

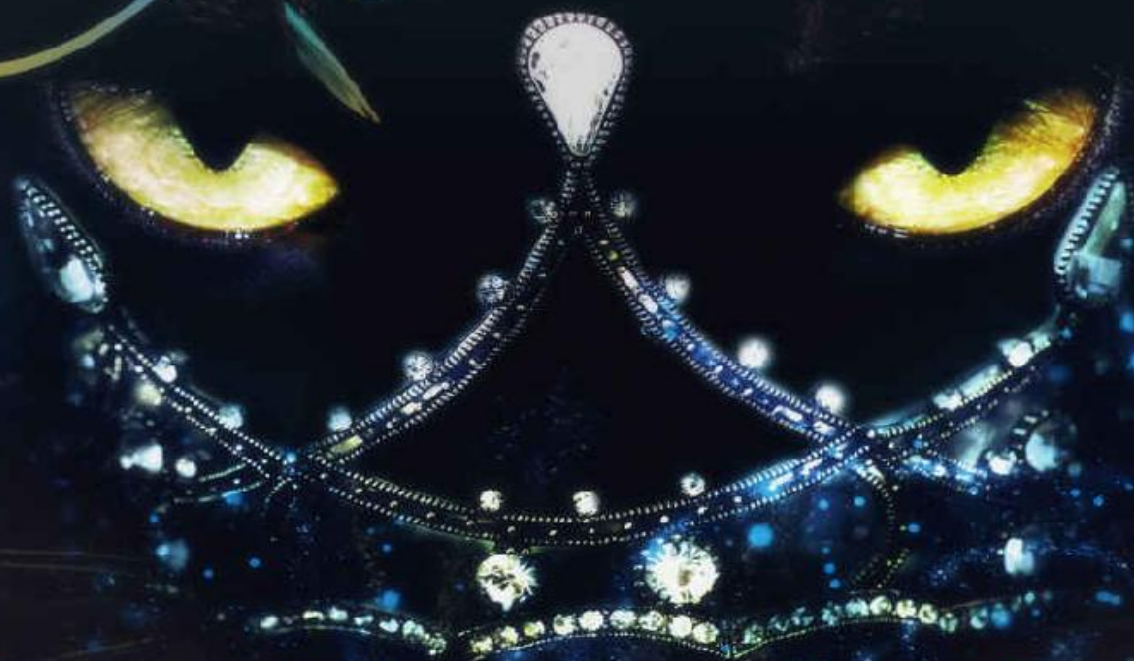


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SKYE ALDER

MATING

Cinderella



MATING CINDERELLA

ONCE UPON A SHIFTER

BOOK 3

SKYE ALDER

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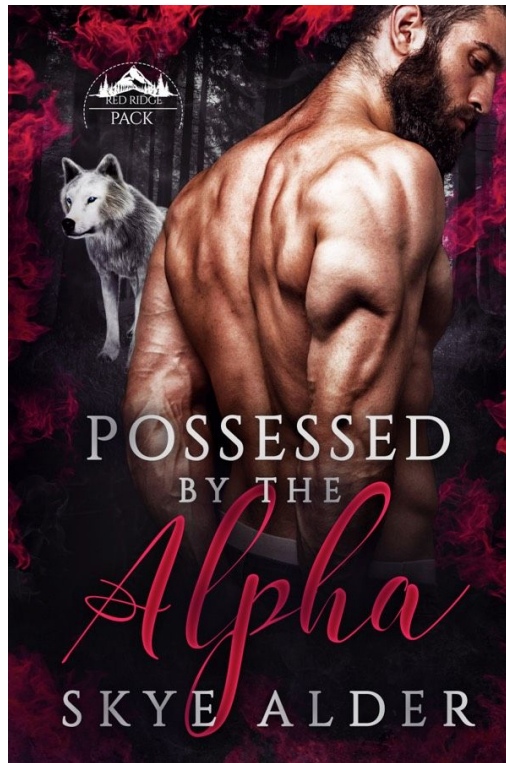
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*

Will he get more than just one night with his fated mate?

Jax has more money than he knows what to do with, but it's not enough to make him happy.

He wants his mate.

And he knows exactly who it is.

Too bad for him; he knows that her family will never let them meet, let alone mate.

She's all that he can think about, though.

Chrisinda Poppy.

She's his fated mate, his delectable little Sin, but Jax knows that this isn't a fairytale.

She's desperate to get away from her awful stepfamily, and he knows that she will.

She'll leave him, just like everyone else.

Unless he can show her what it would be like to rule beside him and mate her before she has a chance to get away.

Come meet the shifters of the North Star pack as they find their fated mates. These four Alphas are hot and wealthy, just like the fairy tale characters they're based on! These guys just have a little more... bite.

ONE



Chrisinda

I SHOULD HAVE RUN AWAY *from home when my mother died*, I think to myself for the ten thousandth time. Maybe I would have my own life by now filled with love and joy and happiness instead of... whatever it is I have now. At the very least, I'd be at a job I like instead of on my hands and knees, mopping the dirty floor for the third time this week.

"Sorry about that. I guess I didn't see the mud," my stepsister, Molly, says. She smirks at me, a twisted sense of superiority gleaming in her eyes.

She knew damn well what she was doing by stomping through the mud puddle outside and then all over the first floor of the house. She knew I would be the one who had to clean up after her. Just like always.

"No worries," I lie right back.

I give her a fake smile, and she glares down at me. As much as I'd like to dump this bucket of dirty mop water over her head and watch her makeup drip down her face, I've found that killing Molly with kindness is usually the fastest way to get her to leave me alone. Sure enough, she stomps away a minute later, her high heels stabbing the floor with each step.

I let out a sigh of relief, feeling the tension drain from my muscles. If I can finish this floor, then maybe I can grab my bag and head out to help my friend, Ruby, at her grandma's

house in North Star. We're supposed to be packing it up so she can try to sell it, but instead, I keep getting called back home to do chores.

I expected it to happen, but I can't deny that I was disappointed when my phone rang with the same old excuses. *Your father is traveling on business again. I just can't handle the housework and Molly on my own. You owe us for all the years we took care of you.*

That little errand back home ended up lasting close to a month now. There was another snowstorm, and I got stuck here with my stepmother and Molly. I was hoping to get back to help Ruby the next day, and now, close to four weeks later, I'll finally be able to head back to North Star.

I wring the dirty water from my rag into a bucket, then dip it in the clean soapy water and continue my task. I'm convinced my stepmother had this stone tiling put in for the sole purpose of how difficult it is to clean. Just once, I'd love to see Molly try to scrub the floor with a toothbrush while her mother stands behind her, criticizing everything she does.

Alas, I've stopped wishing for that kind of poetic justice. At this point, I'd be happy for an afternoon of freedom to go check on my friend.

I've barely talked to Ruby since I got called home. My stepsister threw my phone during one of her temper tantrums, shattering the screen. I used up the last of my savings to afford a cheap flip phone, but at least I can get in touch with my friend now.

She was so worried about me when I finally got through to her. I'm not surprised. Ruby knows how awful my living situation is. She said that she was sending someone to check on me, but they couldn't get through because the roads were so bad. I had to assure her that I was fine about a dozen times. It should have been annoying, but really, I was just glad that someone cared about me. I haven't had a lot of that in my life since my mom passed.

It turns out my family called me back home for nothing. All of the chores they had for me could have waited the two

days that it would have taken to help out Ruby. Of course, I know it's not about their ability; it's about their control. They love knowing I'm their little puppet.

And I hate it.

I wish there was a way to escape from them. God knows I've searched for a way out. Unfortunately, there aren't many high-paying, or even mediocre-paying, jobs in Windy Pines. All of my money seems to go to my stepmother anyway. She calls it rent and my share of the bills. Meanwhile, her daughter lives here rent-free and has never worked a day in her life.

"Good. Now that the floor is done, you can start on the weeds outside," my stepmother says.

I hunch my shoulders instinctively, my body curling in on itself as I feel her presence grow closer. Peering up from my position on the floor, I'm greeted with a frown and the all-too-familiar look of disgust and disapproval.

She stares down her nose at me; her beady eyes and barely contained grimace making my skin crawl. I nod wordlessly, knowing there's no point in arguing about the snow starting again soon. The less I speak, the less there is for my stepmom to fight about.

My plans of getting back to North Star and to Ruby just went up in smoke, but I wait until I'm alone to let my disappointment out. I hate this. I hate feeling helpless, and I really hate letting my friend down. Something has to change, but what?

Shoving those thoughts aside, I finish the floor, then stand and wipe my hands off on my stained jeans. They're a few years old and worn through in the knees from hours spent cleaning up after my family. There's no point in buying new ones, though. Even if I could afford it, buying them would be a waste. I know they would wind up having the same holes and stains in them as these.

I head down to the basement and empty both buckets of water, rinsing them out and leaving them to dry before I head back upstairs and out to the front flower beds. Molly is already

outside in her lounge chair. She's been working on her tan for the last week. It's still March, and it snowed last week, but that hasn't stopped her. Looks are the only thing Molly cares about. Actually, appearances seem to be all that Molly or her mother care about.

I can't believe my dad married that evil witch.

Kneeling down on the hard stones that border the front flower bed, I get to work. My knees protest the rough treatment, but I know better than to ask for a cushion or towel to use.

I'm halfway through the first flower bed when a car engine distracts me, and I glance over my shoulder in time to see two men climbing out of a sleek black car.

"Afternoon!" One of them calls, and I roll my eyes as Molly shoots up from the lounge chair to greet them.

She thrusts her chest out, shimmying slightly and smiling wide as they head her way.

"Hey there," she purrs. I wonder if they're some of her admirers from town.

They don't look like they are from around here. At least I don't recognize them. That doesn't mean much, though, since I rarely get out.

"We were just passing through town, and must have gotten turned around. I can't seem to get a signal on my phone. Think that you could give us directions?" One of the guys asks, and Molly practically trips over herself trying to get closer to him.

The other man heads my way, and I dip my head, avoiding eye contact. My stepmother doesn't like me talking to other people, so I stand, taking a few steps toward the front door.

"Hey," the man says quietly. I blink, not quite sure he's really talking to me. No one talks to me. "Are you okay?"

"Uh, me?" I say stupidly.

"Ruby and Kade asked us to stop by," he whispers.

I relax instantly. If Ruby sent him, then he must be a friend, someone she trusted. I nod, my eyes straying over to the other man.

Both men are handsome, but for some reason, it's like I can't look away from the one that's cornered by Molly. He glances at me, looking annoyed and my lips curl up into a soft smile. Everything in me softens, and I realize I feel safe around this stranger. Around both of them actually.

When was the last time I felt truly protected? Like nothing could harm me?

I blink, looking back to the man next to me.

"Is Ruby okay?" I ask the stranger, worried that something happened.

"Yeah, she just hadn't heard from you in a while. With everyone getting snowed in, she was worried. Ruby wanted us to make sure you were okay," he says.

His brown eyes scan over me, and I can tell he's furious with what he sees. I'm sure I look like a complete mess. I combed my hair this morning, but that was hours and several unexpected chores ago. I can feel mud drying on my cheek and forehead, and I know my jeans are ripped and stained. I'm sure I have bags under my eyes from the lack of sleep these last few weeks, not to mention a few scrapes and bruises that come along with doing manual labor twelve hours a day. Meanwhile, Molly is over here lounging in her bikini.

"Do you want to come back to North Star with us to see Ruby?" he asks.

I glance back to his friend and he looks over at me. His lips curl up into a soft smile and I know that he's trying to appear friendly.

I want to say yes. I want to leave this place with every fiber of my being, even if it's just for the weekend. It's impossible, though. My stepmother would be furious and it would only make things worse for me when I inevitably have to come back.

“I... thank you, but I really can't. Can you tell Ruby I'll be back to help her either tonight or tomorrow?” I start to panic, thinking about how much I'm inconveniencing my friend. “I know she must want her car back. I should be done around here in a few hours. Definitely before sundown. Or maybe just a little after,” I ramble. “I'll be there soon. I promise.”

He nods but doesn't look happy to be leaving me here. I guess even to a stranger, it's clear that I'm being mistreated and used as free labor. When my stepmother opens the door and walks outside, he straightens, forcing a smile onto his face.

“Perfect, thanks for the help. I don't know how we got so turned around,” he says to me, and I nod, picking up on his ruse.

“No problem. Safe travels.”

He waves, nodding at my stepmother, and turns back to his friend. He's still talking to Molly, although now he has a slightly pained expression on his face. He's still smiling at her, but it doesn't seem to quite reach his eyes. He glances back to me and I stare back at him. I wish that I had gotten their names, but if they're both friends of Ruby's, then I'm sure that I'll meet them soon.

Maybe I can get to know the other one a little more.

A gust of wind blows my loose blonde hair into my eyes, and I push it out of the way. When I look back at the handsome stranger, his eyes are laser-focused on mine. He looks like he just got slapped or possibly had the wind knocked out of him. I frown, wondering what that stunned look is for.

His deep brown eyes grow impossibly wide, and for one second, they almost look like they're glowing. That can't be right, though. It must be the sun shining at them at a weird angle or something. His chestnut hair looks so soft as it blows slightly in the breeze, and I can't seem to pull my eyes away from him.

He's crazy sexy, but his friend is handsome, too. So why am I having a reaction to just him? Why can't I seem to look away from his warm, chocolate-brown stare?

He takes one step toward me, and I find myself doing the same, an invisible force pulling us together. The man who was talking to me reaches out and stops him, looking confused and I want to growl at him for trying to keep us apart.

Why am I reacting this way to him?

"Chrisinda!" my stepmother growls at me, breaking the spell.

I whip around and head to the other flower bed, not trusting myself to look back at the stranger with the intense stare.

If I can get this chore done, maybe I can slip away and head back to Ruby. She's supposed to be getting the moving truck soon, and I wonder if she's gotten everything packed up yet.

"Thanks again!" the guy calls, and I break my own rule, peeking under my lashes to see the guys climbing into their car and backing out of the driveway.

"Oh my gosh! He was so cute. I think he was into me too. I hope he comes back," Molly rambles. Her mom nods.

They head back into the house to talk about the handsome men as I try my best to forget about him.

Only a few more hours and I can finally make my escape. Even if it is only temporary.

TWO



Jax

I FOUND *HER*. My mate. I *found* her.

I keep repeating those words in my head, testing them out and seeing how they feel.

Fucking incredible; that's how they feel.

I've been looking for my fated one for years. I've traveled around Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. I've run with packs in Brazil, Honduras, and Mexico. I toured Africa and even spent time in Australia trying to find my mate... and all I had to do was drive an hour up the road. I could have been with her this whole time.

I want to smack myself in the forehead for wasting years of my life running around the world, but my wolf barks, then paws at my chest relentlessly. He's right. I should just be thankful I have her now.

Well, technically, I don't have her yet. But I will.

Suddenly, I'm incredibly thankful I did this favor for Kade. In fact, I might just need to give him a gift as a thank you.

"We have to go back," I tell Sayer as we drive through town. He stares at me in bewilderment.

"What? Why? I mean, she seemed upset and tired, but she said she would be coming to North Star tonight or tomorrow.

I'm pretty sure it would make things worse if we tried to take her," he says. I shake my head.

"She's my mate. We have to go back."

"What?!"

"She's my *mate!*" I say more forcefully. Sayer blinks a few times, but then he's on my level, ready to help in whatever way I need.

"What's the plan?" he asks. "Are you going to try to hide her from her family? That other girl in the tacky swimsuit was attached to you like glue. If you go back, it's going to be a fight to keep her away from you long enough to take your mate."

As soon as we pulled up to the house, my eyes had been drawn to the curvy girl, half covered in dirt and mud. Sure, she was beautiful with her long blonde hair and glittering blue eyes, but I thought that was it. Then the wind shifted, and I smelled her. Wildflowers, honey, and sunshine, the sweetest, most delectable damn thing I've ever smelled.

She's *mine*.

And we just left her there with those awful people who don't seem to understand how precious and special she is.

My wolf snarls inside of me, and I grit my teeth, though I have to agree with his reaction. I hate that our girl has been so mistreated for so long. I don't know her story, but it's obvious from the five minutes we spent together she's treated like shit while the other woman relaxes in the sun. Why doesn't she leave? Are they keeping her captive?

Another wounded cry comes from my wolf, not liking the thought of our beautiful mate feeling less than or being taken advantage of. And then there was the way her mother, stepmother, or whoever yelled at her. Such anger and malice in that woman's voice, directed at my sweet mate.

Now that we've found her, though, we'll fix everything. We'll spoil her with kisses and compliments and chocolate. Women like chocolate, I've heard. And flowers. But these flowers will be just for her, and she won't have to pull weeds

for them. My mate will never have to lift a finger again if she doesn't want to.

My wolf nods, liking that plan. He can't wait to take care of our mate. He's going to make sure that she's safe, well-loved, and protected from every bad thing.

I wanted to grab my girl and drive off with her right then and there, but I saw something evil in her stepmother's eyes. Her stepsister's, too. They weren't going to let me get close to my fated one. Not without a fight. I didn't want to make life harder for my girl, so even though it killed me to leave her there, it was probably for the best.

"Do you think they bought the directions excuse?" Sayer asks as we idle at a stoplight.

"I don't know. The swimsuit girl didn't question me that much."

"Yeah, well, she was too busy trying to get you to ask her out."

"Yuck," I say, gagging in my mouth at the thought of being with anyone who isn't my mate. My wolf growls as my stomach turns. How could I ever find her beautiful when I've seen how flawless my mate is? I can't wait to see her when she's all cleaned up and well-rested.

Sayer rolls the window down, and I take a breath of fresh air, thankful for the momentary distraction. My heart is racing, my palms are sweating, and I can't stop tapping my right foot.

"We have to go back," I tell him again, turning to face him. I stare at Sayer's head as if I could beam the idea straight into his brain and control his mind.

"She said she'll be in town tonight, right?" No such luck.

"If it was your fated mate," I say slowly, trying not to lose my temper, "would you just leave her there? With those people?"

I can tell that I've got him. Sayer has been looking for his fated mate even longer than I have. He's been traveling for

nearly a week every month, going to one new city after another, but he hasn't had any luck yet.

"I'd throw her over my shoulder and get her out of there," he growls.

"Exactly." I nod, and Sayer sighs, hitting his blinker and making a U-turn as soon as the light turns green.

We head back to her house, and he parks a few streets over. Sayer leans back in his seat and looks at me, waiting for my brilliant plan. I don't really have one; I just know I have to see her again, have to make her understand she's mine now, and I'll fight her whole goddamn family off if that's what's necessary.

"Are we shifting or just hiding in the bushes until the cops get called?" Sayer asks, making me glare at him.

"Shifting."

He nods, and we start removing our clothes. We're pulled off into a deserted parking lot in the woods so we have some privacy to shift, and then we're prowling through the trees back to my mate's house.

My dad always told me that finding my mate would be the greatest moment of my life. He used to gush about the moment he met my mother and knew that she was meant to be his. She was human, too, just like my mate.

Some shifters are wary of human mates, or maybe they're just scared of what they don't understand. It doesn't bother me at all. Why would it? I've found my fucking fated mate, the one soul in the universe tied directly to mine. Whatever and whoever she is is perfect simply because it's her.

My parents were together for close to thirty years before they were in a car accident. I lost both of them in one tragic night, and I've been alone ever since. Sure, I have my pack and my friends, but it's not the same. I still go home to an empty house. I go to sleep alone and wake up alone, and my thoughts are plagued with the nagging doubt that I'll never find my mate.

Not anymore. She's real, she's perfect, and she's so damn close I can smell her. Literally. The sweetest, most delicate scent in the world floats through the air, and my wolf and I breathe in deep. *Soon*, I tell myself as much as my wolf. Soon we'll have her all to ourselves.

Sayer and I find a hiding spot just across the street from my mate's house, and we remain crouched behind a grouping of trees as we watch the dreary-looking house.

My girl comes back outside, wiping the sweat from her brow as she gets back to work pulling weeds. She kneels, and I can see her wince as her knees rest on the rough stones there. Her shoulders are bunched up around her ears, and she looks sore and exhausted. I want nothing more than to scoop her up in my arms and take her to my home, directly into a hot bath, so I can wash away every ache and pain she's ever had.

I whine, wanting to make that happen right the hell now, but Sayer gives me a warning growl. I know that approaching her in my wolf form would freak her out, so I stay put and keep my agitated whimpers to myself.

After a while, Sayer lies down on the damp ground, but I remain vigilant. I'm not taking my eyes off the house until I see my girl get into a car and drive off.

Then we can go home to claim our curvy little princess.

THREE



Chrisinda

IT'S BARELY five in the morning, and I'm currently tiptoeing out the front door. I hate feeling like some kind of criminal every time I go to do something for myself. I need to get back to North Star, though. I promised Ruby that I would help her, and if that meant sneaking out of my own home, then so be it.

Once I'm safely outside, I jog over to Ruby's car. I had to borrow it when I left her grandma's house, and I'm sure she's anxious to get it back. I was only meant to have it for a day or two, and instead, I've had it for weeks.

Guilt settles heavily in my stomach, but I try reminding myself that Ruby is my friend and she cares about me. Not everyone is like my stepmom and stepsister. Not everyone wants to use me and walk all over me and make me feel stupid and weak. Not everyone is looking for a reason to be mad at me.

It took a long time for Ruby to convince me of that. I still struggle with the concept most days, but I'm trying to trust the process. Ruby has been so good to me, and I hate that I had to bail on her when she needed me.

I start the car, hurrying to back out of the drive, and hit the road. I have a feeling that my stepmother will be calling me soon, so if I want to help Ruby, I need to get there bright and early.

We've barely talked about her grandma's house or her plans over the last few weeks. She was more preoccupied with how I was doing, and I was too tired and guilt-ridden to ask her. I left her stranded at her grandmother's house. I didn't do it on purpose, and I know that Ruby will forgive me, but I still feel like a bad friend.

Traffic is light at this time, so hopefully, I'll be able to get to the house in no time. I text Ruby when I hit the stoplight right before the highway and let her know that I'm on my way. She's probably still sleeping so I don't think of it when she doesn't respond.

There's only one other car on the highway toward North Star, and I'm a little surprised when they take the exit to town too. I head straight for Ruby's grandma's house, and I'm parking out front when I see Ruby heading my way on the little path next to the house.

"You're here!" she exclaims, wrapping her arms around me as soon as I climb out of the car.

"Sorry it took me so long," I whisper. She hugs me tighter, somehow knowing that's what I need right now.

"It's alright. I know how your evil stepwitch is."

I sigh as she guides me into the house, and I look around.

"You got quite a bit done since I was last here," I say as I survey all the boxes.

"Kade helped."

"Yes! How was it after I had to leave?" I ask her excitedly.

I had only met Kade in passing before I left, and I forgot to ask her how things had been going with him. It was obvious that he was into her when I was here. He brought over breakfast when I got the call to come home, so I didn't really get to meet him. It sounds like Ruby did, though.

"It was... really good," she says with a blush, and I squeal.

"Oh my gosh! Good job! He's hot."

She blushes more, and I grin at her. Ruby deserves to have some fun. We've both been working so hard for so long.

"There's something that I need to tell you," she says, and I nod.

"Are you two dating now?"

"Yeah, well... it's more than that."

"More?" I ask as we take a seat on the couch facing each other.

"Um, it's going to sound crazy," she starts, and I frown.

"You can tell me anything. You know that."

"Kade is a shifter. A wolf shifter."

I blink at my friend, expecting her to burst into laughter at any moment and tell me it's a weird joke. When she doesn't, I keep blinking but manage to choke out, "A what? What's a shifter?"

"Like a werewolf. Only there are all kinds of animal shifters and not just wolves," Ruby answers in a rush.

"What?" I ask again, staring at her blankly.

"It's true! I've seen him shift. I've pet his wolf."

I open my mouth, but I'm not sure what to say back to that.

"And shifters have mates. Fated mates," she continues.

"As is the custom," I mumble sarcastically.

"I know you're being snarky, but it really *is* the custom. And more than that, it's *amazing*. I'm Kade's fated mate."

"Have you been wearing a facemask while cleaning?" I ask. Ruby furrows her brow, staring at me like *I'm* the weird one. "You know, to protect you from inhaling dust and huffing cleaning chemicals?"

My friend giggles, and even though I'm confused, the sound is comforting. Without Ruby in my life the last few years, I wouldn't have had any joy or reason to smile.

“I’m not high or dying from snorting dust,” she answers once her laughter is under control. “I’m blissfully happy with my fated mate.

It’s then that I notice the bite mark on her neck. Holy shit. *What?*

“What does a fated mate do?” I ask her hesitantly.

I trust Ruby, and I know she’s not crazy. If she’s telling me that werewolves or shifters exist and that her new boyfriend is a wolf one, and that they’re meant to be... then I believe her.

“It’s like a husband or marriage. Shifters are only attracted to their fated mates.” Ruby leans in closer, dropping her voice to a whisper even though no one else is here. “They can’t even get hard until they’ve found their mates.”

My eyes widen, and I cover my mouth with my hand when I realize what she’s talking about. “So, he’ll never cheat on you,” I mumble through my fingers.

“Exactly. He will only love me. He practically worships me, Chrisinda. It’s kind of overwhelming.”

“You deserve it, Rubes. I’m serious. You’re the best person I know.”

She smiles at me, her eyes shining with warmth and love. Ruby looks absolutely gorgeous, and I swear she’s glowing. I want to feel that way about someone. I want someone to feel that way about me.

But this isn’t about my life right now. “How did you find out about shifters?” I ask my friend.

“My grandma actually told me about them when I was younger. Then I saw Kade’s eyes glowing the morning you left, and... I don’t know. I just knew that he was one.”

“His eyes glowed?” I ask, remembering the way the handsome stranger’s eyes glowed yesterday. I thought I was making it up, but is it possible...

Could he be a shifter too?

“Does that mean you’re staying in North Star?” I ask her. Ruby nods, and I force a smile onto my face. I’m truly thrilled for her, and no one deserves a fairy tale ending as much as Ruby. It’s selfish for me to be thinking of how lonely I’ll be when I go back to Windy Pines.

“Yeah, I’m going to move in with Kade,” she confirms. My stomach drops, but I manage not to let it show. I hope. “I wanted to talk to you about that, actually,” Ruby continues. “I was going to mention it on the phone, but you always seemed so stressed. I didn’t want to add one more thing to your plate. Especially since the weather was bad, and it’s not like you could have left.”

“What is it?” I ask her, and she gives me a wide smile.

“What do you think about moving here, too? We could start our own business. We could finally do it, Chrisinda!”

I want to come up with a million excuses, but her excitement is infectious. It lights up her whole being from the inside out, and I feel myself start to make plans for the future despite knowing they’ll never happen for me.

“Kade has money and says we can use it to get started. He’ll help out in any way he can, and we can be together. Plus, you can get away from your freaking awful family!”

I love the sound of that. I would never have to take orders from my stepmother or Molly again. I would be free of them.

I almost weep at the thought.

“But—”

“And did I mention that shifters are super strong and fast and can definitely take down your evil stepwitch and her vain, narcissistic daughter?”

“What about—”

“You’d stay with us, obviously. It’ll take a few months to plan everything and get set up, but I’m thinking we could have a big opening right before the holiday shopping season begins!”

“I can’t just... leave,” I say lamely now that Ruby has addressed all of my concerns without me even asking.

“What’s stopping you?” my friend whispers. I open my mouth, then close it again, not sure what to say. Ruby takes my hands in hers, looking me right in the eye. “I know it’s scary, but isn’t this better than where you’re at now? This could be your way out, Chrisinda.”

Taking a deep breath, I gather up all of my courage and nod. “Okay. I’m in.”

It’s a huge leap of faith, but for some reason, it just feels like it’s time. Maybe it’s because I just spent the last four weeks scrubbing and rescrubbing every floor in their mansion, and my knees are sure to have permanent indents in them from kneeling on the stones outside. Or, maybe it’s just time. After years and years of being abused, I’m just... done.

“We called and canceled the moving truck, but I can go get it today. Then we can go to Windy Pines to get your things so you can move in here. You can use anything you want here,” Ruby says, and I smile.

It feels like the first time I’ve smiled this wide in a long time.

“Let’s do it!” I whisper enthusiastically. If I say it any louder, I feel like I might jinx it.

“I’ll talk to Kade. I’m sure that he’ll help.”

“When do you want to go and get the truck?”

“At nine. Right when they open,” she says, and I see we still have a few hours. “In the meantime, how do you want to set up our offices?”

She gives me a bright smile, and I laugh, relaxing back against the couch as we start to dream about the future.

FOUR



Jax

“WHERE IS SHE?” I ask Kade as soon as he answers the door.

“What? Where is who?”

“My mate,” I half snarl, and my friend takes a step back in surprise.

Normally I’m the calm, easy-going one in our little group, but not right now. I spent all night watching my mate work her ass off, and I’m on edge. She didn’t fall asleep until nearly two thirty in the morning. As I watched her drag her exhausted body to bed, I vowed that she would never spend another night like that again. How long has she been wearing herself thin to do the bidding of that horrible shrew and her minion?

Sayer and I are both bone tired. I stayed up all night watching my mate, and he stayed up all night watching me. I think he must have sensed that I was seconds away from barging in there and carrying her out. He had to stop me a few times, and even after she had gone to sleep, we both stayed up, watching over her.

“Why am I here?” Thatcher grumbles as he comes up the path behind me, jarring me out of my tired and angry stupor.

“Are we doing brunch?” Clara asks, yawning delicately.

“You’re hungry? I’ll get you something to eat,” Thatcher, her mate, says as he pushes past Kade into his house.

“Help yourself,” Kade calls after him sarcastically.

“I wasn’t even hungry,” Clara says with a wide smile. “I just had no idea why we were all down here so early.”

“Jax found his mate,” Sayer tells her, and she grins at me.

“Oh my gosh! Congratulations!”

She doesn’t try to hug me, and I appreciate it. I don’t want anyone but my mate getting close to me.

“I need to go get her,” I tell the group, and Kade frowns.

“Okay, so go? What do you need us to do?” he asks.

“I need you to tell me where she is. Sayer wouldn’t follow her once we got to town.”

“I told you that I didn’t want to freak her out,” Sayer says in exasperation.

“She’s with your mate,” I tell Kade, and understanding seems to dawn on him.

“Your mate is Chrisinda. She’s with Ruby at her grandma’s house. It’s just down that path.”

As soon as he gives me a direction, I take off. I can hear my friends running after me, but I don’t slow down. I need to get to her. My wolf is pacing back and forth inside of me. He wants out. It would be faster if I let him run to her, but I can’t show up naked and don’t want to shift in front of her right now. Before I do that, I need to tell her about shifters and mates.

I skid around the corner, and the quaint little cottage tucked away amongst the trees comes into view. My body seems to relax with relief that we’re so close to her but my heart takes off like a shot.

I can see my mate and Kade’s mate sitting on the couch in the front room, and I slow to a brisk walk as I make my way up the path to the front door.

“Yeah, I’m going to go in first,” Kade says as Sayer and Thatcher practically tackle me.

Clara is watching us scuffle with an amused look on her face, and she winks at her mate as she heads inside after Kade.

“I’m fine,” I promise my friends, and they share a look before slowly releasing me.

“You better be, or you’re going to mess this all up,” Sayer warns me.

With that thought in my head, I take a deep breath and head into the house after my friends.

“Oh! You brought help! That’s perfect. We’ll be able to get you moved out in no time,” Ruby says to my mate.

Chrisinda.

I say the name over and over in my head, loving the sound of it.

“What’s going on?” Clara asks the girls.

“Chrisinda agreed to move here. We need to go get her things from Windy Pines,” Ruby says, and my wolf sits up inside of me.

She’s moving here. That makes my plan easier.

“We just need help packing everything and getting the moving truck,” Ruby says.

“I’m in,” I volunteer, and I see Sayer roll his eyes.

“We should probably have someone stay here and make room for your things,” Ruby says as she looks around the cluttered living room.

There are boxes pushed up against the walls and stacked everywhere. I shoot Sayer and Thatcher a look, and they both sigh.

“We’ll stay here and do that,” Clara volunteers. “I’m Clara, by the way, and that’s my mate, Thatcher. Those two are Sayer and Jax.”

My eyes almost bulge out of my head when she just casually mentions mate in front of humans, but when I look over at Ruby and Chrisinda, neither seems surprised or confused.

Could she already know about mates? Her and Ruby are close, so it would make sense that they talked and Ruby told her. Does she know that I'm a shifter, though? Or that she's my mate?

"It's so nice to meet you! I'm Ruby, and this is my best friend, Chrisinda."

"Hey," Chrisinda says with a warm smile.

"We're supposed to pick the moving truck up in half an hour," Ruby says, glancing at her phone, and Kade nods.

"I'll drive you there to pick it up. Jax, why don't you take Chrisinda home, and you can start packing up her things? We'll meet you there soon."

I could kiss Kade right now, but I try to play it cool.

"Sounds good. Are you ready to go, Princess?" I ask Chrisinda, and her mouth drops open at the pet name.

I can see Thatcher dragging his hands down his face, but it's too late to take the term of endearment back. Besides, with the way that my mate's cheeks are starting to heat, I would swear that she likes it.

"Yeah, I'm ready," she says as she stands and gathers her phone and purse.

"I'll drive," I tell her, and she nods, following me outside.

Being so close to her is like a dream come true. I can smell her sweet floral scent, and my wolf flops over onto his back inside me. He wants to roll around in her scent. He wants to mark and claim her so everyone knows she's taken.

"I'm just up this way," I tell her, and she nods, falling into step beside me as we walk down the narrow path toward my place.

I only live a short distance from Kade's house and the cottage we just left, and I wonder if my princess will like that we're so close to her friend.

"Are you excited to move to North Star?" I ask her as we walk.

"Oh my gosh, yes. You have no idea," she says with a wide smile.

"You don't like Windy Pines?" I ask, even though I already know the answer.

"There's just nothing there for me. I've been dreaming about opening a business with Ruby since we were kids, and it's exciting that we're finally getting to do it."

She doesn't mention her family, and I hate to bring up the topic too. I spend the rest of the short walk telling her about North Star instead.

"There's this great little diner in town. They make the best pancakes," I tell her.

I'm hoping to segue that into asking her out on a date, but she grins and distracts me. Everything about her is breathtaking, and I never want to stop looking at her.

"I think I've had them, actually. Kade brought over breakfast the morning that I left, and I grabbed a to-go box before I had to head back to Windy Pines. It was messy, but the pancakes were amazing."

We reach my house, and I watch as Chrisinda's eyes widen and her mouth drops open slightly.

"Whoa. This is your place?" she asks. I want to tell her it's ours, but I know that would just freak her out.

"Yep. Want me to give you a tour?" I ask.

I want to see her in my space. I want to watch her reaction to each room, but she shakes her head no.

"We should get going. Maybe later, though," she says, taking one last look at my place before she heads over to the car.

I dig my keys out of my pocket, opening her door, and she gives me a bright smile.

“Thanks!”

I’m getting the feeling that no one has ever opened a door for her, and while I’m glad to be the only man to do that, it saddens me that no one has ever been kind to this angel.

“It’s my pleasure,” I tell her honestly.

She rattles off the address, and I put it into the GPS for show. We’re both silent as I navigate the dirt roads back to the highway. As soon as we get on the road to Windy Pines, I notice that my girl seems to tense up. She’s fidgeting in her seat, looking nervously out the window. Chrisinda is nibbling on her bottom lip and wringing her hands in her lap. I can smell her anxiety, and it kills me to see her like this. She has a bright light inside of her, and her family has tried to smother it for far too long.

“Are your parents going to be sad to see you moving away?” I ask her. She blinks.

“I’m not sure that *sad* is the right word,” she mumbles. I pretend to be confused.

“Why is that?” I ask her, and she straightens in her seat.

“My dad is rarely ever home. He’s always traveling for work so I doubt he’ll even notice I’m gone.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell her, and she nods.

“And my stepmother and stepsister are just... they’re not good people. I won’t be sad to get them out of my life, but I don’t think they will take the news well.”

“I’ll be there for backup. I won’t let anything happen to you,” I promise her, and she smiles over at me.

It doesn’t quite reach her brilliant blue eyes, but it’s a start.

“What about you?” she asks as I take the exit to Windy Pines.

“What about me?”

“Do you have any siblings? Do your parents live in North Star too?”

“No, I’m an only child. My parents did live in North Star, but they passed away a few years ago.”

“Oh, Jax. I’m so sorry,” she says, laying her hand on my arm.

My wolf is leaping around inside of me, too excited that she touched us to focus on the somber tone of this conversation.

“Thanks.”

“My mom passed away, too. I was really young, and don’t remember much, but what I do remember was warm and kind and safe. I don’t think I’ve felt that way since. Things only got worse when my dad brought home my awful stepmom and stepsister.”

“Chrisinda,” I whisper, my heart breaking all over again for her.

“I’m sorry,” she says, dipping her head down. “I don’t know why I told you all that. You make me feel...”

“How do I make you feel, Princess?” I murmur, moving my arm so I can lace our fingers together.

“Safe,” she says softly, squeezing my hand.

My wolf and I straighten our backs and puff out our chests, proud as fuck that we make our mate feel protected.

“You are,” I promise her. “I’m sorry you’ve experienced so much pain in your life. North Star is the perfect place to start over.” She doesn’t know why it’s perfect yet, but she will. All in good time.

The navigation tells me to turn onto her street, and I watch as my princess goes rigid in the passenger seat. She’s taking shallow breaths, her eyes locked on the house as it looms before us, and I want to kill someone.

I hate that she’s so worried. I hate that they’ve been allowed to mistreat her so much for so long. I don’t know what

all they've said or the lies they've told her, but it's my job now to heal those wounds and remind her of the truth of who she is every day.

I pull into the drive and turn to face my precious mate, taking her hands in mine.

"It will be alright, Chrisinda. I'm going to be right by your side for all of it," I promise. She takes a deep breath as her blue eyes search mine. "I won't let anyone hurt you. Never again, Princess. Do you trust me?"

My girl is trembling from head to toe, but those eyes stay locked on mine. She nods after a beat, and I squeeze her hands in mine.

"I'll get your door," I tell her.

I climb out, giving her a moment alone in the car to get her emotions under control before I pull open the passenger door.

As she climbs out, we both turn to face the house. As the door opens and her stepmother steps out, I feel a lot like a knight headed into battle to defeat a dragon.

FIVE



Chrisinda

I'M NOT sure if I reach for Jax's hand or if he reaches for mine, but it doesn't matter. Having his strong fingers wrapped around mine as we stare at my stepmother is somehow giving me the strength to meet her eyes, as cruel and cold as they may be.

This is finally it. I'm leaving.

She knows it, too. My stepmother is always in control, always poised and put together, but right now? She looks like she's unraveling before my eyes. Her thin lips are pursed, and she's glaring at me like I've ruined her life.

I wonder if she ever thought this day would come. I always thought if I ever shored up the courage to fight back, it would be when my father was here as well so he could join in on the fun. My stepmom is usually on her best behavior when my dad is around, so in my head, I figured that meant she'd put up less of a fight.

Now that I'm here, I realize I should have done this a long time ago. I just needed a reason to take the leap of faith.

"Are you ready?" Jax asks me quietly, his lips grazing the shell of my ear. I turn to face him, those warm brown eyes capturing mine and letting me know he's right here with me.

"I'm ready to start my new life," I confirm, giving him a tiny smile. He returns it with such genuine enthusiasm I almost

burst out laughing. I don't, of course. I still have to talk to my stepwitch.

Jax squeezes my hand as we start to walk toward the front door, and I focus on taking deep breaths. I can hear my heart racing in my ears, the noise drowning out everything else.

“What are you doing here?” my stepmom asks.

I blink a few times, reaching way down deep for the strength to speak my mind. “We're here to get my things. I'm leaving,” I tell her, my voice only shaking a little.

Jax's thumb grazes the back of my knuckles, soothing me and keeping me grounded. I straighten my shoulders, drawing on him to get through this.

“What things?” the horrible woman spits out. “Everything you have here belongs to us. Your father and me. We bought it for you after all.” A dark, twisted smirk curls up one corner of her lips, and her eyes are blazing with cruel intentions.

“Th-that's not true. Can I at least get some of my clothes? It's not like you or Molly will miss them.”

If I'm being honest, there's really only one thing I want out of that house. My mom made me a scrapbook when I was younger. She worked on it before she passed, and inside is the necklace she always wore. That scrapbook is the only thing inside that means anything to me, and I can't leave without it. It's the last thing of my mother's I have left.

“I always knew that you were a whore,” she says, changing the subject abruptly.

“Excuse m-me?” I stutter out. At the same time, Jax growls, the sound deep and almost primal. His muscles tense as if he's bracing for a fight. I squeeze his hand, hoping to calm him down.

“You heard me, Chrisinda. What, did you go sneak off last night and spread your legs with the first man you could find?”

“No, I-” I start to try to defend myself, but she cuts me off.

“What would your father think if he knew he had such a useless tramp for a daughter?”

“I’m *not* a tramp,” I try again, knowing it’s useless. I can defend myself until I’m blue in the face, but she’ll never believe a word I say.

“Now you want to shirk your responsibilities here to run off and play house with some man you just met. You stupid girl,” she hisses at me.

The back of my eyes sting with unshed tears, but I can’t stand giving her the satisfaction of seeing them fall. My throat starts to hurt as I swallow past the lump of emotions, and I know I won’t be able to hold back for long.

I should just leave now. I don’t want her to see my tears. I don’t want her to know that she’s won, that her words cut me open and left me feeling raw and vulnerable, but I can’t seem to get my legs to move.

“Do you want me to huff and puff and blow this house down?” Jax murmurs, removing his hand from mine so he can wrap his arm around my waist. He tucks me into his side, covering me with his steadiness and strength.

“Are you a big bad wolf?” I ask.

Jax grins at me, his eyes glowing again, just like the first time we met. *I knew it! He’s a shifter!*

Before I get a chance to answer, Molly comes to the door to see what all the commotion is about. Her gaze is instantly drawn to Jax, and she licks her lips as her eyes roam over his body. Then she seems to realize he’s here with me. Molly’s face turns sour, her eyes filled with malice. The next thing I know, she’s launching herself at me.

“You stole him from me, you slut!” she screeches as we go tumbling back to the ground.

I brace my hands to push her off me, but she’s being lifted and tossed aside before I even realize what’s happening. Jax reaches for me, pulling me back into his arms, and I cling to him.

“Let’s just go,” I whisper, making him frown.

I can sense that he wants to tell them both off, but I must look pretty shaken up because he nods and starts to carry me back toward his car.

“Stealing your sister’s man? That’s low, Chrisinda. Even for you,” my stepmother calls after us as she goes to console her daughter.

We make it back to the car, and Jax passes me some Kleenex. I didn’t even realize I was crying, and I hurry to dry the tears.

“Sorry,” I say with a snuffle, feeling pathetic.

“Hey,” Jax whispers, his hand coming up to cup the side of my face. “There’s nothing to apologize for. I could go in without you and grab whatever you need,” he says, trying to find a way to make this right and get me to stop crying.

I open my mouth and a sob comes out. He pulls me into his arms, and I breathe in his pine scent, letting him comfort me. I can’t remember the last time someone hugged me aside from Ruby. Jax surrounds me with his protection, letting me curl into his chest as I heave out another pathetic sob.

“Please don’t cry, Princess. I can’t stand to see your tears. Tell me what to do and I’ll do it.”

“It’s okay,” I say, trying to pull myself together. “I can replace all of the clothes and everything else. It might take a while, but it’s just stuff. I have a scrapbook, though. My mom made it, and...” I swallow back more tears, not wanting to think about never seeing it again. “That’s all I want,” I finish lamely, hiccupping slightly as I try to stem the tears.

“I’ll go get it. Where is it?” he asks urgently.

“They’re never going to let you inside,” I protest. Jax just smiles.

“I’ll go get it, Princess. Where is it?”

“In the top drawer of my dresser.”

“Which room is yours?”

“The attic. Way up there.” I point up to the small window at the top of the house, and he growls.

“Of course it is,” he grumbles under his breath. “I’ll be right back.”

“Wait!” I say, but he’s already closing the door and taking off.

I watch as he circles around to the back of the house and disappears. My stepmother is still trying to calm Molly down. She’s wailing and having a tantrum on the front lawn, and I can tell that my stepmother is over it. She’s probably worried that one of the neighbors will see.

She glares in my direction, and I sink down in my seat. When they start to head into the house, I panic. What if Jax gets caught? I can’t have him getting in trouble because of me.

I’m about to climb out of the car and try to distract them when he comes running around the side of the house, a familiar rectangle shape tucked under his arms.

As soon as he gets back in the car, he passes me the scrapbook, and I burst into tears. I think I fall in love with the man a little bit right then and there. As if he wasn’t perfect enough with his charming smiles and comforting brown eyes, now he’s also like some gallant prince, riding in to save me.

“Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you,” I chant in his ear as I wrap my arms around his neck.

“Anything for you, Princess.”

My whole body lights up at that nickname. When he said it back at the cottage, it had caught me off guard and I tried to play it off. Now when he says it, I just want to crawl into his lap and beg him to kiss me.

“Ready to get out of here?” he asks me when I pull back, and I nod.

“Yeah, let’s go home.”

As he starts the car and we head back to North Star, I find myself thinking back to Jax’s glowing eyes. He has to be a shifter, too.

I wonder if he has a mate. If he does, she's one lucky girl.

Jealousy starts to eat at me at the thought of him being with someone else, and I grip the scrapbook in my lap tighter.

I call Ruby to distract myself from my dream man sitting right next to me.

“Hey, change of plans,” I say when she answers.

“Sorry! I was just about to call you. There's something wrong with the truck. They're trying to get us a new one.”

“Don't bother. My stepmom isn't letting us in the house. I'll have to buy new stuff,” I tell her.

“I can take you shopping,” Jax offers, and I shake my head.

God, if this man buys me clothes right now, I might just throw myself at him.

“That's okay. It's been a long morning already.”

He nods, hitting the blinker and turning onto the highway.

“We're headed back to North Star now,” I tell Ruby.

“I'll meet you back at the cottage then. I'm so sorry, Chrisinda.”

“It's alright. At least I never have to see them again.”

“Ah, a silver lining!” she says, and I grin.

“I'll see you soon,” I tell her, and then we hang up.

Calling Ruby didn't really help. I'm still thinking about shifters and fated mates, and as we drive in silence, the tension starts to build inside me until I can't take it anymore.

“Are you a shifter?” I blurt out, clapping my hand over my mouth as soon as the words fall from my lips.

Jax's eyes widen as he looks over at me.

Crap. What have I done?

SIX



Jax

THIS ISN'T how I planned to have this conversation. I had my suspicions that Chrisinda knew about shifters from the way she didn't react when Clara talked about mates this morning, but now, I'm scrambling.

How much does she know? If I tell her she's my mate, will she understand? Will she be happy about it? I can't lose her before I even had her. I won't.

I wish I could look at her while we talked. That way, I could gauge how she's feeling about all of this. I glance around for a place to pull over, but we're almost to North Star. I'll just have to wing it.

My wolf shakes his head inside of me. We just found our mate, and if we lose her now, he's going to kill me.

"I am," I say slowly. "How much do you know about shifters?"

"Just what Ruby told me this morning. She said that you can be all kinds of different animals."

"Yes," I say with a nod. "There are all kinds of different shifters, but I'm a wolf. So are Sayer, Kade, Thatcher, and Clara. There are a lot of wolves in town too." Peering over at her, I see Chrisinda nodding along. She doesn't seem too fazed, which is a relief.

“And, um, you have... *mates*?” she nearly whispers. Every muscle in my body is pulled tight, and it’s taking every ounce of strength I have not to shout that she’s mine and I will love her better than anyone on the face of the earth. “Ruby said that she was Kade’s mate, but she didn’t really elaborate on it much. Just said that it was like being married.”

“Yes,” I choke out, clearing my throat to cover up the raw need in my voice. “It’s a similar bond. Maybe even stronger because there’s no possibility of divorce or loving anyone else.”

“So, you mate for life then?”

“Yes,” I answer, taking my eyes off the road just long enough to give her a serious look. One I hope doesn’t scare her away. “Once a shifter finds their fated mate, they are all in.”

“And how do you find your fated mates?”

“Most go traveling and looking for them. There are services you can use, like the Love Bites Dating Agency, that will find them for you, too,” I explain.

“How will you know once you’ve found your one true love?” she asks, shifting to face me more in her seat. I can feel her longing and how much she wants to be loved.

My wolf whines, wanting to sink his teeth into her skin and claim her, as well as hold her and give her everything she’s been missing.

“By their scent,” I grit out, holding back every urge I have to lean across the center console and bury my nose into the side of her neck.

My teeth are starting to elongate, and I can feel myself slowly starting to shift. My wolf is pushing forward. He can’t take it any longer, and I grit my teeth, tightening my grip on the steering wheel to hold him back.

When the sign for North Star comes into view, I almost start crying with relief. I need to get out of this car. I need to have this conversation with her and then beg her to let me claim her.

I'll do anything she wants as long as she agrees to be mine. I'm already planning all of the things I can buy her since she wasn't allowed to take anything from her home. We can go shopping and buy out the whole store for all I care. I just want her to be happy and safe with me.

I exit the highway, taking the side road back to Ruby's grandma's cabin. I can see that all of my friends are still there, and I slow down.

"Can I cook dinner for you tonight, Princess?" I hope I don't sound as desperate as I feel.

"Really?"

I pull over on the side of the road, putting the car in park before turning to face Chrisinda.

"Really," I confirm. "I want to have this conversation with you, but I'd rather be face to face instead of getting distracted by driving."

"I... I don't think I'd be very good company," she murmurs, clutching the scrapbook to her chest.

"Chrisinda," I say softly, reaching out to tuck a few strands of silky blonde hair behind her ear. "You don't have to be any certain way with me. I just want to spend time with you, no matter what kind of mood you're in."

My precious mate blinks up at me; her brows furrowed in confusion. It kills me that she's gone so long without any kindness in her life. Chrisinda nods slowly, her eyes never leaving mine.

"Yeah," she whispers. "I think I'd like that. Drop me off with Ruby, and I'll be over in a bit after cleaning up?"

I can't help the wide smile stretching across my face as I nod a bit too much, a bit too long. Chrisinda giggles, and my wolf turns around in circles inside my chest, wagging his tail in excitement. We're that much closer to claiming her.

The mating moon is tonight, and I know that if we don't have our mate in our sights, my wolf is going to snap and try

to break into the cottage to get to her. I need to convince her that she's ours before then.

Several hours later, I'm pacing back and forth in my living room, pausing every few seconds to look out the window. Chrisinda has only been gone from my side for an afternoon, but it's painful not being around her. Hopefully, after tonight, we'll never be apart again.

My wolf perks his ears up when we hear soft footsteps climbing up the front porch. I pull the front door open before she even has a chance to knock.

There my mate is, in a pretty blue dress she must have borrowed from Ruby. Her hair is swept to the side, the golden locks cascading down her left shoulder. Bright blue eyes sparkle up at me, her grin too big to be contained.

Chrisinda shocks the hell out of me by throwing her arms around my torso in a giant bear hug. I instantly wrap her up in my embrace, lifting her off the ground and walking us inside.

"Hello to you, too," I say with a chuckle as I set her down.

"Sorry," Chrisinda murmurs. "I don't know what came over me. How is it possible to miss someone you just met?"

This is as good of an opening as I'm going to get. Holding out my hand for her to take, I lead us over to the couch, getting Chrisinda settled as close to me as possible.

"I missed you, too," I start, giving her what I hope is a comforting smile. Her cheeks flush the sweetest shade of pink, and I barely hold myself back from kissing them. "Remember when you asked about fated mates?"

She nods, nibbling on her bottom lip. Chrisinda's blue eyes are locked on mine, and I swear I can hear what she's thinking. It's right there in her endless gaze. She wants to be mine as much as I want to be hers. I hope to God I'm not wrong.

"How would you feel if I said you were mine? My fated mate?"

Silence follows my question, and I think I'm going to die if she doesn't say something. Finally, Chrisinda leans into me,

her face inches from mine. “That depends,” she whispers, a hint of a smile on her lips. “Is this a hypothetical question? Or are we working with facts in this scenario?”

I tip my head closer and rub my nose against hers, loving the way it makes her heart beat faster and her blush deepen. “I knew you were my mate the moment I caught your scent, beautiful Chrisinda. But I don’t want to scare you away. You’re human and just getting used to a world with shifters in it. If it’s too much—”

“You mean it?” Chrisinda squeaks out. “I’m really your mate?”

I nod, my eyes searching hers for a hint of how she feels. “Yes. You’re the only woman I’ll ever be attracted to. The only one who has my heart. After the mating moon tonight, we’ll belong to each other completely.”

“Mating moon?”

I groan, pushing back my wolf before he tries to show her exactly what the mating moon is. “Can you feel this pull between us, mate? The need to be with me in every way?” She nods, scooting closer to me. “It’s almost painful, isn’t it?” Again, she nods, a low moan caught in her throat.

I can feel her heat, smell her arousal, and it snaps something deep in my chest. I can’t hold back any longer. I feel the pull of the mating moon with every cell in my body, each one aching for more of Chrisinda. More of my fated mate.

Repositioning my precious, sexy little mate so she’s straddling my lap, I stare into her bright blue eyes as an electric current buzzes through my body into hers. I see the moment it hits.

“That’s the mating moon,” I murmur, pressing a kiss to her temple, cheek, and nose. “It’s nearly impossible to resist. Once we’re together, I’ll need to bite you to complete the process of becoming my mate.” Her eyes widen, but I’m quick to follow up. “I’ve heard it’s not painful at all. In fact, most humans find it... quite pleasurable.”

A shiver runs down Chrisinda's spine, and I groan as I trace up and down her back with the tips of my fingers. "I want that," she breathes out. "I want to be yours, Jax. Your mate."

"God, I've been waiting my whole life to hear that," I groan.

My dick throbs as it presses against the zipper of my jeans. I know she feels it when she gasps softly. "Jax," she whispers.

"I love hearing my name on your lips," I whisper back, running my hands up her thighs and torso until they cup the sides of her neck. I trace light circles on the underside of her jaw. She swallows thickly, and I growl when I feel her throat muscles working against my hands.

"Jax," she murmurs again, leaning closer to me, so close I can taste her sweet breath.

Her lips part beneath mine as she slides her tongue into my mouth, immediately taking control of the kiss. I breathe her in and grip her hips, helping her grind down on me to get the friction she needs. Chrisinda moans and arches her back, breaking our kiss.

I trail my lips down her neck, scraping my teeth over her delicate skin and imagining my mark there. Soon. Chrisinda shifts, resting a hand behind her on my knee, opening herself up for more of my attention.

"Fuck," I grunt, gripping her ass with one hand while trailing the other between her breasts and down her torso. Chrisinda throws her head back and moans loudly for me.

I cup the back of her neck, drawing her back into me for a kiss. Her hands tangle in my hair, pulling at the strands while we taste and explore each other. She's trembling in my arms, but she keeps rocking her hot little pussy against me and fighting me for control of our kiss.

I growl and nip at her bottom lip, pulling it through my teeth before diving back into her sweetness.

"Jax," she pants, resting her forehead on mine. "I need something... I need something else. I need more."

“I’ll give you whatever you want, mate,” I groan, slipping my hands underneath the hem of her dress. Chrisinda sucks in her stomach, which pisses me off. I knead her soft flesh and ample curves before growling into her ear, “You’re perfect. So beautiful and sexy. God, Chrisinda, you have no idea what you do to me.”

I don’t give her a chance to respond before pulling her dress over her head in one swift move. With a flick of my wrist and a twist of my fingers, I have her bra unclasped and joining her shirt somewhere on the floor. She gasps but then moans as my large hands palm her tits.

God, they are exquisite. The glowing light from the setting sun kisses the contours of her breasts, making my mouth water. I rub my thumbs over her hard little nipples and then press her tits together and lick up her cleavage.

“Ohmygod,” she whimpers, clutching my hair and holding me to her chest. I grunt as I leave little bites all over the tops of her breasts, kissing and teasing my way down to her pebbled peaks. I suck on her nipples, loving the way Chrisinda gasps and writhes in my arms. When I bite down, she squeezes her thighs around me, her entire body locking up.

“You like that?” I nearly growl, the lust building up to a breaking point.

Instead of answering, Chrisinda wraps her arms around my head and pulls me further into her, burying my head between her breasts. I’m suffocating on her, and I fucking love it. My hands slide down her back, landing on her thick, juicy ass and squeezing. Hard.

I slide her up and down my aching cock while meeting her thrust for thrust, dry fucking up into her. Goddamn, I feel her heat through our layers of clothing, feel her need for release, her need for *me* to give her that release.

“I-I-I’m...” Before she can finish her thought, Chrisinda cries out, shattering in my arms.

I lift my head up from her chest and swallow down her moans, wanting to taste them while her body pulses with

pleasure.

“That’s it, mate,” I rasp, grinding against her core to draw out her pleasure.

Eventually, she collapses on my chest, flushed and out of breath.

“Can we do that again?” she asks, still panting from her orgasm.

My wolf and I growl as I stand with Chrisinda in my arms, racing through the house to get her spread out on my bed beneath me as soon as possible.

“We can do that anytime you want,” I promise. “Are you ready for more?”

I stand in front of my bedroom door, waiting for her answer. It might kill me if she says no, but I’d never take what my mate isn’t freely offering.

“Yes, please,” she breathes out, lifting her head to press a line of kisses along my jaw. Her little tongue darts out, and I nearly collapse when I feel her lick a stripe up my throat.

She’s as turned on, as desperate for me as I am for her. I can’t wait to satisfy both of our needs.

SEVEN



Chrisinda

JAX GROANS as I lick his throat, the vibrations sending a shockwave throughout my body.

“Need you naked,” he grunts, setting me down in front of his king-sized bed. I nod, slipping my fingers into the waistband of my panties. Jax already took care of my dress and bra. Not that I’m complaining. “No,” he barks out, making me freeze. “Let me.”

I melt at his words, even more so when Jax presses a kiss to my temple, cheek, and lips, then lower, on my neck, my breasts, and my torso. He kneels in front of me, tucking his thumbs into my waistband and peeling the fabric down slowly.

Jax kisses my thighs and calves as the fabric slides over them; then he gently lifts one foot, then the other, ridding me of the last of my clothing. The way he’s looking at me with awe and reverence makes me feel more seen, more understood than I ever have before.

“I’ll be so good to you,” he whispers as he stands to his full height. I watch as he lifts his shirt over his head, revealing his sculpted chest and thick biceps. I barely have time to ogle his muscles before he nearly rips his jeans off.

“Jax,” I breathe out, staring at his thick, throbbing dick. It should scandalize me, but this mating moon is no joke. I crave all of this man, and I’m desperate to feel him inside me.

Guiding me backward, Jax urges me to lay back on the bed. I do, loving the way his eyes widen as they take in my naked form. I always thought I'd be embarrassed or ashamed of my body if and when the time came to show it to someone in an intimate way. But right here, at this moment, I feel confident and sexy and ready to please my man.

Jax crawls on top of me, nuzzling into my stomach and breasts before kissing and licking my neck. "You're incredible," he whispers into the shell of my ear. "So beautiful it hurts. I can't believe you're mine. I promise to make this so good for you, mate."

He seals his declaration with a heated kiss, letting me feel the weight of his body as it presses down on me. I spread my legs for him, and he settles between them, rocking his already hard length into my center.

"Show me," I whisper. "Show me what it means to be yours."

"You're already mine, sweet mate. I'll never get enough of you."

His words break me open. I feel vulnerable and exposed but seen and cherished. I feel loved. Jax must recognize the depth of my emotions as he rests his forehead on mine and breathes the same air as me.

I spread my legs for him, wanting nothing more than to be even closer to this man who has completely swept me off my feet and saved me in more ways than one.

Jax holds himself up with one forearm on the side of my head and massages my thigh with his other hand. "Open wider for me, sweetheart. I'm not a small man."

"Yeah, I noticed," I say with a smirk. He grins back, but then his face turns serious.

"I'll be gentle with you," he promises. "I'll always take care of you."

"I know. I trust you."

He kisses me then, softly at first and then with more passion. I feel the tip of his cock part my folds, and we both groan. Jax slides his thick dick up and down my slit, getting my juices all over him and hitting my clit with every shallow thrust.

“You feel incredible,” he groans.

His words set me on fire, and I tilt my hips, trying to get him where I want him. Jax takes the hint and lines himself up at my opening. I feel the head of his swollen cock stretch me wide open, the burning sensation nearly taking the air out of my lungs.

“You okay, mate?” he grits out, shaking with the effort of going slow.

I nod my head. “I’m good. You’re just so big.” I feel his cock twitch, and then a trickle of wetness spurts from the head.

“Shit, I’m gonna come too soon if you keep talking like that.”

I smirk, knowing how I can get him to do what I want. “I want to feel all of you,” I purr. “Please, Jax, I need to feel you, need your—”

Jax growls and snaps his hips, breaking through my barrier and thrusting all the way home. I gasp at the slight pinch but then moan at finally, *finally* being with him in the most intimate of ways.

“So tight, Jesus, you feel amazing. Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

I wiggle my hips, getting used to being so full. I like it. I feel my pussy sucking him in deeper, and I know I’ll never get tired of having him inside of me like this.

“I’m so good, Jax. Keep going; I want to feel you move.”

He groans and kisses me as he pulls out and thrusts inside of me again. I’m already so close; I can feel my orgasm burning me up inside, singeing my nerves deliciously. Jax breaks our kiss and turns his attention to my breasts, sucking on one nipple and then the other.

My pussy clenches each time his warm, wet tongue swipes across the sensitive peaks. Jax groans, so I squeeze myself around him more tightly.

“I’m close, Jax,” I moan, meeting his thrust for thrust now, sweat coating my body as we move together. Each time he hits the end of me, my muscles tense and spasm, sending me higher, closer, so close, right there, one more...

I come in a delicious, vicious, intense explosion throughout my body. I keep saying his name over and over again like a prayer, like a spell, like the only word I know. He’s opened up a ferocious need inside of me, and I don’t know if I can take anymore, but fuck, I know I’m going to try.

“That’s it, come around my fat cock,” Jax chokes out.

He holds still inside of me, feeling my cunt contract around him again and again. Each pulse shoots lightning throughout my body, keeping me at my peak.

When I finally come back down from my high, Jax starts moving again. He pumps in and out of me, faster, harder this time, and I’m ready for him.

The urgency of his body as it moves against mine is intoxicating. He’s pushing me further, higher, with every movement, every thrust. I’m clinging to him, digging my nails into his powerful back, pressing myself up against him. I grind my heels into his muscled ass, and he grunts, fucking harder, deeper, rougher.

The base of his cock taps my clit with every stroke, filling me up and hitting my sweet spot so good. The slide of his cock is perfect, in out, in out, and I’m almost there. One hard thrust and I shatter around him, my pussy tightening, twitching, and tensing again and again around his massive length.

“I can’t hold on,” he warns, his voice deep and gritty.

“Let go for me,” I whisper. “I want to feel it.”

“Fuck yes,” he growls, his thrusts getting faster, sloppier, rougher until he comes with a broken groan of pleasure. “Mine,” he roars, seconds before sinking his teeth into the side of my neck.

I cry out as an unexpected shockwave rolls over my body, spiking my nerves and sending tingles down my spine. His hips stutter against me as his cock jerks inside me, pouring his warm, sticky seed into my still-spasming pussy.

“Chrisinda, fuck, Chrisinda...” he whispers into my skin as he nuzzles into the crook of my neck, licking over his mark and making me twitch as the last of my energy drains from my body.

Jax collapses on top of me and rolls onto his back, pulling me with him. I’m straddling his hips, his cock still wedged deep inside me. We both groan as I flutter around him and release another wave of wetness. He strokes my back and kisses my temple before tucking my head under his chin so he can hold me close.

Our breathing slows as our hearts find the same rhythm. Jax has me wrapped up in his arms, trailing his fingertips over the bare skin of my shoulder. “That was...” I whisper, at a loss for words.

“Everything,” Jax finishes for me. “You felt it, too, right? How perfectly we fit together?”

I tip my head up from where it was resting on his shoulder, giving him a smile. Kind brown eyes meet mine, filled with love and satisfaction. “I felt it,” I breathe out, brushing my lips against his. “I felt my whole world shift until you were in the very center.”

Jax smiles, rubbing his nose against mine in a sweet gesture I’m starting to love. “You’re my whole world, mate,” he murmurs.

“Mate,” I sigh contentedly. “I like the sound of that.”

“Me, too,” he confirms, kissing the tip of my nose. “I’ll be right back,” Jax says, taking me by surprise. I pout as he rolls me over and crawls out of bed, but then smile when he comes right back with a washcloth.

“What are you doing?”

“Cleaning up my precious mate,” he says softly as he kneels next to me on the mattress. “Now lie back and let me

take care of you.”

I do as he says, my eyes never leaving him while he gently wipes my thighs and between my legs, handling me with such care I start to tear up.

“Did I hurt you?” he asks, panic lacing his voice. “Chrisinda, I—”

“I feel incredible,” I tell him through sniffles. His shoulders relax slightly, but he’s still worried. “You’re so good to me, and I guess... I don’t know. I guess it’ll take some getting used to, you know? Up until yesterday, I spent most of my life anticipating other people’s needs and paying the price if I didn’t measure up to whatever moving standard they had. But one day with you, and I feel...”

“How do you feel?” Jax whispers, cupping the side of my face as he stares right down into my soul.

“Like a princess,” I whisper, a soft smile playing on my lips.

“You are,” he says just as softly. “My princess. I’m so sorry for how life has treated you, Chrisinda. I promise those days are over. You’re mine, and as my mate, I’ll make sure no one mistreats or disrespects you.”

“I know,” I tell him with a grin. “It’s just one of many reasons why I love you.”

My eyes go wide at my confession, but Jax just stares at me in bewilderment. I’m about to apologize for saying the L word too soon, but then a brilliant smile stretches across his face.

“I love you, too,” he’s quick to reply. “Forever. Always. I should have said it before we mated. For shifters, declaring your mate is... deeper than love. Deeper than loyalty. Deeper than any other connection in this life or the next. But I should have known you’d want to still hear it from me.” I nod, but his words are still sinking in. *Deeper than love. Deeper than loyalty.* “Chrisinda, I love you more with every breath. I love your light, and I love that you haven’t let life snuff it out, even though it hasn’t been easy. I love everything about you, mate.”

I can feel myself blush from head to toe, but I never break eye contact. “I love you so much, Jax. I’ve never felt so seen or understood, so cherished in all my life. Thank you.”

“Never thank me,” he whispers, kissing the top of my head as we snuggle back down in bed. “You give me everything just by existing.” I bury my face into the side of his neck, loving the way he automatically wraps an arm around my back to keep me there. “Get some rest, Princess. I can’t wait to do it all over again in the morning.”

I giggle, and Jax squeezes me tighter. I’m happier than I’ve ever been, and for the first time in my life, I can’t wait to see what tomorrow holds.

EIGHT



Jax

I STIR awake in the dark, unsure what woke me up. Then I hear it. The sweetest, softest moan. I'm spooned around Chrisinda's curvy body, one hand on her side as she rocks her hips slowly, brushing her ass against my hard as fuck dick.

"Baby," I groan, tightening my hold on her hip to help her grind against me.

"Mmm," is all she says.

"Are you awake?" I ask, sliding my hand around to her front and cupping her pussy. Fucking hell, she's *soaked* for me. Chrisinda moans my name under her breath and pushes back against me. My sleepy, horny mate is going to get quite the wake-up call.

I settle my throbbing cock between her cheeks, rubbing the sore fucker up and down to find relief. Dipping two fingers inside her tight as fuck hole, I drag her arousal up her slit and circle her little bundle of nerves. Chrisinda jerks forward, gasping as her cunt pulses for me and releases more of her sweetness.

"Jax?" she asks, her voice scratchy from sleep.

"Yeah, love," I grunt, thrusting two fingers inside her while grinding my heel down on her clit.

"Oh God, ohmygod, don't stop," she whimpers.

I growl and lean forward, scraping my teeth along the side of her neck and sucking on my mark there. I dip my tongue into the grooves of the bite mark, loving the way she writhes and gasps at that simple touch. My cock is leaking precum, getting her ass all slick and wet. Jesus, what that does to me.

“Need you, mate. Need you so fucking bad,” I murmur into the shell of her ear. Chrisinda looks at me over her shoulder and nods. Moonlight streams through the half-open curtains, highlighting her blue eyes and full lips. She’s so beautiful my chest aches. My balls ache. Every part of me yearns for more of her.

I flip Chrisinda on her stomach in one swift move, making her gasp and then giggle. Her laughter quickly turns into a moan as I pull her hips up and back, massaging her perfectly round ass. I spread her cheeks wide and drag my thickness through her slick folds, groaning as her pussy flutters around me and coats my cock with her juices.

“Please,” she begs, pushing back against me. “It hurts. I ache for you.”

“Jesus, I can take that pain away, love.”

Without warning, I thrust into her sweet cunt, hitting the very end of her. Chrisinda cries out and jolts forward, clawing at the bed. I stay still inside her, taking a moment to feel how perfectly we fit together.

Chrisinda starts to tremble, and I grip her hips, steadying her as I pull out and stroke back in, shoving my dick so deep inside her.

“Jax, I’m... I think...”

“Fuck,” I groan, feeling her tight little channel squeeze me so damn hard. “Don’t come yet. Hold it.”

Chrisinda whimpers and drops her head forward, every muscle tensing as she tries to push her orgasm back. I slide my hand up her back, loving the way she shivers at my touch. Wrapping her silky blonde hair around my hand, I tug her head back as I lean forward to kiss her, driving my dick into her pussy over and over.

“J-Jax, God, I’m... I’m...”

Her words break off into a jagged moan as a shiver works its way through her body. I crush my lips down on hers, swallowing every desperate sound that pours from her mouth. Leaning back a bit, I lift two fingers to her mouth, nudging them against the seam of her lips.

“Suck on me, mate. Get me nice and wet,” I grunt. Chrisinda looks at me over her shoulder, questions swimming in her brilliant eyes. “You’ll like it. I promise.” I stroke inside of her slowly, tapping her G-spot, keeping her right on the edge of sweet ecstasy.

Chrisinda obeys, parting her pink lips and wrapping them around my fingers. She swirls her tongue against my skin and sucks on me, making me groan as I think about how she’ll feel when I fuck her mouth.

I withdraw my hand, bringing it to her tight little ass hole. Circling my wet fingers there, I nearly lose my shit when she pushes back against my hand, urging me to keep going. I pull almost all the way out of her dripping pussy, then slam back into her as I shove one finger into her ass.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh *fuck*,” she cries out. I grip the soft flesh of her hip in a punishing hold, keeping her still as I split her open with my cock and finger. “I can’t hold on. Jax, I can’t...”

Chrisinda sucks in a huge breath and holds it. Her back bows, causing her ass to lift and push back into me. “Hold it,” I growl, right before easing a second finger inside her tight ring of muscles. I scissor my fingers, stretching her wide open. Chrisinda lets out an agonizing cry as she gushes for me.

“Please,” she whimpers over and over, trembling uncontrollably. Shit, she’s strung so damn tight. She’s barely hanging on, barely even breathing, trying so damn hard to obey me. Fuck, if that doesn’t make me feel like the king of the world. I love that she’s letting me command her body. Own her orgasms. Keep her all to myself.

My dick jerks and swells as my aching balls draw up tight. I feel my release claw up my spine and fill me up, drowning me in ecstasy. Right before it hits, I shove my dick so fucking deep into her cunt and hold it there.

“Come for me, Chrisinda. Come so damn hard for me. Come right the fuck now,” I growl, slipping my fingers into her wet heat and pinching her clit as I continue to fingerfuck her ass with my other hand.

Her broken cries fill the room as she falls apart so beautifully for me. I feel her orgasm ripple up and down my cock as she shakes violently and then squirts all over me. I groan and slide my arm under her hips right as she collapses.

I withdraw my fingers from her ass and spank her nice and hard, growling when she pulses around me, more of her release gushing out of her, dripping down my balls. Chrisinda’s moans are muffled by the sheets where she has her face buried.

I rut into her again and again, shredding her to pieces until she’s limp in my arms. With one final, brutal thrust, I explode inside her, ropes of my cum shooting out of me as I hold still. I keep coming so damn hard. So damn long.

Finally, Jesus Christ, *finally* the last of my release spurts out of me, taking all of my strength with it. I collapse on top of Chrisinda, both of us sweaty and trembling with the aftershocks of our explosive climaxes.

When I’ve gained a bit of my strength back, I roll over, taking Chrisinda with me. I drape my woman over my chest, and she snuggles up against me, burying her face into the side of my neck. We’re both panting as we cling to each other.

After a few quiet moments to soak in the afterglow of what we just did, I peel Chrisinda off of me and cup her face in my hands, brushing a soft kiss on her lips. She sighs so sweetly for me, another shiver running up her spine.

Guiding her to rest her head on my chest. She relaxes against me as I comb my fingers through her hair, pausing to

brush the tips of my fingers over her bite mark. She sighs contentedly, pressing herself impossibly closer to me.

“What’s on your mind, mate?” I ask softly.

“I’m just... happy,” she whispers.

I tighten my hold on her, then relax a bit, not wanting to crush her. “Good. Then I’m doing my job right,” I tease.

Chrisinda props herself up on my chest, a serious look in her bright blue eyes. “What if something bad happens? What if I’m too happy, and it tempts the universe or something?”

I curl my hand around the back of her neck, comforting her as I draw her close. Resting my forehead on hers, I silently encourage my mate to match my breathing. “You don’t know this yet, Princess, but life doesn’t have to be a battle to survive. You grew up with people who didn’t value you or see how precious you were. No more, love. I’m here now, and I’ll remind you every single day that you deserve happiness in your life.”

“Thank you,” she whispers. “You’re so good to me.”

“We’re good to each other,” I tell her as we get readjusted.

Chrisinda curls up against my side, and I tuck her even closer, needing as much of her to touch me as possible. When her breathing evens out and her soft snores tickle my ears, I finally allow myself to drift off to sleep.

NINE



Chrisinda

I'VE BEEN LIVING in my own little bubble with Jax for the last few days, and it's been perfect. He's so sweet and funny, always trying to make me smile. I can see why Ruby fell for Kade so fast. It's hard to resist the guy when he's so attentive, and his whole goal in life seems to be to make you happy.

My phone rings, startling me from the lazy morning I was having in bed. I fumble to answer it, rubbing my eyes to try to clear them as I squint at the screen. When I see my father's name, I frown, wondering if I'm still dreaming. I glance at the clock and see that it's only a little after seven in the morning.

Why is he calling me so early?

I look over at the other side of the bed, surprised to see I'm all alone.

Where is Jax?

"Dad?" I answer before it can go to voicemail. I clear my throat, still trying to clear the sleep from my voice. "Is everything alright?"

"No, it is not alright," he snaps. My spine straightens at his tone.

He doesn't sound worried or sad like there was an accident or something, and I wonder what could have happened.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, throwing my legs over the side of the bed.

“*What’s wrong?* Are you serious? How could you steal your sister’s boyfriend and then just disappear? How could you abandon your family? Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

My body goes rigid, and I wonder where to even start. The old me would have been thrilled that he cares about my absence because at least that’s some sort of emotion from him. But the me who has been mated to Jax knows my father never really loved me to begin with if he let his wife and stepdaughter treat me the way they did for years.

Rage starts to build inside of me. All of the anger that I’ve kept pent up for the last decade is threatening to be let out, and for once, I want to let it out. Maybe it’s about time he knows what a joke of a parent he is.

Maybe it’s time that I officially cut him off, too.

Jax appears in the doorway, a tray of food in his hands, and my heart melts at the sight of him. He frowns when he sees the look on my face, concern filling his brown eyes. I take a deep breath, preparing to get rid of the last of my family.

It hits me then as I stare into Jax’s warm brown eyes. I’m no longer alone. I never will be again. Jax will always have my back; he’ll always be on my side. He’ll always protect me and make sure that I’m safe.

Jax deserves a strong mate. He makes me feel confident and capable, and it’s about time I stood up for myself.

“Sister’s boyfriend,” I suddenly stutter because that’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard. “She met him for like five minutes when he asked for directions. He didn’t ask her out. He’s not interested in her.”

Jax sets the tray down on the dresser and comes to my side. He kneels in front of me, giving me an encouraging smile, and I take his hand in mine, holding onto it for dear life as I say everything I should have said to my father a long time ago.

“So, you just ran off with him? And you’ve been holed up with him God knows where for the last week?” he spits. He’s not calling me a whore or a slut like my stepmother did, but the implication is there in his words.

“Yeah, I’m with him. I’m in love with him, and he loves me.”

My father laughs bitterly, and the image I’ve been clinging to for the last twelve years slips away. He’s no longer the man I knew when I was a kid. He’s not the caring, goofy, funny man I used to love. He hasn’t been that man in a long, long time. And I deserve better than the man that he is now.

“I always knew you were gullible, but this is too much. He doesn’t love you,” my father says. Jax must be able to hear because he nods his head and mouths, yes, I do.

I smile at my mate, stroking my thumb against the side of his hand as I mouth back; I love you too.

“You will not abandon this family. It’s time that you come home. Now, young lady,” he snaps, and that breaks something inside of me.

“No.”

“Excuse me?” he hisses. I roll my shoulders back.

“I said *no*. I’m never coming back. I’m never talking to any of you again. I’m staying here with Jax, with the people who love and care about me.”

I seem to have shocked him into silence, and I don’t give him a chance to recover before I barrel on.

“And how *dare* you accuse me of abandoning my family. *You* abandoned me as soon as mom died! You left me in that house with those awful people for *years!*”

“I had to work!” he tries to argue, but I’m done with his excuses.

“You could have found another job. You could have called or come home more, but you didn’t. You let that woman treat me like a servant while you treated her and her daughter like royalty.”

“I was trying to welcome her to the family,” he protests, and I let out a bitter laugh.

“You did it for years and years, dad. You let her treat me like crap. You made me stay there to take care of everything. You knew that I was miserable. You had to have known that I was miserable. Did you just not care?” I ask him, and Jax leans forward, wrapping his arms around me.

“I didn’t know that you felt that way,” he says stiffly, and I scoff. “I didn’t know it was that bad for you.”

“That’s bullshit. You saw my room. You saw that they made me move into the attic. That last vacation that you all took, why did you think that I wasn’t there? Because I didn’t want to go? It’s because she wouldn’t allow it!”

He has nothing to say back to that, and I cling to Jax.

“You were my father. It was your responsibility to look after me. It was your job to keep me safe and make sure that I was taken care of and loved, and you failed. You’ve failed me for years, and now you have to live with the consequences.”

“Chrisinda,” my dad starts, but I’m done.

“You’ve left me alone for years, dad. This shouldn’t be hard for you.”

“Chrisinda!” he tries again.

“I don’t want to hear from you or your wife ever again. I have a new family now. I don’t need yours anymore.”

With that, I hang up, tossing the phone onto the bed beside me. Jax pulls me into his arms instantly, and I let him hold me as I cry for the hurt little girl I’ve been for the last decade.

When I’m done, I feel lighter than I have in years, and I know, deep down in my soul, that I’m where I’m meant to be now.

TEN



Jax

“IS EVERYTHING OKAY?” Chrisinda asks me as she finishes the last bite of her meal.

“Yeah. Yes. Of course,” I say, totally unconvincingly. Chrisinda furrows her brows and tilts her head to the side, studying me.

“You seem... nervous. And don’t lie to me, mister,” she adds, narrowing her eyes playfully at me.

Truthfully, I *am* nervous. I planned this whole dinner and kept thinking the perfect opportunity to ask her the most important question in our lives would pop up. So far, it hasn’t.

“Can I get you anything else to eat?” I ask instead of answering her. My mate isn’t having any of that, however.

“Is something wrong? Did I do something or—”

“No,” I rush to say, standing from my chair and kneeling in front of hers. “You’re perfect. It’s me. I’m just...”

“Oh my god, if you’re breaking up with me, please, for the love of god, don’t give me some stupid *it’s not you; it’s me* line.”

“What? Break up with you? I would never,” I growl, the thought of being separated from my mate too painful to bear.

“Then what’s going on? You’re freaking me out.”

“I’m sorry,” I say with a sigh, still kneeling in front of her. “I’ve been trying to find the right moment, but I keep screwing it up. I’m no good at this human stuff,” I mutter.

“Help me out here, Jax. What human stuff?”

Digging around in my pocket, I pull out the ring I bought a few days ago. Ruby gave me some tips on what Chrisinda likes, and I ran with it. Only, now I’m not sure if she’ll like it or even if she’ll say yes.

“I’m told most girls dream of their wedding day,” I start. “It’s less common with shifter mates since a marriage license seems trivial in the face of everything fated mates are, but I understand the sentiment behind the ceremony.”

Chrisinda blinks at me, her eyes drifting to the velvet box in my hand.

“I’m not doing any of this right,” I say under my breath. “We’re starting a new life together,” I try again. “And I want you as my wife as well as my mate.”

She blinks again but still doesn’t respond.

“Well? What do you think?”

Another long moment of silence, followed by the softest tinkling of laughter.

“Are you asking me to marry you?” she says with a big grin on her face. That has to be a good sign, right?

“Yes. Oh, that’s right, I have to word it in a question form. The guys told me about that. Uh... Will you marry—”

“Of course, you silly wolf!” she exclaims, cutting me off.

Chrisinda launches herself into my arms, tackling me to the floor. I hold her close, then roll her on her back, holding myself up with a hand on either side of her head. “So, yes? You’ll be my wife?”

She nods, her hands coming up to cup my face. “Yes, Jax. I want to be everything to you.”

“You already are, Princess.” I slip the ring on her finger, loving the way her eyes light up as she looks at it.

“Jax, it’s beautiful,” she whispers.

“So are you.”

Chrisinda shifts beneath me as she pulls me closer, closer, closer until our lips are fused together in a passionate kiss. My hands roam down her curves, mapping out each hill and valley as I grind my thickness against her core.

“Need me to show you how much I love you, mate?”

“Y-yes,” she stutters out. “God, yes, Jax.”

I don’t need to hear anything else. I stand, scooping my bride up in my arms, loving the way it makes her laugh.

I kiss her the entire way to the bathroom, only breaking apart so I can start the water. Once it’s a good temperature, I turn to my beautiful mate, brushing my fingertips over her skin as I peel off each layer of clothing until she’s naked before me.

My mate smiles up at me, her crystal blue eyes locking onto mine and hitting me to my very core. She steps inside the shower as I tear my clothes off. Chrisinda giggles at me, then turns serious, her gaze raking over my body.

I join Chrisinda in the shower, fixated on the warm water trickling down over her flawless skin and supple curves. My hands follow the droplets of water over her shoulders, her waist, and her hips. I grab ahold of her perky ass and pull her toward me, kissing her soundly. She lifts one leg over my hip, and I hold it firmly in my grip, groaning at the way she’s opening herself up to me.

“Chrisinda...” I murmur into the side of her neck before licking and nipping at the mark there.. She thrusts her hips and rubs her hot pussy against my rock fucking hard cock, her body writhing against me as I continue lapping at her skin.

“Please?” She whimpers. “I need to feel you. I need...”

I pull back slightly so I can rest my forehead on hers. “What do you need, Princess?”

“Need to feel you,” she begs.

My hands roam over her body, stroking, squeezing, savoring every inch as my lips find hers. I chase her tongue with mine, tangling them up as we fuse ourselves together.

Finally, I break our kiss and spin Chrisinda around so she's facing the back wall of the shower. She takes the hint and braces herself on the wall, sticking her ass out, presenting herself to me in an act of complete trust.

"I'll never get used to how gorgeous you are," I mumber before kissing her between her shoulder blades and ghosting my lips and nose down her spine.

Reaching between her legs, I dip two fingers inside her wet slit to check her readiness. Goddamn, my mate wasn't kidding; she needs this.

"Ready for me to fill you up again?" I ask while lazily pumping my fingers in and out of her soaking wet hole.

"God, yes, please, please..." Chrisinda moans.

I stand up behind her and grip her ass, massaging her perfect cheeks and pulling them apart, exposing all of her to my hungry eyes. I lean over and cover her, pressing my chest into her back as I reach around her with one hand. She shivers beneath me.

I bite her neck right over her mark, cup her breast, and drive my cock into her mercilessly, letting out a feral growl as I bottom out. She whimpers with each thrust and pushes back into me, letting me know she's right here with me.

I skim my fingers down her torso, all the way to her pussy. Her clit is a fat little pearl, swollen and throbbing for me. She bucks against my hand as I play with it, rubbing and pinching and not letting her take a breath as I give her body more pleasure than she's ever known. She twists and cries in agony, but I don't stop. She's mine now. Mine to please. Mine to torture. She arches in my arms as I take her apart piece by piece, letting out a desperate plea right before she breaks.

"That's it, come for me, Chrisinda," I grunt, still pumping into her and teasing her nipples with one hand while rubbing her hard little clit.

“Jax!” Chrisinda gushes for me, her tight pussy spasming around my cock again and again. “I... c-can’t... stop,” she gasps in between each word like it’s taking up all of her concentration just to breathe.

I wrap one arm around her hips and one across her perfect breasts, holding her up as her knees give out. Chrisinda is screaming my name and pounding her fist on the wall of the shower as another orgasm is torn from her very depths. Fucking beautiful.

I’m so lost watching her get obliterated by pleasure that my climax slams into me unexpectedly. I roar as I thrust into her one last time, pressing her trembling body flush against the shower wall. I come almost violently, jet after jet shooting out of my dick as it swells and spasms inside her.

Stumbling back a bit, I gather Chrisinda up in my arms and slowly slide down to the floor of the shower, not trusting my legs at the moment. She curls up into me, still shaking and breathing heavily.

“You okay, mate?” I ask, still out of breath myself.

“So good,” she sighs.

I grin and nuzzle into the top of her head, letting the hot water pour over our bodies and relax our sore muscles. After a few minutes of rest, we manage to stand up and wash each other off.

I grab a fluffy towel from the rack and wrap it around my mate, drying her off as I admire her flawless body. “You’re perfect,” I murmur to myself.

“So are you,” she says with a smile. “You love me so well.”

I dry myself off and then take Chrisinda’s hands in mine. “You are the easiest person to love, mate. And I plan to prove that to you every day for the rest of our lives.”

She smiles and clings to me, wrapping her arms around my torso. “I like the sound of that,” she whispers.

“Me, too, Princess. Me, too.”

ELEVEN



Chrisinda

FIVE YEARS LATER...

“ARE YOU ALL SET, PRINCESS?” Jax asks as he ties his shoes.

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

We’re headed out for brunch with all of our friends. Our two kids are busy running in circles around the living room, and I smile as they try to play freeze tag with just the two of them. They just learned that game at preschool a few days ago, and both of them have been obsessed with it ever since. Luckily for Jax and me, their friends are just as into it so we might get a break from running around while we eat.

“Sayer and Snow are hosting it this time, right?” My husband asks me, and I nod. “Did you want to walk then?”

“Yeah!” Julie and Mason both cheer, and I grin.

“Sure. It can’t hurt to burn off some of this energy.”

Jax laughs, taking my hand as the kids bolt outside and down the front porch steps.

“Stay on the path!” I call to them, and they nod as we start to head through the forest and toward Sayer and Snow’s house.

Jax swings our hands slightly, and I smile, enjoying the beautiful day. The sun is out for the first time in what feels like a week, and I'm glad to be out in the fresh air.

"Your dad tried to call me yesterday," Jax says quietly, and I turn to look at him.

He looks a little nervous about how I'll react to that, but the truth is that I'm over it. My father has tried to make up for the way he's treated me, for leaving me alone all of the time with my stepmom and Molly, but they've been half-measures.

He would apologize and say he didn't know, but how could he not? Even if he didn't know, I had told him. Add that to the fact that he was barely there for my childhood, and well, there wasn't much of a relationship to rebuild.

Now that I have kids of my own, I can't imagine leaving them for months at a time and never calling or doing whatever I could to fly them to come to see me or go back home.

Besides, my dad is still with my stepmom. He's still traveling for work all of the time, and I just don't have the energy for that. I have a family of my own now, one that would do anything for me, and I don't need him anymore.

"He wanted me to try to convince you to see him again," Jax says, and I roll my eyes.

"He wants money from you," I tell him, and he frowns.

"From *us*. It's *our* money, Princess."

Jax has been insisting that his money is mine since we first were mated, but even five years later, I still sometimes forget that I have money now. I'm not scrapping by, desperately trying to make ends meet.

"Still. I don't want to see him. I don't want you or our kids near any of them. Ever," I stress, and he nods, squeezing my hand.

"That's what I told him."

"Good."

Jax has always had my back. He didn't even know me when we drove to Windy Pines for my things, and he was still unequivocally on my side. He doesn't need to know the details. He just will always choose me. He's my literal Prince Charming, and he still calls me his Princess.

The online store I started with Chrisinda five years ago has really taken off. We have more orders than we can fill most months. Luckily for us, we have two mates who would do anything to help us reach our dreams.

Snow and Clara have both started to help out around the cottage as well. We've grown closer to them over the last five years, and now I couldn't imagine my life without them all in it.

Snow and Sayer's house comes into view, and I can see their kids all running around outside. Clara and Thatcher are already here with their little ones, and I hear feet running behind me and manage to duck out of the way of Ruby and Kade's kids just in time.

"Hi, Aunt Chrisinda! Hi, Uncle Jax!" They call, and I laugh as they hurry to catch up with Mason and Julie.

"I think that you might have been onto something with burning off that energy," Jax says, and I laugh, leaning my head on his shoulder as we walk up to the front door.

Jax and I got married close to five years ago. He told me that marriage wasn't really a big deal to a shifter; it was the bite mark, but he wanted the world to know that we were together. I think that's why he bought me this giant ring too. I swear that you could see it from space. I love that he wants everyone to know that I'm taken, though.

"Ready to eat?" Snow asks as we come inside, and I lean up, kissing Jax's cheek before I go see what she needs help with.

I look back over my shoulder before I head into the kitchen, and Jax is staring at me. He gives me a wink as he turns to greet our friends, and I grin to myself as I turn back to help Snow.

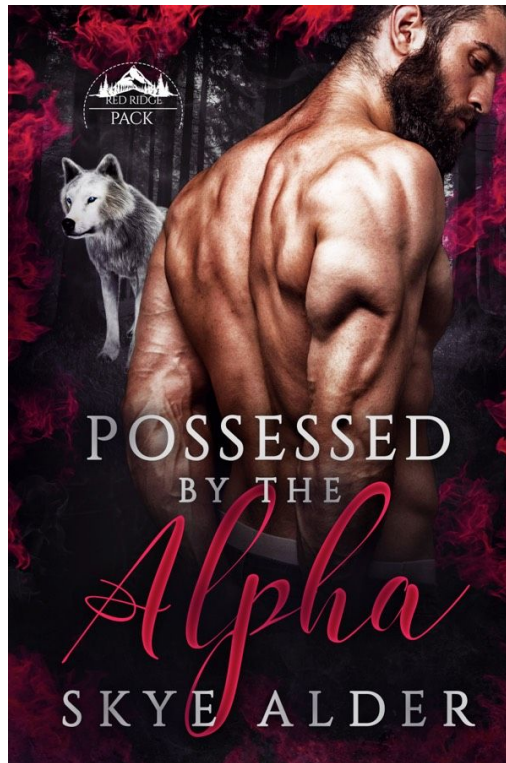
Even five years later, it still feels like we're on our honeymoon. I can't get enough of my charming shifter, and I know he feels the same way about me.

We're meant to be.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cameron Hart & Shaw Hart are a duo of romance authors who teamed up to write under the pseudonym, Skye Alder. They share a love of comedy TV shows, matcha tea, and trying their very best to do yoga.

When they aren't bonding over funny memes, they like to brainstorm new book ideas. One day, they decided to collaborate and have some fun creating new characters and worlds that will make you blush and have your heart melting.

If you enjoy sweet and sexy paranormal romance books (Specifically shifter romances!) then a Skye Alder book is for you!

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