd make caramel popcorn balls for tomorrow, so we're going to do that first thing in the morning."

"I love those things," Cymbre said. "Sounds like a fun night."

Ivar put the lid down on the trunk. "Is there anything else I can bring out for you?"

"Nope, I've got everything now. This is my third trip here." She gave him some side-eye. "And I knocked like ten times and announced myself really loudly in case you two were knocking boots in the kitchen again."

Cymbre's cheeks pinked and she let out a groan. "Arely!"

"Just teasing. If I had my mate, we'd be knocking boots everywhere."

"I'll be sure to knock very loudly when that time comes," Cymbre said with a chuckle.

The two friends embraced and they said goodbye. Ivar led Cymbre into the house.

"Wow, she's really gone," Cymbre said.

“How can you tell?”

“The throw pillows were hers. And the blue lamp,” she pointed out.

She turned to face him with a soft trill from her bird. He recognized the sound because his owl knew it meant she wanted to play.

“Dinner?” he offered, even as he tugged his shirt from his jeans.

“Later,” she whispered. Then she took off for the bedroom with a happy giggle, and he couldn’t help but chase after her. They tumbled to the bed, clothes flying, shoes hitting the walls, and pleasurable moans filling the air.

Nothing was as good as being with Cymbre, feeling her respond to his touch and knowing that he held her heart.

She certainly held his.

* * *

“If there are any among you who have reason to believe that Ivar should not become a member of the pack, please speak now,” Rehlik said, his voice booming over the crowd.

The town square was packed. Cymbre stood with Ivar. Their mating ceremony had happened first, with the two of them pledging to love and care for each other forever. Then he’d bit her neck to give her a bruise that was symbolic of the mating mark he’d given her earlier. The pack had cheered their mating, officiated by Rehlik, and then they’d started the joining ceremony.

The whole pack was quiet, and Ivar found himself holding his breath, wondering if anyone would say they didn't trust him or didn't want him to join them.

When enough time had passed to satisfy Rehlik that no one objected, he smiled and nodded.

"Then it's my pleasure to welcome Ivar McIntyre to the pack. Join me!" Rehlik lifted his head and howled. The pack joined in, and Ivar added his tiger's roar to the mix with Cymbre's falcon joining in.

Ivar grinned at his mate as he pulled her close for a kiss. As their lips met, his beasts quieted in reverence.

"You're the best thing that ever happened to me," he whispered against her lips.

"Me too."

They kissed again as the pack dispersed to enjoy the party. Rehlik congratulated them and so did Weylyn, and then he and Cymbre were alone.

"Sweetheart?"

"Yes?" she asked.

"I want to ask you a question, but I have to ask you something else first."

She gave him a curious look. "Okay?"

He chuckled, suddenly feeling nervous for a reason he couldn't explain. "So you know how I don't have a birth certificate or any sort of government identification?"

"Sure."

“Well, just keep in mind that whatever we decide, I can’t do anything truly legal.”

Her brows rose. “Legal for what?”

He dropped to one knee and brought out a ring from his pocket. She let out a soft gasp.

“I love you so much, sweetheart. You’re everything to me. I want to ask you to marry me, but I can’t actually marry you legally because I don’t really exist. But we can have a ceremony anyway and know that in our hearts we’re married even if the government is in the dark.” He blew out a breath. “Will you be my wife, Cymbre?”

“Yes! Of course!”

He slipped the ring on her finger and rose to his feet to catch her in a hug and kiss her.

She sniffled and tasted the salt of her tears.

He brushed a tear from her cheek and smiled down at her. “I’m sorry I’m not legal.”

“I don’t even care about that. I just want to be yours in every way and for you to be mine in every way.”

“Me too.”

He pressed his forehead to hers and sighed happily. His beasts were so thrilled that his chest was rumbling with his tiger’s happy purr and owl’s trill.

People started to clap. Ivar glanced to the side to see Rehlik, Weylyn, Trace, Jewel, Breaker, Arely, and Diem standing in a semi-circle. Arely lifted her phone and smiled with tear-wet cheeks. “I got it on video!”

“Congratulations, you two,” Rehlik said. The small group cheered, and the females came over to check out the ring while the males clapped him on the back.

“There’s a guy who can help,” Trace said with a low voice.

“Help what?” Ivar asked in confusion.

“Our pack member Graham is an excellent forger. He can make any documents you need that will be good enough to pass muster with the government, from birth certificates to driver’s licenses.”

“Wow, really?” Cymbre asked. She looked at Ivar. “If you had real identification documents, we could get married for real.”

“And I can officiate the wedding when you’re ready,” Rehlik said. “I’m ordained.”

“That’s amazing,” Ivar said. “Thank you all so much.”

“Now we’ve got an extra thing to celebrate,” Diem said. “Let’s go party!”

Ivar held Cymbre’s hand until the group left and then he pulled her close one more time. “I love you. I’m going to make you the happiest wife on the planet.”

“I love you too, and I can’t wait for this new chapter of our life to get started.”

They joined the pack to enjoy the party food. Later that night, they’d head out in their shifts and he and Cymbre would get to hunt together for the first time. He couldn’t wait for the moon to rise and the hunt to start. It was turning out to be the very best damn day of his life.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ivar put his hand on Cymbre's knee.

“What?” she asked, glancing at him as he drove.

“Your knee is bouncing like crazy. Are you okay?” He looked at her for a moment and then turned his attention back to the road.

“Yeah,” she said with a chuckle. “I’m just nervous, I guess.”

“Why are you nervous?”

She sighed. The day after the full moon, they'd had a small wedding ceremony with Rehlik presiding. Breaker had been Ivar's best man and Arely had been Cymbre's maid of honor. The intimate ceremony had ended with a pack-wide party at the bar with appetizers and Trace's special cocktail served in their honor. Then they'd taken a few days to go on a honeymoon, spending time at a cabin on a lake.

When they'd come back to Cider Falls, Ivar had organized a group to go with them to find out if the person Jewel's research had unearthed was truly Yva, traveling with a circus, which was currently in Northern Florida.

Two vehicles were with them and included Trace, Jewel, Breaker, and Arely. Cymbre was glad to have the pack's support.

“I don't know why I'm nervous,” she said finally. “What if it's not her?”

“Then Jewel’s research will keep going, and eventually I’ll find out what happened to her.”

“I just don’t want you to be disappointed.”

He picked up her hand and brought it to his lips. “I’ll be disappointed if it’s not really her, but I have a good feeling about it.”

“You do?”

“Sure.” He let out a chuckle. “Even if it’s not her, I still have you. Being with you has given me hope for the future.” He paused and then said softly, “I may never know what happened to her if I don’t find her, but I don’t think I’ll ever stop wondering.”

She gave his hand a squeeze and leaned over to rest her head on his shoulder. “I’m going to hope for the best.”

“Me too, sweetheart.”

She closed her eyes with a yawn. They’d left early that morning because, according to the traveling circus’s social media page, it was their last day in Tallahassee before they headed west. Ivar and his friends were hoping to catch the circus before they moved on so they weren’t chasing after them on the road.

“Hey, we’re here,” Ivar said.

Cymbre opened her eyes and sat up, not realizing she’d fallen asleep.

With a stretch and yawn, she peered out the windshield. In the distance, she could see an archway leading into the traveling circus, a lit-up sign with the name Ferinni’s Fantastic Circus in the center. She could see a Ferris wheel slowly

turning, and when she opened her door, she heard music and laughter, along with the occasional scream from the rides.

Cymbre met Ivar at the front of the car, and they were joined by the others.

“Ready?” Trace asked.

“Yes,” Ivar said.

Their group headed to the entrance, where they paid the entrance fee and were given orange wristbands. Following the crowd through the archway, they stepped to the side and gathered in a loose circle to look at the map.

“The sideshow is next to the main tent,” Cymbre said. “But the next show isn’t for a half hour.”

They’d hoped to be able to see the sideshow acts on social media, to be able to tell if the cat-bird woman was actually Yva or not, but there weren’t photos available.

“Let’s head over there anyway,” Ivar said. “We can get in line early.”

They started the trek toward the center of the circus.

“Oh my gosh, it smells so good here,” Jewel said.

“We can eat lunch after the sideshow,” Trace said.

“I’m going to eat my weight in cotton candy,” Arely said.

They passed a row of games, with barkers calling for them to stop and play.

“If we weren’t on a mission, this would be a fun place to hang out,” Cymbre said.

She stopped suddenly. Ivar paused and looked at her. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“That little boy looks like you,” she said, pointing to a young male with the same features as Ivar.

Ivar looked to where she pointed, but the boy, who seemed to realize they were looking at him, ducked into the main tent.

“I didn’t get a good look at him,” Ivar said.

“Me, either,” Arely said. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Cymbre said. Her heart was pounding. What if they’d really found Yva? What if that was her son?

Cymbre took off at a jog toward the tent. The others hurried behind her to catch up. When she reached the tent, the flap opened suddenly and a huge male stood in the entrance. He glared menacingly down at her. The little boy peeked out from behind the male.

“Are you chasing my son?” he demanded.

Cymbre took a step back in surprise. Ivar stepped in front of her with a soft growl. “My mate thought your boy looked familiar.”

The male stared at Ivar. The two were nearly the same height, both muscular and broad, and they both were growling.

Cymbre didn’t want to cause any trouble, so she leaned past Ivar and said, “I’m sorry if I scared him, I didn’t mean to.”

“Do I know you?” the male asked Ivar.

“Babe? Where’s Ivar?” a feminine voice said. “Bella said she saw him look scared.”

Cymbre’s jaw dropped at the name. Ivar? Someone else was named Ivar?

What were the odds?

* * *

Ivar couldn’t speak. Hearing the female’s voice made everything within him freeze.

A woman appeared next to the huge male.

“There you are, Iv,” she said, bending to kiss the boy’s head. “Are you okay?”

“Yva?” Ivar whispered, finally getting his voice to work.

She straightened and stared at him. She’d been smiling, but her smile slipped as her mouth fell open and her eyes went wide.

“Ivar?”

There was a moment where time seemed to stand still, and then Ivar and Yva crashed together in a hug.

“I thought you were dead!” she said.

“I’ve been looking for you for ten years!” he said.

“What the hell is going on here?” the male asked.

Yva leaned away and smiled, tears spilling over her cheeks. “It’s my brother, Nando.”

“You said he was dead.”

“I thought he was! Oh my gosh, let’s go to our place. We have so much to discuss!”

She grabbed his hand and moved out of the tent.

“We’ll be eating all the fun stuff,” Jewel said. “Text us and let us know what’s going on.”

Ivar grabbed Cymbre’s hand as his sister towed him behind the huge main tent and past a cordoned-off area where RVs and trailers were lined up.

Once they were inside, they sat around a table.

Yva reached for the big male’s hand. “This is my mate, Fernando. Our son, Ivar, just ran into his room to play. Our daughter, Bella, is eight and working with the lion tamer for the main show.”

“This is my mate, Cymbre.” He choked up. “Tell me what happened to you.”

She gave him a watery smile. “First, tell me how you’re alive. When the pack took me, the last thing I saw was you fall and not get back up. I thought everyone had died.”

“I almost died, but I survived. I hid until my wounds were healed, and then I hunted down the males who killed our family. Before the alpha died, he said he’d sold you. I killed him and the others involved, and then I searched for you, but I never found any trace. I honestly wasn’t sure if you were alive, but I wasn’t going to give up. Tell me how you came to be here.”

Fernando put his arm around her, and she leaned on him.

“It was awful. They drugged me and kept me chained up in a room for a few days. No one touched me, thankfully, but I

was so scared because I didn't know what they were going to do to me. It turned out the alpha needed money and had a buyer for unique shifters, so he sold me. The male who bought me attacked me, so I killed him and ran away. I stayed hidden and only traveled at night. I was so afraid someone was going to find me." She stopped talking and Fernando took over.

"One night, while I was patrolling while everyone in the circus slept, I heard something in the trash. I found Yva scrounging for food. It was December, and she had no shoes or coat and looked like she hadn't eaten properly in weeks."

She wiped at the tears on her cheeks. "I knew when I looked into his eyes that he was my true mate. He took me in and cared for me until I was back to full health, and then the alpha offered to let me join the circus. I shift on the weekends for the sideshow. Humans tend to think it's a costume," she said with a chuckle. "Fernando and I mated a few months later, and then Bella was born, and a little after that we had Ivar, who I named after you."

"I'm so happy that you're well," he said, sitting back in the chair. He scrubbed a hand over his face, relief filling him.

"I can't believe you've been looking for me. I never knew you were alive. I feel awful."

"Why do you feel awful?" Ivar asked.

"Because we might have found each other if I'd been looking for you too."

He shook his head. "That doesn't matter, Yva. The only thing that's important right now is that we're together finally."

She slipped from the booth and stood. "Give me another hug!"

He rose to his feet and hugged her.

Little Ivar appeared. "I have an uncle?"

"You do!" Yva said. She held out her hand, and he joined them. "You're named after him because he's the best brother a female could have."

Ivar squatted down and stuck out his hand. The young male shook it, giving him a toothy grin.

"It's nice to meet you," Ivar said. "I like your name."

"I like yours too," he said with a giggle.

A phone beeped, and Fernando said, "We must go, my love. The show is going to start soon, and we're needed."

"Will you come watch the sideshow? Oh! You could shift with me, that would be amazing. Cymbre, what are you? You smell like a bird, but I don't know which one."

"I'm a falcon, but I'm pretty ordinary compared to the two of you," she said.

"Not ordinary," Ivar said, pulling her close. "You're beautiful."

"Alpha Ziggy will love to have another gryphon in the show," Fernando said. "Come, we'll introduce you to him and get set up."

Ten minutes later, Ivar and Yva were on a stage next to each other in their shifts behind a red curtain. Cymbre was in the stands with young Ivar and Bella, who already adored their Aunt Cymbre, as well as their friends, who'd come to watch the sideshow.

Yva gave Ivar a nudge with her paw, and he let out a soft purr.

In all the years he'd been searching for her, he hadn't known if he'd ever see her again. To know she'd not only survived the last decade, but had thrived, finding a home and family? It was sweeter than he had ever imagined.

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, today we have a most special surprise. Our favorite cat-bird woman is joined by her brother! Join me in saying a roaring hello to them both!” The curtain opened slowly, and the crowd gasped.

On cue, Ivar and Yva roared and rose into the air, their wings lifting them off the ground a few feet. They swooped and dove, dancing around the stage and swishing over the top of the audience, who cheered and clapped. When they were back on stage, they bowed and stretched out their wings, letting loose another roar as the curtain closed. The next sideshow hurried onto the stage as Ivar and Yva padded off to wait out their shift.

After the show was over, Yva and Ivar were able to shift back to human. When he was dressed, he went out to the stands and found Cymbre and the others. Yva and Fernando joined them.

“That was the most fun I've had in years in the sideshow,” Yva said. “Thank you so much!”

“Our alpha wants to offer you a job within the circus,” Fernando said. “You and Cymbre.”

“Oh wow,” Cymbre said. “That's amazing.”

Ivar nodded. He looked at his mate, who was smiling so sweetly at him. He knew that she'd go wherever he wanted,

that he didn't even need to ask her to join up with the circus and leave Cider Falls behind.

"That's a wonderful offer, but our home is in Cider Falls," Ivar said. "But we'd love to connect with you throughout the year as you travel."

Fernando nodded. "That would be good."

Trace said, "If you're in Kentucky, it would be awesome if we could bring you to town."

Yva smiled. "I told the alpha you wouldn't want to join up with us and asked if we could come to see you, and he said we'll be through in April. Just have your alpha call him."

Ivar's phone buzzed, and he looked at the screen to see contact information for Alpha Ziggy.

"That sounds perfect," Cymbre said. "I can't wait."

* * *

A few hours later, they were headed back to Cider Falls.

"I can't believe you really found her," Cymbre said. "She's amazing."

"She is. And she's done so well for herself."

"Are you sure you don't want to live with them?" she asked, looking at him.

He gave her a sweet smile.

"I really don't. Living on the road like they do probably isn't all it's cracked up to be. I'd love to spend time with her,

but I don't want to be part of a sideshow."

"You guys were amazing together." She'd loved seeing him flying all over. It was spectacular.

"It was definitely fun. And we can always take a vacation and follow them in the summer. Their alpha said we were welcome anytime."

Cymbre opened the bag on her lap and took out a piece of fluffy cotton candy. After eating it, she said, "This has been the best day. I'm so happy for how things turned out."

"Me too, sweetheart. If I hadn't tried to help Vega take over Cider Falls, you and I might never have met and I wouldn't be the happiest male on the planet."

"I'm definitely the happiest female on the planet," she promised.

"I'll make you happier when we get home."

"Oh, drive faster, then!" she said with a laugh.

As Ivar accelerated with a grin, she couldn't help but smile herself. The last few weeks had been crazy on a level she'd never experienced before.

She'd never expected that her truemate would be a spy trying to take out her alpha, and while some parts of her recent past she'd like to forget, she couldn't be sorry for the way her life had turned out. Ivar was one of the best males she'd ever known, and she could feel all the way to the depths of her heart just how much he loved her.

And she loved him that much too.

Her life had been turned upside down more than once in the last few weeks, but she'd come out on the other side of

things stronger.

“When we get home,” she said, leaning against him and closing her eyes. “I’m going to make you mine, over and over.”

She heard the happy rumble of his beasts in his chest.

“Same.”

She closed her eyes with a smile, her body heating at the thought of what awaited them once they were home.

For a female who’d thought she didn’t deserve to find love and happiness, she’d been granted them in spades.

* * *

Thank you so much for reading **DECEPTIVE PROMISES!** I hope you enjoyed visiting Cider Falls and getting to know the Pack! The Cider Falls Shifters stories continue this fall with **ANCIENT PROMISES.**

In the meantime, check out the first book in my Wolf’s Mate Generations series, [**LYRIC & THE CATS.**](#)



She-wolf Lyric Gerrick knows her alpha wolf parents want her to settle down with a

pack member and build a life in Kentucky, but her restless wolf isn't interested in anyone in Allen. After exhausting job options in Allen and the surrounding towns, she answers an ad for a teaching job at Ashland Elementary, a town in Indiana full of mountain lion shifters. Her parents happen to know someone in Ashland willing to let Lyric stay with them during the interview process. What she wants is to get the job. What she doesn't expect? To find not one mate, but two.

Mountain lion shifters Elliott and Evan Fallon have been working for the Ashland police department from the moment they graduated from the police academy. They both love keeping the humans and shifters in the sleepy town of Ashland safe. When the daughter of their mother's old friend arrives in Ashland for a job interview, they know the moment they lay eyes on her that

the delectable Lyric is the one female for them both.

Lyric's parents are not okay with her having two mates who are mountain lion shifters who'd like her to move to Ashland with them. Old wounds are exposed, and painful memories dredged up, but it's not Lyric, Elliott, and Evan's fight—it's their parents'. Can the blooming love between the wolf and mountain lion trio bring their two groups together, or will things be over before they start?

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Read on for an excerpt from *Lyric & the Cats*...

* * *

Elliott and his twin Evan were the first of the new generation born in Ashland, and everyone assumed they'd take over for their parents, but the truth was it wasn't even on his radar. His lion was being particularly grumpy lately because they were twenty-five and unmated. He and Evan were planning to share their truemate...if they could find her. Mountain lions mostly shared—two males to one female—although there were a few mated quartets with three males to one female, too. The lions were very accepting of whatever romantic notions a male or female had. Want to mate with a human? No problem. Some other kind of shifter? Not an issue. Want more than one mate? The more the merrier.

Ashland wasn't entirely lion, with humans making up half of the population, but they were accepting of the pride and the nuances of the romantic relationships that had begun with his parents finding each other under the most unlikely of circumstances—a car accident. When his mother had flown off an icy road and been knocked unconscious, his fathers—identical twin brothers Eryx, a police officer, and Ethan a police officer and EMT—had responded and discovered they were truemates. Callie was a wolf shifter from a pack in Kentucky that had antiquated ideas about hierarchy and rankings, and she'd left to find a new place to settle. King hadn't been a good fit for them; back then the females were under a curse from a goddess to hate the notion of family and

love, and they actively chased potential mates away. Ashland was a haven in more than one way.

“What are you thinking about so seriously?” Lennox asked.

Elliott blinked a few times and put his beer down. “Truemates.”

“Why? Feeling the bug to settle down?” Eddie asked as he signaled Chase, the bartender and a pride member, for another beer.

“I guess? My cat’s feeling unsettled. Just seems like it’s been long enough, you know?”

“We all feel that way at one point or another,” Reilly said. He shrugged. “It’s part and par of being a mountain lion. Even for those of us who aren’t entirely mountain lion.”

There weren’t a ton of pure mountain lions in the pride. Mixed matings had made for some interesting hybrids, like Lennox, who was a mountain lion with the dark fur of his grizzly bear side, or Eddie who was a panther with mountain-lion colored fur, or Reilly who was a wolf with mountain lion tendencies.

“I suppose. I think maybe hitting twenty-five has made me feel even more antsy.”

“That makes sense,” Trent said.

“Here you go,” Chase said, sliding a beer across the counter to Eddie. “What makes sense?”

“Feeling the mating pull,” Reilly said. “It’s getting to Elliott.”

“It’s not getting to me,” he said irritably, “it’s just on my mind.”

“You know,” Chase said, looking thoughtful, “it always seems like males start to get agitated about being unmated just around the time when their truemate shows up. Dylan, Hunter, and I were all getting anxious about settling down and finding a female to share, and then we met Cristabel.”

“Maybe that’s a good sign,” Myles said as he leaned over and snagged a handful of pretzels from the bowl. “You two might be finding your truemate sooner rather than later.”

“I’d love that,” Elliott said.

* * *

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