

A New Orleans



CHRISTMAS

Enchantingly Haunted Romance

Pursued

Rachelle Stevensen

pursued

a new orleans christmas novel

Rachelle Stevensen

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To my amazing ARC team. This one is for you all.

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chapter
one

Rygan Ericson

OPENING his eyes with a gasp of pain, Rygan stared up at the canopy of leaves above him, trying to remember everything that had happened.

All that came back to him was the brutal fight over territory between his clan and the vampire coven that had decided that they wanted the territory that his clan had claimed years ago.

He tried talking to the coven leader, Felix Moreau, but talks went nowhere and instead fell apart as one of Rygan's men was attacked by one of Felix's vampires, and the fight turned into an all-out war.

The fight bled into the woods; the vampires were just as vicious as his shifters, and Rygan knew that his shifters weren't expecting the fight. They weren't as prepared as the vampires were.

They never imagined a clan of vampires would swoop in, trying to take over their hard-won territory.

Rygan was fighting with two vampires when one of his younger shifters got attacked by three men at once.

Linus went down with a yell, and Rygan's eyes flashed to that of his mountain lion when Linus was ripped to shreds, and he roared in agony, knowing Linus was barely ten and seven and had barely even started living.

Rygan had taken Linus under his wing -so to speak- and seeing Linus die? It was not going to go over well.

Rygan roared in rage, throwing the men he was fighting away from him with a burst of strength from his lion and rushed the men laughing over Linus' death.

His mountain lion came rushing to the surface of his skin, and he barely held it back, knowing he needed to stay in control and that he had to stay human to fight these bastards fair.

The vampires turned in shock, their faces filled with fear.

Rygan advanced on them, slicing one of them open from the stomach to the sternum, watching the man's intestines fall free and the man trying to hold them in, but Rygan slashed his throat open with his claws, rending through bone, muscle, and tendon, and the wounds proved too much even for a vampire's healing.

Rygan turned to the next man, but more men rushed him, and though he fought, he was outnumbered by at least seven men.

He was hit repeatedly, feeling one man's claws rake across his chest to his stomach, but his mountain lion did his best to lend him strength and speed in the fight without shifting.

He killed one of the men by ripping his head off and knocking another away before getting hit from behind, feeling someone's fangs sink deep into his neck.

He roared so loud, trying to reach behind him to rip the man away from his neck, angry that someone dared take blood from him.

He was the Alpha of his clan. No one had attacked him like this. Had dared to take his blood, but here this man was, his fangs buried in Rygan's neck, the other vampires drawing his attention so he couldn't get the man behind him.

The pulls of blood the man took from his vein were deep and harsh, sucking a lot of blood from him. Rygan could feel his fingers and toes growing cold, his body slowing down, and he let out another roar that wasn't as loud but one that caused one of his men to hear his distress and come running.

“Rygan!” His beta, Torin, screamed his name, and Rygan swayed as the blood loss affected him.

One of the vampires hit him in the stomach, and Rygan grunted as he felt the man sucking his blood rip free from his neck.

The man’s fangs took a chunk of his skin with him, and Rygan dropped to his knees, holding a hand to his neck.

Blood flowed freely between his fingers, and his mountain lion wanted to take over, trying to rip free from his skin, but Rygan was too weak, and he staggered away from the fight.

He knew he needed to heal, that the blood loss was too great, and the only way he could heal was to get away from the fighting.

He didn’t want to leave his men, though. They were all in dire straits with these vampires, and he couldn’t abandon them in their time of need.

He looked toward one of his men fighting with two vampires at once, knowing he needed help, but could not even walk toward the fight, much less fight.

His vision swam, spots appearing in his eyes, and he blinked to try to clear it.

He fell a few times trying to reach Frank, and he knew he was in no shape to fight longer as he lost too much blood from the fucker who bit into his neck.

Someone hit him in the back of the head, causing him to fall forward, and he let go of his neck to catch himself from falling on his face.

Blood dripped to the ground under him, and Rygan forced himself to stand, staggering further into the woods; the sounds of the fighting slowly faded into the background.

He heard Torin scream his name, his voice frantic, but Rygan couldn’t answer and didn’t have the strength to try.

He staggered further into the woods, leaving a trail of blood behind as he did.

He finally collapsed to the ground, unable to move any further.

His body felt cold, and he knew deep in his soul he was dying.

He had never thought about death until this moment, but he realized he never even gave himself a chance to enjoy life.

It had always been about the territory, fighting to take it, fighting to keep it, and struggling to ensure everyone was fed and had a roof over their head.

That the shifters he was Alpha of were heard, taken care of, and lived happy lives.

He encouraged them to go out and find their fated mate and bring them home.

He wanted to scoff at himself. He never found his. He never even came close.

He knew a few women in his range hoped to be his mate, but you couldn't force fate or a mating. It didn't work that way.

When shifters came of age, they found the one person meant to be their fated mate, and that was it.

They never felt desire for another, never even looked twice at the opposite sex as it wasn't in their blood.

Rygan had a lot of regrets, and never finding his mate was one.

He used to long for her when he was younger. Longed to find what his parents had.

They had moved west in search of more territory for their range, and Rygan missed them but knew it was for the best.

His range was mainly mountain lions, but he knew he would welcome any shifters to find solace in his pack.

They had thrived in New Orleans until Felix brought his vampires in to try to take over their territory, and Rygan was angry that he had dared to take over territory that had been established long ago.

He felt his anger surge through him, and he staggered to his feet again, moving through the woods, knowing he most likely wouldn't survive.

Shifters could heal many things, but this kind of blood loss was too much.

He didn't hold out much hope.

His eyes started to glaze over, and he didn't see the large ravine in front of him as he stepped into nothing but air.

His mountain lion had normally helped him to be light on his feet, but the blood loss was too much, and he fell, end over end, into the ravine, landing hard enough to feel some of his ribs crack.

He roared in agony, but it ended up a quiet mewl.

There was water close to where he lay, and he knew alligators often came this deep in the bayou, so he stood, staggering further away from the water, knowing he needed to find a tree to climb, but not having the energy.

He finally collapsed, his animal taking over, ripping free from him, the pain too much to bear for him to hold alone, and blackness taking over the edges of his vision.

He knew this had to be the end.

Shutting his eyes, the sounds of the forest faded around him, and he slipped into the welcoming darkness.

Rygan slipped in and out of consciousness, and it felt strange. He thought he was still in his mountain lion form, but he felt bigger and taller and he knew he must have changed sometime before this.

He was warm, seemingly laying on a soft surface, while the most delicious scent filled his nostrils and practically knitted itself into his lungs.

It was cinnamon, apple, and hints of vanilla, like the best scents of an apple pie that his mother would make as he grew up.

It was his favorite thing in the world, and he was surrounded by the scent and wanted to bathe in it.

He must be dead if this scent was anything to gauge by.

Only Heaven could smell this good.

He slowly opened his eyes, expecting to find, well, not what was above him. Thick branch-like beams made up the ceiling like they grew that way to form a structure. He thought it was odd but also liked that it looked like someone had created this home from nature, not steel and brick, as other homes were made of.

Some herbs were hanging from one of the beams, drying, and the light was spilling in from a small window.

He looked around a little more, seeing a large fireplace, a large pot simmering over it, a table with three chairs situated next to a small kitchen with a large sink that had a pump inside the house, and another room a little further away, with a bed like the one he was in.

He looked down at the blanket that covered him. It was a soft quilt, hand-sewn with a flower design in the fabric.

It was slightly worn as if used quite regularly.

The apple pie scent came from the blanket and the pillow he used.

He groaned as the scent overwhelmed him in the best way as he moved the blanket, making the scent blossom in the air.

He brought the blanket to his nose, dragging in deep lungfuls of the scent.

He had no fucking clue where he was, but he didn't care.

Not if this scent covered him. In the back of his mind, something niggled at him that this scent called to him above all others, but he didn't care at the moment why it did.

A sound came from the front of the house, making him drop the blanket and sit a little in the bed.

He looked down, noting that he was still naked as the day he was born.

Had been since he broke into his mountain lion and thought he had died.

He was grateful for the blanket covering his waist at this moment.

He knew being nude around other shifters wasn't a big deal as they had to be to turn into their animal; he also didn't want to be nude in front of someone who wasn't a shifter or his mate.

He wasn't raised to be a barbarian in front of the women and men in New Orleans.

He may not be around humans much, but he had manners.

Clutching the blanket to his waist, he looked over at the front of the house as a woman walked slowly into the house, her gait strange as if she couldn't straighten her legs out fully.

Her dark brown hair was loose around her shoulders, a small piece of fabric tied around the front of her hair as if keeping it out of her eyes.

She had on a cream-colored peasant top, a purple skirt, and a pink shawl draped down her arms.

She was holding a wicker basket stuffed to the brim with ripe raspberries.

She looked over at him, then away, then her eyes were wide as she looked back at him again.

Then he noticed her eyes were light gray like the sky when a storm was getting ready to roll in.

His heart stuttered in his chest as it finally hit him why her scent called to him.

His mountain lion roared in his head, "MATE!"

Rygan felt his jaw drop open, barely biting back a growl as his girl squeaked, turning her head from him, letting him see her from a different side.

She had scars on her neck. Scars like someone had wrapped a rope around her neck and tried to hang her.

There were also raised bumps under her shirt, and he could see what looked like healed burns on the top of her shirt.

Rygan could feel his mountain lion in his head, roaring, screaming out in anger that their mate was hurt in this way.

Rygan swallowed the growling in his throat as she turned back to him.

Her whispered voice reached his ears, “I was afraid you wouldn’t wake for a while. If you ever did. You lost a lot of blood, and you broke several ribs. The scratches that covered you were rather deep. And your neck, well, I think you will scar.”

“I heal fast.”

She looked down at his chest, which made him look down as well, and he noticed the white bandages there that he hadn’t seen before.

He was too obsessed with the scent coming from the blankets.

He felt his ribs, noting that they had stopped hurting and had healed. The bandages were still white, and no hint of pink from any blood had seeped.

He touched the bandages on his ribs and the one on his neck, loving and appreciating that she had wrapped them around him herself.

She was still looking at his bandages, and Rygan felt his cock stir, rushing with blood, knowing he was with his mate.

Finally.

She coughed, looking away and then back to his eyes.

He smiled gently at her, “I hope I wasn’t too much trouble. I do appreciate you taking me in and caring for me.”

She waved her hand, “You were heavy, but my sister helped me to carry you here.”

His eyebrow went up, “All right, well thank you.”

“We did notice you had no clothes,” she trailed off, “Is that normal for you? To wander around deep in the bayou with no clothes on?”

His eyebrow shot up, and he chuckled. “Not usually. No.”

“Oh. So just to fall down ravines then? And almost die? That’s a good time to wander in the nude?”

He laughed even harder, “I promise you that I’m not insane. I just had issues that caused the run through the bayou sans clothing.”

She coughed as if trying to hold back a laugh.

“Well. That’s new. Generally, one wears clothes when going through the bayou. There are a lot of poisonous things in these woods.”

Rygan covered his smile with his hand, “I’m not afraid of the creatures who live in the bayou.”

It was her turn to raise her eyebrows, “You should be. Evil lives in the woods. Or haven’t you heard?”

Rygan shook his head, “I hear many superstitions about the woods from my friends. But I believe nothing unless I see it for myself. And most of the time, superstitions are nothing but tall tales.”

She looked away from him, “I wish most weren’t true. That people believe what they see and not the rumors they hear here.”

“What do people believe about you?”

Shaking her head, she said, “It’s not important.”

Rygan growled, “I think it is. But, if you do not wish to tell me, then I will let it go.”

She looked over her shoulder at him, turning slowly toward him.

“What is your name?”

Rygan grinned at her, “Rygan Ericson. A pleasure to meet you, my lady.”

Her cheeks went pink, “I’m Brianna Badeaux.”

“Brianna. The name suits you.”

She flushed even more, “Thank you. I think your name suits you as well.”

“May I ask why you live so far out in the bayou?”

Her shoulders stiffened at his words.

He held out his hand, “I do not ask to cause any harm. I am simply curious. I expected to die in these woods. Not be rescued by the most gorgeous woman I have ever seen.”

She looked down at her hands, wringing them together.

“You need not answer if I made you uncomfortable again. I seem to do that quite a lot.”

Shaking her head, she said, “It is all right. I do not talk about myself often. And when I do, it’s to my sister who knows all about me. Nor have I had a man call me gorgeous. It’s a lot to take in.”

He smiled, hoping to encourage her. She let out a small sigh, “We moved to the woods because our mother was shunned from the town. Run out of New Orleans because of,” she coughed delicately, “Her promiscuity.”

His eyebrows rose, and she said, “The men she slept with all professed their love to her. But the wives of those men weren’t so pleased. They chased her out of town and banned her from returning on the threat of death by hanging. They feared her and what she would do to them.”

“Why would they be afraid of a woman?”

She looked into his eyes, took a deep breath, and said, “Because she was a witch.”

He went stock still, knowing the superstitions about witches from living in New Orleans.

People didn't like witches. Were terrified of them and the power they held.

He heard about a woman who had been chased from town after she had let loose lightning on an unsuspecting crowd of innocent bystanders just loitering in the town square.

He had a feeling that the story wasn't accurate, though.

He didn't know any witches personally but knew that they weren't what the stories said, and if they were, they had good reason.

He looked over at Brianna, seeing her shoulders slump at his reaction.

He stood, wrapping the blanket around his hips, not wanting to scare her away with his nudity.

He just couldn't stand the thought of her being sad, wanting to comfort her.

He stepped toward her, and her head came up, "What are you doing? You shouldn't be out of bed."

She held a hand out flat as he walked closer, almost as if to stop him from getting closer to her.

He grabbed her hand, "I just want to make certain you are all right. I do not judge you or condemn you for who your mother is. Having a witch in the family isn't something to be ashamed of. No matter if others don't feel the same."

She blinked up at him, making him note the hint of blue swimming in the gray of her eyes.

"You really don't condemn me? Most men would run screaming from the house."

Rygan quirked his eyebrow at her, his lip lifting in a smirk.

"I am not like most men."

He reached up, gently cupping her face in one hand, holding her other and lifting it to his lips, kissing her knuckles.

She let out a small gasp, "No. I supposed you aren't."

He smiled down at her, and the front door opened, and another young woman bustled inside.

She was carrying a similar basket to the one Brianna had brought in earlier, but this one was filled with different leaves and roots.

She stopped short when she saw the two of them, “Oh. He’s alive.”

Rygan dropped his hand from Brianna’s cheek, taking a step back from her.

“Brielle. Um. Yes, he is alive.”

Rygan coughed, turning to Brianna’s sister.

“I am Rygan Ericson.”

The woman pursed her lips, “Brielle.”

She looked down at his bare chest, her lips pursing even more. “When we found you, you were naked. Do you realize that’s not at all proper?”

Rygan nodded, “I apologize. I don’t normally walk around in the nude. Circumstances were out of my control. I was trying not to die.”

Brielle’s eyebrow went up, “Well.”

Brianna rushed around him, “It’s all right Brielle. It’s fine.”

Rygan fought the urge to pull Brianna back against him and then gave in, pulling her back by her hips.

She let out a small squeak but didn’t push away from his hold.

He buried his head in the back of her hair, taking a deep breath of that apple cinnamon scent.

Brielle made an outraged noise, “Now, just a second, mister. You can’t just put your hands on my sister.”

Brianna shook her head, “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

Rygan glared over at Brielle, “She is in no danger from me. I would never harm a hair on her head.”

Brielle's eyebrows lifted, "Oh. Is that so?"

"I would never harm my mate."

Brianna went still in his arms, "Your what?"

Brielle stood up straight, "Your mate? What the hell does that mean?"

Rygan groaned, "It doesn't matter now. Just know, she is of no harm from me."

Brielle scoffed, "Our mother told us about men like you."

"Men like me?"

"Yes. Men like you. You are only after one thing. We saved your life, and you seem to believe you have a claim on the first girl you set eyes on. So, a brush with death means you feel the need to claim the first woman you, see?"

Brianna shoved away from him, "Is that true?"

Rygan growled, "Not in the least. I may have had a brush with death, but I assure you, if it had been your sister who walked in that door first, that I wouldn't feel for her that I do for you. You, Brianna, are my mate. Not your sister. I have one mate and only one."

Brianna looked at him, her gray eyes serious, "What does that mean?"

He walked over to her again, "It means you own me. Body, heart, mind, and soul. I'm yours. Only yours. As you are mine."

chapter
two

Brianna Badeaux

BRIANNA WOKE early to the sounds of birds singing in the trees.

Brielle was still asleep, tucked away in her bed, making Brianna smile.

Brielle would sleep for hours and hours if she could. She would always say that the moon called to her and her magic.

While the sun called to Brianna's. She left the bed quietly, dressing quickly to gather herbs for some tonics she wanted to brew today.

They were running low on some, and Brianna didn't want to worry when winter worsened.

They were so close to Christmas. Not that they celebrated or anything. Their mother refused as she said it was a pagan holiday.

Brianna knew that while they didn't celebrate, she used to wish they would.

When they were run out of town by an angry mob, it was close to Christmas time, and Brianna was crushed to leave everything behind.

She had been looking forward to celebrating the holiday with her mother and Brielle.

They didn't have much in their tiny home on the outskirts of town, but their mother had gotten them each a small present, and she and Brielle made something for their mother.

Unfortunately, it wasn't meant to be. The townspeople were tired of her mother and her endless stream of lovers coming forth and letting it be known that she had said endless lovers.

Their wives decided that having Bianca out of town would be the best.

They wanted her nowhere near any of the people in town. Not just because of her proloctivities with all the men in town, but because she used her magic on them all. More than once.

She could influence others and their acts, but only if she were one-on-one with them. She also could brew potions and cure ailments of any kind. Could see the future in certain instances and cause all sorts of mischief.

Women would come in the dead of night to see her, to have her put spells on the men they loved. To get them to stay faithful.

Though most had no idea at the time, the woman they sought to keep away from their men was the one they were seeking spells from.

Many men hadn't wanted to be with her, but Bianca made it her goal to have them under her spell.

She liked knowing she could make a living from the women in town because they were desperate to keep their husbands in their beds, not to have them with someone else.

Bianca relished their agony. Had no care that she was hurting people. She had the power and would cradle that power to her breast as if it were a tiny babe.

She told the girls that each new person she influenced or did spells for only made her feel much more powerful and that she was addicted to how good it made her feel.

Sleeping with someone was just a bonus.

She didn't care who she hurt if getting what she wanted from someone got her what she needed.

Brianna used to be in awe of her mother's powers. How she could do spells for those who came begging for them made

the girls long to learn their gifts. It seemed effortless to influence a man to do whatever Bianca wanted.

But the girls didn't inherit Bianca's gift of influencing anyone. They got different gifts, and the girls were a little scared to use their magic if anyone was around, preferring to keep it hidden.

One night, they were fast asleep when Brianna sat in bed, gasping for air.

Their bedroom was thick with smoke, and she rushed to the window to see men throwing lit torches at their house.

She watched horror as flames licked up the house and some men rushed inside.

She whirled around, wanting to cry to wake Brielle, but she was too late.

The men stomped up the stairs, and Brielle was dragged from her bed; when one of the men saw her standing by the window, a sinister look covered his face, and a rope was thrown over Brianna's neck, tightening so much that she almost blacked out from the lack of air.

The man pulled her toward him, causing her to stumble forward, tripping over her feet.

She fell to the floor, and the man snarled, lifting her back up with the rope wrapped around her neck.

She could feel the rough edges of the rope ripping into the skin, and she wanted to cry out but couldn't.

She couldn't breathe, let alone cry out.

She could feel herself growing faint, black spots dancing in front of her eyes from the lack of oxygen in her lungs.

She stumbled again, and the man shoved her away from him, causing her to hit the wall, right against the flames that had rushed up the wooden house.

She felt the heat of the fire on her back, wanting desperately to scream, but instead had spots dancing before her eyes.

The fire licked up the back of her legs to her back, eating away at her nightgown, burning her flesh, and causing pain to rip through her injured body.

She heard Brielle scream her name as if she were far away, and she reached for her sister, barely saved in time because Brielle got away from the man trying to hurt her and used her powers of manipulating the weather on the man holding Brianna's rope to make the man scream in pain.

She had used a small whirlwind to throw a fireball at the man, hitting him right in the face, and he fell back, hitting himself in the face to put out the flames.

He thrashed on the ground, and Brielle kicked him in the stomach, rushing over to Brianna and lifting the rope off her neck.

Brianna was coughing and crying, blood ran down her neck, and her back hurt. Brielle gently patted the flames out on her ruined nightgown, but the damage had been done.

Brianna's back and legs felt like they were on fire in some places. In others? It was as if she had no pain, but she knew from the look on Brielle's face that it wasn't pretty.

Brielle looked at the flames getting higher, the smoke overcoming both, and she pulled Brianna from the house, coughing as they went.

Brianna could barely move her legs, crying with every step she took. The pain was intense.

Together the girls ran from the house, screaming for their mother the best they could with their lungs hurting and coughing instead of screaming.

They stopped short when they saw that the mob of people had surrounded their mother, sobbing as someone slapped her, the people screaming for her death.

Brianna and Brielle held onto each other, their small fingers laced together tightly, their eyes wide with fear.

Brianna held back whimpers of pain, but barely. She hurt so badly, all over her small body, and she just wanted the pain

to stop.

Her nightgown barely hung onto her small frame in the front; the entire back melted away, and she felt so exposed.

She knew it wasn't fair that these people had gone to the extreme to hurt them all, and she hated them for it.

Bianca looked over at them, seeing Brianna's wounds, the blood dripping down her neck, the burns covering her back and legs.

Her eyes flashed purple with rage as she turned back to the crowd, something neither of the girls had seen before.

Bianca started chanting, and the girls could feel the magic rising in the air and knew their mother hadn't told them all they could know about her powers.

Bianca shut her eyes, her chanting growing louder, seeming to be pulling on the magic she buried deep inside her, magic the girls didn't even know she had.

Brianna saw lights flashing from her mother's fingertips, her hair standing on end as an unexpected storm rolled in faster than one should have. With massive forks of lightning flashing through the sky.

One of the forks streaked out of the sky, hitting the ground in front of the mob and their mother.

Women screamed, backing away from the burning hole in the ground, and some men looked on with wide, terrified eyes while others ran from the chaos as more lightning streaked from the sky to hit the ground between her mother and them.

One man seemed unafraid of the chaos, unafraid of the lightning that was constantly hitting the ground and causing the people to back away further from her mother.

He seemed determined to do what he came to do and rushed toward Bianca, screaming as he did.

She turned toward him, and the girls watched in horror as he was hit with a lightning bolt, his body looking as if he was lit from the inside, so massive was the fork of lightning he was hit with.

He fell back on the ground, his body smoking, streaks of red showing on the veins in his arms and legs. He wasn't breathing.

The other men saw this, horror filling all their features, and then, the horror was replaced with rage.

One man yelled, "Leave now witch, and you will be spared. Stay, and your life and the life of your daughters will be forfeit by hanging."

Bianca glared, lightning still forking through the sky, and one man raised a gun, shooting at the girls, making them both scream in fear.

Bianca finally shook her head, her eyes narrowed.

She walked backward toward the girls, holding her hands out.

"If we leave, I expect to be left alone. If any of you come after us, I will be back to finish what I started."

No one said a word, and Bianca grabbed the girls, looking toward their home, slowly crumbling in on itself, the heat of the fire reaching them.

She turned to the girls, "Come. This town is no longer safe for us."

Then they walked away. Brianna tried not to cry in pain with each step she took.

Bianca scooped her in her arms, trying to be mindful of the burns covering Brianna's almost nude form.

No one followed them, but Brianna looked toward the house they grew up in, watching as their house was burnt to ash.

She felt the tears streaming from her cheeks, her body hurting almost as much as her heart.

She hated their life as they knew it would never be the same again.

Their mother found a small unoccupied bungalow-type home, and she laid Brianna on her stomach.

“We need to take care of this. If we don’t, you will be scarred for life. It may already be too late.”

Brianna nodded, the pain overwhelming her, and she shut her eyes, letting sleep take over as her mother rushed about, trying to heal the wounds that were too deep to be healed.

After a few days of her mother doing all she could to heal the deep burns that covered her back and legs, they were discovered.

Brielle helped her run the best she could, and no one followed them this time.

The three of them pushed on, going deep into the bayou, where the only things that lived there were the animals.

They had no idea how to survive in the wilderness, especially with Brianna’s injuries.

They healed a little, but not enough to have her sleep on the ground.

They had always relied on the fact that they lived where they could be comfortable and happy.

Being abruptly torn from their good life wasn’t even the hardest part of their life.

Turned out that having to figure out how to live in the deepest part of the bayou was.

After the first week of sleeping on the ground, trying to keep Brianna’s wounds from becoming infected, getting bitten by endless mosquitoes, and Brielle almost getting bitten by a poisonous snake, their mother had had enough.

She screamed at them endlessly, her anger always coming to the surface, and Brianna soon realized her mother wasn’t the good mother she said she was.

The two girls had to figure out life in the deep bayou for themselves. Brielle took over Brianna’s care and tried to find a suitable place to start building them a home.

Both the girls knew that living in nature would kill them in the end. They needed shelter.

Poisonous snakes hid in deep underbrush or dry leaves that sat innocently on the ground.

There were also spiders galore, mosquitoes, and massive alligators that wouldn't hesitate to eat you.

The animals ruled the bayou, and the humans were just there, living in their domain.

Bianca wasn't prepared for how hard life would be when they ran out of town.

She had no idea how to live in the wilderness, build shelter, or find food.

After the first hard week, the girls relied on their powers to help get them through the hardest part of the winter.

Brianna could influence nature. When she was a little stronger, she figured out how to manipulate the branches of a few trees that grew close together.

She used up most of her energy, getting the branches to bend and twist how she wanted them to, and when it was all done, they had a nice home off the ground, the trees now made into a wonderful shelter.

The plants would bend to her whim when she needed them to, and she also knew which plants could be used to heal, which Brielle would use to put on Brianna's back and legs.

Brianna also told her which could feed you or poison you.

Brielle could influence the weather. She didn't have a large reach with her powers, but she was trying and using them when it mattered.

Bianca encouraged them to get used to using their powers. She told the girls it would save them one day. Like she had with them.

She never wanted them to rely on anyone, not even her, for their safety.

They would learn to embrace their magic, letting it fully envelop them, and never let anyone again harm them because of their strength.

Brianna struggled with it. She didn't want to use her powers to harm anyone. She didn't want to use her powers to harm anyone. So badly she struggled to walk. The burns on her legs ruined the skin where she bent her knee.

At first, it was hard. But she learned to walk and appreciate that no one gawked at her scars and awkward gait.

Unlike her mother, Brianna grew content with her life in the bayou. There were no more rules or expectations of how they were supposed to act and be.

She loved that they could finally just be themselves.

Brielle, too, loved the simplicity of their life.

But their mother struggled more than anyone else.

She hated being trapped in the bayou, unable to use her powers how she used to, learning that living with her two young daughters alone, with no men to entertain her and no nanny to keep an eye on the girls, and having a daughter who was now lame, was something she wasn't prepared for.

By the end of the first year of living in the bayou, Bianca started to venture back into the world. Telling the girls she had to keep her powers strong for their good.

Going away for long stretches over the first few months, eventually not returning.

By then, everyone in town had shunned them if they came to town. Hated them.

Brielle became resentful of the entire situation. She hated every human that lived in the town and their mother.

Brianna wished she could change Brielle's mind. She knew that there had to be someone from town that didn't hate them, but so far, she hadn't found anything to support her claim.

They ignored her or were rude to her if she came to town, so she stopped long ago. It was hard to walk that far anyway, and people often stared at her, making her uncomfortable.

Though in her heart, she still wanted to know that there was the best in people.

Over the years, she learned that finding good people was simply a fairy tale. Finding someone to love her was the same.

Men gawked at her when she used to come into town, now that she had the scars around her neck and the limp of not being able to fully extend her legs like she used to.

She didn't like the stares people gave her. They were the ones to harm her in the first place, but they looked at her as if she would rub her lameness on them.

She learned then and there that the people in New Orleans weren't worth her time.

She and Brielle only needed each other. Though giving up on her dreams of finding love still hurt, Brianna knew it was for the best. She knew no one would accept her flaws.

She heard the children's whispers when they came to town, how mothers pushed them behind their skirts to save their children from the 'witches' of the bayou.

She knew they were the evil people whispered about, but she hated that they believed it.

But the damage had been done when Bianca used her powers to save them all.

Brianna finally accepted it was time to let everything go. To fully embrace living in the bayou and love it.

One day, she and Brielle walked slowly through the bayou when they heard a noise.

A groan sounded from a thick brush a few yards ahead of them.

Brianna looked at Brielle, whose eyes were wide with fear.

"It could be an alligator," Brielle said, and Brianna shook her head, "We know what alligators sound like. That was human."

Brielle nodded slowly, grabbing Brianna's hand, lacing their fingers together, and walking toward the sound.

They both gasped when they saw a man lying in the bushes covered in blood.

He had claw marks on his chest, his neck had been ripped open, and blood dripped from the wound to the ground below him.

The leaves were saturated with it. His hair was in his eyes, and he was naked.

Brielle looked up at the sky as soon as she saw he wore no pants, "I don't need to see that."

Brianna shrugged her shawl off her shoulders and threw it over his nakedness.

His chest rose and fell slowly, and Brianna breathed a breath of relief.

She ripped some of her underskirts off, holding them to his neck, making him groan quietly.

She didn't like hurting him, yet that thought was strange. She didn't know this man.

But she felt drawn to him. It scared her a little. She stayed as far from men as she could for a few reasons.

One, she didn't want to be like her mother. Refused to sleep with a man just because she could because it made her feel powerful. And two, she never felt drawn to anyone. No one made her blood sing.

Her mother used to say that men could make her blood sing, making her want to sleep with them more.

She said she would feel a pull to the men, no matter if they were taken or not.

Brianna didn't like that. Refused to think like her mother. Brielle was the same.

But here? With this man in front of her? Her blood was heating while she looked at his handsome face.

Even covered in blood, barely breathing and naked as the day he was born, she was drawn to him.

Brushing the hair out of his eyes, she gently ran a finger down his slightly crooked nose.

He was so beautiful to her with his dark hair and the black scruff covering his hard jaw.

She cupped his face, studying him for a second before she heard Brielle say, “What are you doing?”

Brianna dropped her hand from his face, “I don’t know.”

She looked over at Brielle, seeing her sister’s eyes wide with shock.

“We need to bring him home. He could be killed out here.”

Brielle shook her head, “He is half-dead as it is.”

“We aren’t leaving him out here to die. When did you get so callous?”

Brielle huffed, “We can’t take care of him.”

Brianna stood, putting her hands on her hips, “Yes, we can. I know all the healing plants. You know I know. We must help him.”

Brielle sighed, “Fine. You get the heavy part, though. And I don’t want to see more of him than I must see.”

Brianna knew Brielle would push her hard to walk better and accepted it. She appreciated that her sister helped her try.

She wrapped her shawl securely around his hips, then looking at Brielle, she wrapped her arms under his shoulders, and they lifted together.

He was heavy. Practically dead weight, and Brianna grunted as they lifted him. Her legs started hurting when she lifted him, but she needed to endure the pain. It was the only way to help her legs not stiffen up.

They walked him to the house with careful steps, setting him down a few times as he was heavy.

They finally got to the house, putting him on Brianna’s bed.

Brielle took a step back, breathing hard. “He was so heavy.”

Brianna sat next to him, trying to suck in lungfuls of air, her legs cramping from lifting such a big man and carrying him the entire way. “He is.”

“We need to take care of his wounds.”

Brianna nodded, rubbing her leg for a moment, then slowly getting up and walking to the cupboard where she had medicants made and ready for any ailment.

She searched through a few, pulling out what she wanted and grabbing a swatch of clean linens as she walked by.

Brielle was over by their small fireplace, “I figured you would need some hot water.”

Brianna smiled at her sister, “Thank you.”

Even with Brielle’s reservations about the man currently asleep in Brianna’s bed, she still helped.

Together, they cleaned the man’s deep wounds and bandaged his chest and neck.

Brianna coaxed him to sip a few drops of medicine, and then they left him to sleep.

They walked outside, and Brianna rubbed at her aching legs, massaging some oil into the skin to help ease the ache.

Brielle walked away from their small cabin, wrapping her arms around herself.

Brianna felt confusion wash over her when Brielle turned back her way, her face filled with anguish.

Brianna rushed over to Brielle, “What is wrong?”

Brielle took a deep breath, “I just have a feeling about him. And you. Nothing is going to be the same now that he is here.”

Brianna went stock still, “What? What are you talking about?”

She knew Brielle sometimes had revelations about certain situations, though they were rare and often came out of nowhere. When they did come, she was always right, so Brianna knew that she had to heed her sister’s words.

Brielle let out a small sob, “He is the catalyst. His presence in our life is going to change it forever. I see it clear as day. Our lives will never be the same now.”

Brianna hugged her sister tighter, “How so? How will an unconscious man change our lives?”

Brielle shook her head, “I’m not entirely certain, but I know that with how you looked at and touched him, he is someone to you. Someone important. And that is the key.”

Brianna sucked in a breath, “I don’t know what to say to that.”

“I don’t want to lose you. You are the only family I have left. And if you fall in love with this man, then I will be alone.”

Brianna shook her head, “I won’t abandon you. You are my sister. That man in there is a stranger. I won’t abandon you for a man I have never talked to. You know me better than that.”

Brielle nodded, “I know, but I see it. See your connection with him. It’s soul deep.”

Brianna gasped, “He is my soulmate?”

Brielle nodded again, “He is, but it’s deeper than that. I can’t read it fully.”

Brianna bit her lip, looked over her shoulder at the house, then took a deep breath, saying, “We need to gather some food. I think we need a break from this.”

Brielle went back into the house, grabbing the baskets they took to gather their herbs and berries, and they walked into the woods together.

Brianna didn’t venture far from the house, worried that the man could die.

Brielle just rolled her eyes, “I told you that life would never be the same. Go. Find out if he lives.”

When she returned to the cottage, the man was sitting in bed, and when his eyes met hers, Brianna knew that Brielle

was right. Life would never be the same.

chapter
three

Rygan

HE KNEW he scared the girls, knew he was coming on too strong with his mate, but he couldn't help it.

He went his entire life without her, waited for years to find her, and now here she was.

She smelled like the blankets he had had on him earlier, but stronger, and he wanted to rub himself all over her, not only to get her scent on him but to get *his* scent on her.

He wanted every male in the area to know she was his woman. Only his.

When she told him a little bit of her story and how she had run out of town because of her mother, his heart broke for her.

He, too, hated the people of New Orleans, living right on the outskirts of town so that his clan had land to roam and no one to bother them.

Whenever he or his beta, Torin, went to town, the women tried to get their attention.

It bothered him from the first time to now, as he knew none of the women was his mate. Some women just didn't know what the word, no, meant.

Torin, too, was bothered by the women. They were tall, handsome, and respectful to everyone, but that didn't give the women leave to bother them as they did.

Rygan knew the men hated them. With more men than women in New Orleans, they wanted to stake their territory.

Rygan let them have it. He didn't get angry when the men peacocked around, trying to get the women's attention. He wanted the girls to leave him in peace.

So far, he was still waiting for something to work. But it would now.

Now that he had the woman meant to be at his side, he would finally be at peace.

He lifted a brow as Brianna rushed away, staggering slightly, then catching herself, hurrying to Brielle's side.

"You cannot just say such things to a woman. I'm not yours and you are not mine. You make no sense sir."

He crossed his arms, "You told me things about your family that you wouldn't normally tell anyone, correct?"

She nodded, her brows drawn together in confusion. "Then let me tell you something about me. I know in the depths of my soul that you are meant to be mine. No doubts. No hesitation. You are mine, as I am yours. And I know this because," he took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, "I am a shifter. A mountain lion shifter to be exact. And you are my mate."

Both the girl's jaws dropped open, then Brielle shook her head, "Shifters aren't real."

He raised an eyebrow at that, "They are very much real. All kinds of shifters live in this world. Just as much as humans do. Or witches."

Brianna looked down at her hands, and Brielle nudged her in the side with her elbow, "You told him that we were witches?"

Brianna's eyes went wide, "No. That mother was a witch."

Brielle shut her eyes, "Perfect. Well, that doesn't mean we believe you and that you are a shifter."

Rygan let his mountain lion come forward just enough that his canines grew, his eyes flashed gold and his body expanded.

Both the girls went stock still. Brianna's eyes were wider than before.

“Oh, my word.”

Rygan barely bit back his smile, but he managed it. “Do you believe me now?”

They both nodded at him, and he grinned, “Good. Since you didn't believe shifters were real, I'm guessing you don't know much about them?”

They both shook their heads, and Rygan grinned a little wider, “Shifters are special. For instance, as a shifter, my animal and I know that we have one woman in the world that is meant to be ours and ours alone. It's you, Brianna.”

Brianna shook her head, but Brielle pursed her lips again, “How are you so certain?”

Rygan tapped his nose, “Her scent was all it took for me to know at first. And then I knew when we locked eyes with one another.”

Brianna was biting her bottom lip, “But, why me?”

Rygan shrugged, “I don't know why you were chosen for me, and I wouldn't change it. I'm ecstatic that you are mine. That I finally found you.”

She looked down at her hands, wringing them together, “But does it bother you that I limp and have scars?”

He shook his head before she even finished speaking, “As I said before, you are the most gorgeous woman I have ever laid eyes on.”

“Oh.”

He wanted to cross over to her but stayed put, leaning up against the wall, needing to hold onto something to stay in place.

“I know this seems overwhelming, but everything I'm saying is true.”

She looked over at her sister, who was studying him.

Finally, Brielle locked eyes with Brianna, “I told you that it wouldn’t be the same.”

Brianna bit her lip, and Brielle looked over at him, “If you hurt her, I will hurt you. We haven’t trusted anyone or let anyone into our small circle. Brianna doesn’t need someone to get her hopes up, but she has been through too much.

Rygan nodded slowly, “I may not know your entire story of why you live so far out in the bayou and why the people are scared of the witches that live here, but I can tell you this with an absolute certainty,” he took a deep breath, then said, “I would never hurt her. She is my world now. I will do anything to keep her safe from harm.”

Both the girls looked at each other with wide eyes, “You would do that for me?”

Rygan nodded, “I would do anything for you.”

Brielle nudged Brianna, “I think he is serious.”

Rygan bit back his smile, “I am. A shifter searches for their mate from the moment they are of age. I have searched for thirteen years for you.”

“You have?”

“I have. I thought I was meant to be alone. Thought I was content with my life. With my life as it was. Until I smelled the most amazing scent of my life, and you walked in the door. I found my purpose. It’s to keep you safe, happy and to let you know you are loved.”

Brianna’s eyes filled with tears, “I never thought that there was someone out there for me.”

Rygan could stand it no longer, walking over to her, cupping her face, and making her look up at him.

“I was always searching. I just didn’t look as good as I could because I’m the Alpha and trying to keep the people that followed me here, safe. But I have you now. With you by my side, we can keep them safe together.”

“You wish for me to meet your people?”

He nodded, his eyes searching her storm-gray ones. “You are my queen now. *Their* queen. Of course, I want you to meet them. They will love you.”

“How do you know? Everyone in New Orleans hates me. Hates my sister for who our mother was. I don’t know if I can go back there and have people accept me. They will shun you. Shun your people. I won’t do that to you. To them.”

Rygan knew his face softened, “You don’t even know them and are willing to sacrifice your happiness for them. That’s how I know you are going to make a great queen.”

Brianna looked up at him, “I’m not going to make a great queen. I’m scarred. Broken.”

He leaned down, putting his forehead to hers, shutting his eyes for a second, “If you are broken, then I will fix you. But you don’t need fixing. You are perfect just as you are. I bear scars too. You saw them, helped to heal what you could, but sweetheart, I’m a shifter. Scars are part of our life.”

He stepped back, unwrapping the bandages from his chest, letting them fall to the ground.

His new scars were on full display, the claw marks on his chest from the vampires who attacked his clan.

He picked up Brianna’s hand, putting it on his chest.

“See? Scars are part of our way of life. I have many more. Your scars are part of you. They made you who you are.”

He could feel Brianna’s fingers tracing the scars. They were still sensitive, so her fingers on his skin caused goosebumps.

He barely held back a shiver.

“I just don’t want your people to resent me. For being with you. Won’t the women be angry? I’m sure you have some waiting for you at home.”

Rygan chuckled, “Shifters don’t touch women that aren’t their mate. Same for women. We don’t feel attraction to anyone that isn’t our mate.”

“Really?”

He cupped her face again, running his thumb over her cheek, “Really.”

She shut her eyes for a second, then opened them, “I’m scared.”

Rygan put his forehead to hers once more, “I will keep you safe.”

He heard a throat clear, and he lifted his head to look over at Brielle.

She had her arms crossed and her eyebrows lifted.

“You are intense. Aren’t you?”

He smiled, pulling Brianna into his arms, her hands braced on his chest.

Brianna looked over at Brielle, and Rygan could feel the raised ridges of her scars through her thin shirt.

He hated that she had them.

Brianna went stiff in his arms, and he put his finger under her chin, “Do not. You were meant to be right here.”

She leaned into his arms, relaxing a bit. “I have never been this close to a man before.”

He grinned down at her, “For that I’m grateful.”

Brielle snorted, “Men don’t generally want to come around here.”

Rygan looked down at Brianna, “I apologize for the hard life you have led.”

She shrugged softly, “It’s our burden to bear.”

“Not any longer. Let me help ease it.”

She looked as if she wanted to argue, but he gently leaned down and kissed her full lips.

She let out a gasp, and so did her sister.

Rygan stood straight, backing away from Brianna slightly.

“I need to get back soon.”

Brianna bit her lip, “Are you certain you are healed enough? You lost a lot of blood.”

Rygan nodded, “I’m fine. But my people may not be.”

“Why? Is it the reason you were hurt?”

Rygan nodded again, “There is a vampire coven that is trying to take over my hard-won territory. We went to war the other day and as I was fighting with three men, a vampire came up behind me and tried to rip my throat out after drinking my blood.”

Brianna held a hand to her mouth, and Brielle’s eyebrows raised, “Heavens.”

Rygan looked down at the floor, “I watched as one of my men were slaughtered in front of me. He was just ten and seven years of age. I started fighting the men who killed him when I was attacked from behind. That vampire had no honor. To attack a man from behind. I almost died then. I thought I was going to. But you saved me.”

Brianna’s eyes filled with tears, “I’m sorry Rygan. That you are dealing with that.”

Rygan nodded, “I am too. Would you come with me? I need to see if my beta lives and if we still have a home to go back to?”

Brianna looked at Brielle, who nodded, “We will go with you.”

Rygan let out a breath of relief, but Brielle said, “You may need clothes if you are to go back to people.”

Rygan looked down at his lower half, which was still covered with the blanket.

He looked back up at the girls, “You are correct. But all my clothes are at my home.”

Brielle walked toward her part of the house and came out with a pair of trousers and a shirt.

“I don’t know if these would fit you, but it’s better than being nude.”

Rygan smirked, taking the clothes from Brielle.

He went to drop the blanket, and the girls both squeaked, turning around to give him their backs.

He laughed, “I apologize. We are used to being nude around each other.”

Brianna’s back straightened, “Not around other women?”

He grinned so wide his cheeks hurt, “No. Not around women.”

“Good.”

Rygan dropped the blanket with reluctance, but he knew that he could smell his mate when he wanted, so it dropped to the floor, and he pulled the pants up his legs.

They were tight around his thighs but buttoned up, so that was what mattered.

The shirt, on the other hand, was tight all over. The buttons barely held, but it would work for now.

He cleared his throat, “You may turn around now, I’m decent.”

The girls did, but Brielle rolled her eyes, “Barely.”

He smiled, liking his mate’s sister.

Brianna’s eyes were skating over his clothed form with a critical eye.

He held his arms out, the shirt slightly protesting the movement by causing the seams to try to rip.

Brianna smiled softly, “Where did you get the clothes Brielle?”

Brielle looked down, “I found them in mother’s old room.”

Rygan looked down at his clothes, and Brianna shook her head, “Great. Well, I guess we should go?”

Rygan nodded, “Are you certain you are all right with this?”

Brianna took a deep breath, then lifted her chin, “I haven’t hidden out here before. I won’t start now.”

Rygan knew his mate was strong, and he loved her for it.

She went over to her part of the house and grabbed a shawl, wrapping it around her shoulders.

“I’m ready.”

Rygan held out his arm, which she took. Brielle waved him away, and they walked through the woods, the girls showing him the way.

When they got to the outskirts of town, Rygan turned toward his home.

They walked up the long drive, and when they got to the main house, Rygan breathed out in relief.

It still stood.

The door opened, and a stranger walked out with a knife gripped in his hand. “Something I can do for you?”

Rygan went stiff, “Where are my people?”

The man leaned forward on the railing, twirling the knife and grinning at them.

“They could be here. Or they could be nowhere.”

Rygan felt his body grow, his mountain lion rushing to the surface, the shirt starting to rip apart at the seams.

His canines elongated, “Where are they?”

The man stood up straight, flashing canines of his own, “What do they have to do with you? You weren’t here for the battle.”

Rygan growled, a warning to the man, “I was here. One of your men fought dishonestly and tried to rip my throat out from behind.”

The man lifted an eyebrow, “Didn’t you know? Vampires don’t give a shit if they fight fair.”

Rygan leaned his body forward, “I noticed.”

The man laughed, “You want to start another war? We already kicked the rest of your people off your own turf. Thanks for the house. It suits us.”

Rygan stepped forward, but Brianna held his arm, “It’s what he wants. Don’t give it to him.”

Rygan looked over at her, then back at the man on the porch, “This is far from over.”

The man waved them off, “I’m shaking in my boots.”

Rygan growled louder, and the front door opened again, and a different man stepped out, his hair dark, covering his forehead.

He had light-colored eyes and was cleaning his hands with a cloth when he stepped out.

“Alaric. Go inside. Now.”

The vampire hissed at him, and the other guy’s eyes flashed, “I said get inside, now!”

The other man slinked inside the house, and Rygan folded his arms, and the other guy said, “What can I do for you?”

“I want to know why you are living in my house.”

The man’s eyebrows rose, “Rygan Ericson I take it.”

“That’s me. And you are?”

The man let out a breath, “Thurston Alaire. You went missing in the battle. and your people, more specifically, your beta didn’t want to lose anyone else. So, he surrendered.”

Rygan felt the surprise cover his face, “Torin surrendered?”

The man nodded, “Your people thought they lost too much. What with your disappearance and the loss of two young men, they didn’t want to fight any longer.”

Rygan shut his eyes in pain, “Someone else died?”

Thurston nodded, “I apologize for this.”

Rygan shook his head, “We were just trying to live in peace. But you. Your people wanted what wasn’t yours. You decided to take it instead. You killed an innocent boy. All because of your greed. There is plenty of land around New Orleans, but you just had to come to take this land. Land that we have fought for, died for.”

Thurston held his hands up, “I tried to stop him, but he wouldn’t be stopped.”

Rygan leaned forward once more, but the other man went stock still when Brianna pulled on Rygan’s arm, causing him to turn and show the girls that he had put his body in front of.

Rygan looked over his shoulder at the girls, seeing Brielle’s eyes wide with shock.

Thurston started walking down the stairs toward them, and Rygan turned back toward him, growling so loud that Brianna squeaked, making him stop.

Thurston held up his hands again, “I mean no harm. I just need a closer look.”

Rygan stepped forward, “You won’t get one.”

Brielle stepped up beside him, “It’s all right. There is something about him that calls to me.”

Brianna gasped, and Rygan’s jaw dropped open in shock.

“Is she your mate?”

The man nodded, “She is.”

Brielle put her hands on her hips, glaring up at the man, “You stole his land?”

The man shook his head, “My leader did. I wasn’t part of the battle. I refused. I only want peace.”

Rygan didn’t recall the man at the battle, but it was so hectic that he must not have seen him.

Although the man hadn’t lied so far, Rygan was inclined to believe him.

“Why do you follow a man like that then?”

Thurston hung his head, “Vampires alone in the world don’t get very far. I don’t like the way he runs things, but I choose life and security.”

Brielle shook her head, “That doesn’t make it right.”

She turned her back to him, and Thurston stepped off the porch, “Mate, please.”

Rygan growled again, “Do not take another step towards my mate’s sister. She doesn’t want you.”

Thurston put his hand to his heart, dropping to his knees, “What can I do to make this right?”

Rygan looked over at him and then at Brielle.

“Help me. Help my people get their land back. The land I rightfully own.”

Thurston looked over at the house, then stood. “Done.”

Rygan’s eyebrow rose, “Really?”

Thurston nodded his head, “Anything for my mate. If you are with her, and your mate is her sister, then that makes us family. I will do anything for my family. Even above my coven.”

Brielle turned back toward him, “You would?”

Thurston nodded, “I would do anything for you.”

Brielle swallowed hard, “I wasn’t expecting either of you.”

Brianna stepped toward her sister, “This is good, right?”

Brielle nodded, looking back at Thurston. “It is.”

Thurston grinned, “Then let’s begin. I will show you where your people have taken refuge.”

Rygan nodded, “Thank you.”

Thurston walked over to Brielle, towering over her.

“Come mate. We have a mission.”

“Won’t your coven wonder where you went?”

Thurston shrugged, “They are no longer my concern.”

Rygan knew that Thurston meant what he said.

chapter
four

Brianna

WALKING with her arm linked with Rygan's was wonderful.

She hadn't felt the pain in her legs and knew it had to do with him.

When they got to the house he used to live in, and she saw his body grow and heard his growls of anger pour out of him, she knew that he was what he said.

A shifter. A man able to turn into a mountain lion.

When he growled, she squeaked, but not in fear.

His growl had done things to her body. Things she hadn't been prepared for.

She didn't have time to contemplate them either because they were moving away from the beautiful home in the woods, away from New Orleans.

She was in awe of it when they had first walked up. It was a large white house with white columns that led to the second story.

The porch was raised and surrounded the entire house, a white banister curving around it.

There were seats on the porch and even a rocking chair that she longed to sit in.

Knowing that Rygan had lived here and had gone to war to protect it, she understood why.

She hated that his people had been attacked. They had built a life here, only to have it ripped from them.

Much like she had as well.

She connected with Rygan more just from that alone.

When the man, Thurston, decided to come with them to find Rygan's people, she knew he was a good man.

It was hard to believe that man was a vampire. One that lived off the blood and pain of others.

He didn't seem to be the sort.

She was so confused with the entire situation. She knew there was more in the world.

She had powers, as did Brielle and their mother, but she hadn't realized there were other species.

She should have known better. Had heard enough stories that she had never believed.

Always thought they were just fairytales. But now she knew the truth.

Most stories always had a touch of the truth in them. She knew that.

Rygan looked down at her, "Are your legs all right? Are you weary?"

She shook her head, her legs not paining her in the least.

She knew they would later, but she was all right now.

His face softened, and he cupped her cheek, "My strong mate."

Pressing his lips to hers, he turned to Thurston, "Show us the way."

Thurston gestured them forward, and they turned back the way they had come.

Rygan held his arm out to her again, making her smile. He looked down at her, his face serious.

"You are beautiful. Do you know that?"

She bit her lip, shaking her head. "You are. Never in my life have I seen a woman more beautiful than you."

Brianna fought to keep eye contact with him, her cheeks warm.

“You have to say that because I’m your mate. Right?”

Rygan shook his head, “I say it because it’s the truth. You have a glow about you Brianna. Kindness radiates from you, and I was drawn to that immediately. Who else would have saved a dying man they found in the woods?”

Brianna looked away, and Rygan gently turned her face back to look at him, “I mean what I say. I will never lie to you.”

She searched his golden eyes, a shade she hadn’t seen before.

“Where did you come from?”

He chuckled softly, “Right here sweetheart.”

She sobered, “I’m sorry about your people. About the men you lost.”

Rygan shut his eyes in pain for a second, then opened them.

“They weren’t men. Just boys. Boys that were too young to have to defend their home from men like the ones who stole our home.”

Thurston heard this and turned, “I am sorry. I wanted no part of that. At all.”

Rygan nodded, “I know. I believe you.”

Thurston held out his hand, “I may not be in charge, but I can swear from here on out that I will do all I can to get your home back and that there will be peace between us.”

Rygan shook Thurston’s hand, “I accept.”

Brianna smiled, glad that they could work out their differences.

They walked back the way they came, but before they made it to the end of the lane, Thurston walked off the path, toward the woods.

Brianna stumbled a bit, but Rygan pulled her close to his side, “Are you all right?”

She nodded, “Just stumbled a bit. It happens sometimes.”

Rygan looked down at her, “I don’t like that.”

She smiled, “Do not fuss. It happens. I’m fine. I promise.”

He finally nodded, “If you need me to carry you, I will.”

She smiled, shaking her head, “I will be fine. I’m used to it.”

He growled softly, “I still don’t like it.”

She touched his face softly, “If I need help, I will ask. I promise.”

He leaned into her palm, nuzzling the skin before gently biting her thumb and making her gasp.

With a soft kiss to her palm, he pulled her closer to his side and followed behind Thurston.

Brielle was walking beside the other man, her body leaning towards him, making Brianna smile.

It was as if they were drawn to one another and couldn’t be stopped.

Brianna felt the same about Rygan. She had never wanted to be close to a man before, and now she couldn’t get enough of his hands on her.

Rygan seemed to be the same. Always having to touch her. She didn’t hate it.

They walked for a few minutes until they were deep in the woods, and there was hardly any light from the sun streaming to the ground.

Rygan didn’t seem to have any issues with the darkness, nor did Thurston.

After she stumbled once, Rygan had her in his arms, making her bite back a laugh.

She loved that he worried about her.

Even though he had no reason. She was fine, just couldn't see the branches on the ground.

She settled against his chest, fighting the urge to put her head on his shoulder.

He tightened his hold on her, and she smiled, "If we weren't this deep in the woods trying to find your people, I would think you planned this."

Rygan laughed, "If there is any excuse to hold my mate close, I will gladly take it."

She smiled wider but sobered when she saw a few fires in the trees.

Rygan looked ahead and let out a small breath of relief.

He walked toward the fires, and she said, "Should you put me down? You need to face them without me as an added burden."

He shook his head, "They need to know I found you."

She touched his face once more, "I know. But they need to see you whole. I can be introduced later."

Rygan seemed to fight it but then nodded. "Stay with your sister. I need to speak with them."

"I will be right here. All right?"

He nodded again, putting his head to hers. Then he quickly pressed his lips to hers and stepped back from her.

He walked toward the campfire, with the girls and Thurston slowly trailing him.

Brianna went still when she heard a growl from above them, looking up into the trees, searching for the source.

She saw a set of eyes flash above her and grabbed Brielle's wrist, "Stop. We are being watched."

Rygan heard the growl, turning back to them, his body growing as he seemed to prepare to shift.

A massive mountain lion appeared in their line of vision from the tree, jumping down from the branch and circling

them.

Rygan growled, "Leave them be Torin."

The mountain lion looked over, his eyes locking with Rygan's, and the lion shook, his body seeming to shrink into itself until it ripped into a man.

He was naked, which caused Brianna to look away, understanding why Rygan had been when they came across him.

Torin stood straight, "Alpha. You are back."

Rygan walked back toward them, "I am."

Torin looked at the ground, "We thought you perished in the battle. The last I saw of you; you were stumbling in the brush trying to stem the bleeding in your neck."

Rygan lifted his chin, "I shifted, but I lost too much blood to be able to keep fighting."

Torin nodded, dropping to his knees, "We failed you."

Rygan shook his head, "I failed you. All of you. I was supposed to be your king and I let all of you down when I left the battle to try to heal."

Torin looked up at him, shock covering his face, "You would have died had you not. I tried to follow you, to see if you lived, but the vampires overpowered all of us. We lost Troy after you disappeared. But it wasn't your fault. It was the vampire's fault."

Brianna looked over at Thurston, seeing the pain that filled his features.

Rygan held his hand out to Torin, "You did what you could do. Our fighters aren't as good as the vampires. But that doesn't mean we failed."

Torin studied him, "We lost our home to them."

"I know. We can get it back. If we really want to. We have help."

Torin looked over, seeing Thurston standing there. He took a deep breath, then let out a growl, “He is going to lead his coven here! We will have to run again.”

Rygan shook his head, “He led me to you. Between the two of us, we have peace.”

Torin snorted with derision. “I don’t believe him.”

Rygan put his hand on Torin’s shoulder, “I do. As Alpha, I believe the word of this man. Do I trust his coven? No. Will I? No. But this man left the safety of his coven to show me where you ran to. Knowing full well that he could be killed for it. His coven could come after him for helping me. I don’t doubt they will.”

Torin looked over at Thurston again, and Thurston held his hands, palms up.

“I know my coven hurt your clan. I refused to be part of that. I didn’t participate in the battle, much to my leader’s anger. I refused to steal land that doesn’t belong to us, simply because my leader was too lazy to find more that we could live on. He takes what doesn’t belong to him because he feels he has the right. I don’t agree with his choice. Not now, not ever. I stay with him because as a vampire alone, we are targeted by other species and humans. I only wanted to stay safe. To stay alive. I knew the moment he came after you that I was going to leave that coven. I would rather face the hordes of humans that could come after me than live with him any longer.”

Brianna could feel the truth of his words, as she knew Brielle did.

Torin studied him for a moment longer, then looked back at Rygan.

“I hate that I believe him.”

Rygan smiled, “I know, but he isn’t our enemy. He is willing to help us get our home back.”

Torin slowly nodded, “All right. Come, I know everyone has been worried about you.”

Rygan shook his head, "Before we go, you need to meet someone."

Torin looked over at the girls, "Them? They don't smell like shifters."

Rygan laughed, "They don't. But this is my mate."

He walked to Brianna's side, holding his hand out to her, which she took gladly.

He kissed her knuckles, and Torin's jaw dropped open in shock.

"My lady," he said and dropped to one knee, bowing his head.

She shook her head, "Oh. No. You may stand."

Torin looked at her, his blonde hair falling into his eyes, "My lady?"

"I may be mated to Rygan, but I don't need you to kneel for me."

Rygan gestured for him to stand as well, and Torin slowly stood. "All of our clan will rejoice. We have wished for our Alpha and King to find his Queen."

She smiled, "That's sweet of you to say."

Torin smiled, showing a dimple on his right cheek, "They will all be overjoyed. And this is your sister I take it?"

Brianna nodded, "Brielle. She is mated to Thurston."

Torin's eyes went wide, "I understand more now."

Rygan smiled, "I'm glad."

Torin nodded, "Come."

He led them deeper into the woods, past the few fires, which seemed to be decoys, and to the far trees.

"You can all come out of hiding. Our Alpha has returned!"

At first, no one moved, but then people slowly melted out of the trees, some in mountain lion form, others not.

Brianna looked around in awe at all the people that came out of the trees.

There were men of all ages, women, and even a handful of children.

Rygan had found all of them, brought them together, and given them safety.

Until the vampire in charge of Thurston's coven had ruined it.

It angered her.

Once again, it reminded her too much about their own life and how they were run out of their home.

It was close to Christmas again, and these people were only living their life, minding their own business, when someone thought to take what wasn't theirs.

Brianna grew angry with the man. Wanted to confront him herself.

Around her, the trees and plants grew, listening to the call of her magic and Brielle hissed out of the corner of her mouth, "Calm down! You are going to cause a scene."

Rygan had walked toward his clan, leaving her side, and Brianna looked at his face, how happy he was to see the people he loved.

She took a few deep breaths, and the trees and plants slowly shrunk back to the size they had been.

Thurston's eyes were wide, and he had one eyebrow raised.

Brianna ducked her head, but Brielle walked over to her, "I just got scared. I don't want you to hide who you are. It's just hard for me. Using magic around others brings up too many bad memories."

Brianna reached out, holding Brielle's hand, "I know. I didn't mean to get so worked up, I'm just angry at all these people had to endure. Like us."

Brielle nodded, "I know."

Thurston walked over, “What just happened?”

The girls both turned to him, “Nothing.”

“That wasn’t nothing. I saw those plants grow.”

Brianna wanted to say something, but Brielle put her hands on her hips, “I will explain it all later.”

Thurston nodded, “As long as you explain, I will let it go.”

Brielle smiled, and Brianna looked over at Rygan again.

He was walking through the people, touching some of the men on their shoulders, talking to each one.

When he came to two couples standing together, he stopped and looked at the men holding. Each one was holding a woman in their arms.

Rygan touched them all, his face filled with sorrow as he did.

She couldn’t hear what he was saying, but she could tell he was hurting.

She knew that they were the parents of the boys who had died.

Rygan hugged the mothers, and they cried in his arms.

Her heart broke for them, hating that two young boys were killed for someone else’s greed.

She wiped her eyes, sniffing. Brielle wrapped her arm around her, “It will be all right.”

Brianna just stared at the people surrounding Rygan, knowing he was a good leader. A good man.

She wouldn’t be drawn to him like she was if he weren’t.

After a few moments, Rygan turned to look at her; he cleared his throat, raising his voice, “Everyone, I have a few things to say,” and all the voices that were heard just seconds before went silent.

Rygan held out his hand, gesturing toward her, “This is my mate, Brianna.”

Everyone turned to look at her, and she swallowed hard, lifting her hand, and waving at them.

A few of the women gasped, and one girl, who looked to be about ten and seven years of age, was glaring at her.

Rygan walked over to her, pulling her against his side.

“Brianna saved my life. She and her sister Brielle found me deep in the bayou, bandaged my wounds and kept me safe until I could heal. Her being my mate was the best thing that could have happened on top of that.”

“But, Alpha, they are outsiders.”

Brianna felt her eyebrows pull down, and Rygan said, “I know we are wary of strangers, and for good reason, but my mate doesn’t count. She saved my life at risk to her own. You will treat her, her sister and her sister’s mate with respect.”

Some of the men growled, but Rygan growled louder, “I didn’t realize that was a question. I gave an order and I expect to be obeyed.”

Torin pushed to the front, “Your Alpha is alive, returned to us and found his mate. This is something we should celebrate.”

“I know this is difficult. That we lost a few of our own just recently, but Brianna shouldn’t be punished for it. Neither should Thurston. He may be a vampire, but he and I have made peace and he didn’t participate in the battle. No one is to give him a hard time, am I understood?”

Everyone murmured, and Rygan looked down at her, “Times are changing. We must adapt. To any situation we are faced with. We were caught off-guard when the vampires tried to take over, because we believed there was no one out there willing to fight us for our land. We were wrong. *I* was wrong. I won’t make the same mistakes again. We have someone on our side now that can help keep us safe. Someone who willingly sacrificed his own safety to bring me to you. He had nothing to do with the battle. He is just as much angry about it as we are.”

The clan looked over at Thurston, and he stepped forward, “Everything your Alpha says is true. I want to cause no one harm or pain. I only wish to live in peace. My leader is power hungry and cruel. He will take over this city gladly and will without another doubt if he doesn’t stop him. He wants to have humans as his slaves and bathe in the blood of those who oppose him. I don’t want to live in a world like that. Not with him in charge.”

Torin stepped forward, “He really would hurt all the humans? Most humans know nothing about shifters or vampires. He is willing to expose all of us to do that?”

Thurston nodded, “He doesn’t care for anyone but himself. The secrets of all the shifter races and other vampires be damned. All he cares about is power and the only way to get that is to take over New Orleans, and then other cities like it. He wants to be the new King. And he is cruel enough to do it. He will enslave every human and laugh as he did it.”

Brianna was shocked, and she knew Brielle was as well.

“How can we stop him?” Rygan asked, “His vampires outnumber my shifters. They don’t stand a chance against them again. I won’t lose more men to a battle that is folly.”

Thurston nodded, “I know someone who can help us. He is the best battle strategist I have ever met.”

Rygan nodded, “I will talk to him. We need all the help we can get.”

Thurston inclined his head, “Done. I will take my mate with me to find him.”

Brielle gasped, “I can’t leave my sister. And I don’t know you.”

Thurston raised an eyebrow, “It’s a perfect way for us to get to know each other.”

Brielle sputtered for a second, and Thurston grabbed her hips, dipping his head down to hers and kissing her.

Brianna felt her eyebrows raise, and she looked over at Rygan, who was smirking.

When Thurston pulled away from Brielle, she was dazed and nodded.

Brielle walked over to her, “Will you be all right on your own?”

Brianna nodded, “I will be just fine.”

Brielle looked over at Thurston, “How long will this take?”

Thurston shrugged, “No longer than a sennight, but it really depends on if Kol is still where he was the last time, I saw him. If he isn’t, it will be longer.”

Rygan nodded, “We can wait for a fortnight at least. Come back safely. No matter if your friend helps or not.”

Thurston smiled, “We will be back soon. Stay away from the vampires. They want nothing more than to slaughter anyone that wants to oppose them.”

Rygan nodded, “We will move further into the woods.”

Thurston and Brielle walked away after the girls hugged goodbye.

This would be the longest they had ever been apart, and Brianna knew it would be hard on both of them, but this was important.

She was shocked that after such a short amount of time that they were both happy to pick up their lives for men they barely knew, but were connected to, nonetheless.

When Brielle disappeared into the woods, Brianna turned back to Rygan, who hadn’t left her side.

“Let me introduce you.”

She nodded, “All right.”

Rygan spent the next half hour or so introducing her to everyone in his clan.

The girl who glared at her still glared, and when Rygan barked out at her to respect his mate, she pouted.

“I thought an Alpha needed a strong mate. Not a scarred one. What was wrong with me?”

Rygan snorted, “Clearly you weren’t my mate. I never even thought twice about you. You haven’t come of age, but it wouldn’t have mattered if you had or not. You aren’t my mate. And believe what you wish about my mate, but she is the strongest woman I have met. She went through things you couldn’t even imagine, and she is still here. Still kind and doing what she can do to help us get our land back. If you question her or her status as my mate again, I will ask you to leave. She doesn’t deserve you treating her this way.”

Brianna put her hand on his arm, “Girls say what they must because they feel threatened. I understand her crush. But that’s all it ever was and could ever be.”

Brianna turned to the girl, “What is your name?”

The girl looked down at her toes for a second, then back up. “Cora.”

Brianna smiled, “Cora. A beautiful name for a beautiful girl. You wanted to be the Alpha’s mate. Didn’t you?”

Cora nodded, “Only a little. I just thought he was so handsome, but my mother says I’m not cut out to be an Alpha’s mate. That I wouldn’t have what it takes to lead people.”

Brianna felt sympathy wash through her, “I understand. My mother said things to me that made me want to prove her wrong. I am sorry you didn’t get your wish to be with the Alpha. I’m a little intimidated to be his mate. I still barely understand what that even means. Do you think you could help me figure out life amongst you? To be a good mate to the Alpha?”

The girl bit her lip, then nodded slowly, “I am sorry for being so rude. I didn’t mean to act like that. I was just shocked, and I knew he wasn’t my mate. I felt it. But it was fun to dream about for a while.”

Brianna nodded, “I understand completely. He is rather handsome,” she whispered to the girl who smiled.

Rygan coughed to hide his chuckle and she looked over at him, seeing his brow raised and humor dancing in his eyes.

Brianna turned back to Cora and the girl stunned her by reaching out and hugging her, "I'm sorry again for being rude and churlish. I know I don't deserve you being this kind to me."

Brianna hugged the girl back, "You don't deserve punishment either. You didn't hurt me. I have heard much worse in my life. I don't blame you. You all have had such a hard few days, and then here is this strange woman that is now mated to your leader. I am sorry for all you have endured the last few days. How much you have lost. I promise, I will do all in my power to get you back on your land."

Cora pulled back when Brianna spoke to the rest of the clan and an older woman stepped forward, looking exactly like Cora.

"We don't want you to go out of your way."

Brianna shook her head, "Nonsense. I may not know you all very well, but I feel a kinship to you. I too was chased from my home. That's where I got my scars. I almost died the night someone decided that we weren't welcome in their town any longer. Yet, I stayed strong and did what I could to heal. My sister and I have lived alone, took care of ourselves and were resigned to living that way. But here we are. We are still standing. Still fighting. When we found Rygan in the woods, barely clinging to life, I knew that even without the pull I felt to him that I would save him. As I would do for any of you. After meeting you, that much is still true. No one deserves to have their safety and security ripped from them. I want to see you all back there again. You deserve nothing less."

The clan looked around and murmured, then Rygan looked down at her, "My mate is a wonder. Isn't she?"

An older man nodded, "She is. We need a Queen worthy of our King. She fits."

Brianna felt a blush rush to her cheeks, and she fought to keep her head up.

Rygan pulled her against his side, “She does. Does anyone else have any questions or concerns?”

A few of the people nodded, “We have no place to sleep. It’s been hard to sleep on the hard ground. Even with it being cold, there are still things that bite you in your sleep.”

Brianna swallowed, looking around and not seeing anything that would help her.

She knew Rygan wanted to get further from the house as it was.

“Might I suggest moving a little further into the woods? My home is not far from here and can fit most, and I can make certain that there is another shelter. We would be safe from any vampires that happened to walk by as well.”

Rygan’s eyes widened in surprise, “You mean that?”

She nodded, “We will be cramped in my home, but it’s a roof over our heads. I know how hard the bayou is to live in. Know that sleeping on the ground doesn’t call for much sleep.”

Rygan nodded, “If you say so.”

She smiled. “I do.”

“Lead the way.”

She helped a few of the elderly members of his clan to their feet and grabbed the little they brought.

Then she showed them the way to her home.

She knew Brielle wouldn’t mind and this way, they were away from the men still hunting them.

No one came to her land. Not even vampires. And for good reason.

She knew that would keep everyone safe.

chapter
five

Rygan

SEEING his mate surrounded by his people was something he used to long for.

Now that day had finally come, and it was even better than he had imagined it.

She was unafraid of them, of their wariness toward strangers.

She understood it. He didn't know all of what happened when she had been run from her home but knowing that she felt as if she were a kindred spirit with them was something he didn't know they needed.

And now? She was offering them all a place to stay. To get out of the elements and away from the dangers, both from the bayou and the vampires still hunting them.

He knew fate had gifted him with a woman beyond compare, and he couldn't be more grateful.

Now, if he could just get her alone to solidify their bond.

His mountain lion disliked her being around so many men without his mark on her neck, his scent ingrained in her skin from rubbing himself all over her and planting his seed deep in her womb.

He was getting ahead of himself. First, he needed to see everyone settled, and then, his mate was his.

A few hours later, they made it to Brianna's home.

He was still in awe of its beauty and how it seemed as if it were grown instead of built.

He didn't understand it. Maybe she would answer his questions when they were alone.

For now, they got all the children settled in the home, the elderly set up in Brielle's wing of the home, and the rest spread out on the floor.

Rygan didn't wish to spend his night with his mate with everyone else listening in, and he wanted to speak to her.

She was shocked everyone had fit in her home, and though a bunch of the men were sleeping on the floor, it was better than the hard ground and having to worry about bugs and snakes.

Brianna was talking softly to one of the elderly women in his clan when Rygan cleared his throat, "Pardon me Astrid. May I steal my mate for a bit?"

Astrid smiled up at him, "You may Alpha. She is wonderful."

Brianna's cheeks went pink, and it made him smile.

"She is."

Brianna looked up at him in confusion when he pulled her from the house and out to the woods.

"What is wrong?"

Rygan shook his head, "Nothing. I just didn't want or need all the ears of my clan listening to me as I speak with my mate. Or if we do other things."

Her jaw dropped open, and her cheeks went even pinker.

He grinned, pulling her further from the house, and she looked around when he stopped.

It was a small clearing with a few solid trees and a stump on the ground.

He led her to one, sitting her down on it, “I know I don’t know everything about your life, but I want to change that. I want to know as much about you as I can.”

She nibbled on her bottom lip, “I told you the most important things.”

“You told me what you thought I needed to know. But not all of it. Will you tell me what happened the night you got those scars? Why you were run out of New Orleans?”

She swallowed hard, looking down at her fingers, twining them together as if she were nervous.

He reached out, stopping her nervous gesture.

“I do not ask to aggravate you. To bring up old wounds, I simply wish to know my mate. Why she understands my people and what it means to be run from their home.”

She looked into his eyes, her gray ones swirling with indecision, but she took a deep breath and told him everything.

He sat on the ground, kneeling at her feet while she told him of her past.

She endured the pain, sadness, hard times, joy of figuring out life in the bayou, and being with her sister when their mother left them to fend for themselves.

How hard it was on her body to walk again after the skin healed. How it sometimes still pained her to this day.

He hated that most of all.

Hearing his mate speak of her life and knowing she went through more than most humans could even endure humbled him.

He had had a good life. It wasn’t the easiest, but it was far easier than hers.

His parents were a happily mated couple; they loved each other and were content with their quiet life in Virginia with his father as Alpha and their clan at peace with the humans around them; Rygan didn’t want to do anything to ruin that.

But he longed for more. To find a clan of his own. Land that they had cultivated and made into a place that was a sanctuary for mountain lions and other shifters if necessary.

So, when he heard about the beautiful land up for grabs in a town that was just barely being established, Rygan jumped at the opportunity.

He found the land he wanted, knew the soil was good for crops, that the land would pay itself off within a few years, and that it was home.

When he found the first mountain lion shifter searching for a place to call home, he welcomed Torin with open arms.

Torin had told him that he struggled in the wilds alone after getting attacked by a feral mountain lion and turning into one without knowing what he was. He stayed far from everyone, and when he stumbled upon Rygan in the woods, he collapsed to his knees and sobbed, relieved he could finally get answers.

Rygan did all he could to help Torin, and after the first two weeks, they had an older woman join their clan. She had lost her mate earlier in the year and struggled with it. She had been kicked out of her old clan and had nowhere to go, so when she found them, she said it was a godsend.

Astrid became like a mother to both of them, and Torin especially needed her guidance.

Rygan had no idea that so many others would follow after Astrid and Torin, and that within a year, they had twenty different people living in the huge house that Rygan and Torin built themselves.

But that peace didn't last long. They only lived there for another year before the humans came sniffing around, wondering who had bought up a lot of land and built a massive home, but stayed to themselves.

A man who owned a lot of the property in New Orleans saw the home, the land, and the crops planted so carefully in the fields and immediately decided that it was meant for him.

He didn't know the fight he had ahead of him.

Rygan didn't either and refused to back down, and finally the man relented, but Rygan knew it was only a matter of time before it happened again.

They lived in peace after that, but it was tenuous at best.

And Rygan secretly feared that someone else would come after their peace.

He was correct, but he had no idea that their peace would be shattered by vampires determined to take their land from them by force.

He shook his head, clearing those thoughts from them as he focused back on Brianna.

She had her head bowed again, her shoulders hunched, and he brought her hands to his lips, "I am in awe of your strength. To do all you have done after you have endured makes me realize my mate is so much stronger than I could ever hope to be."

She looked up at him, her eyes liquid with unshed tears.

"You cannot mean that."

He smiled gently at her, "I mean every word."

He told her the thoughts he had, and she bit her lip, "You have had it just as hard as I have."

He laughed as he shook his head, "I guarantee I haven't. Brianna, you are a wonder."

His brows drew together, "You are a pure soul, someone that would do anything for anyone at the expense of your own happiness and wellbeing. I do not know how I got to be your mate, or why, but I thank the fates for you. That you are mine. I get to see the woman you will become, and I get to see the one you are now. I get to witness greatness right in front of my eyes. I will do my best to prove I'm worthy to be your mate. I will do anything, and everything so show you."

Her lips parted in shock, "You think I am the one with greatness? I do not have a beast living inside me."

Rygan chuckled, “No, you may not yet. But you have something more. Not even your magic. It’s just you. There is something about you Brianna. Something that I long to find out more about.”

He was shocked when she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his.

She very slowly brought her hands up to his chest, then ran them up to his neck, curling into his hair there.

He groaned against her lips, pulling her in closer against his body.

She melted into him; her lips pliable under his.

He gently licked the seam, wanting to taste her, needing that on his tongue.

She parted her lips, and he delved his tongue inside, groaning again as her flavor washed over him.

She made a small noise in her throat, and then her tongue was very gently dueling with his.

He sucked the tip of her tongue into his mouth, loving the taste of her.

She moaned softly, then gasped as he pulled her tighter against his body.

He broke away from her mouth, kissing down the length of her neck, sucking gently on the part where his mark would go.

Her head tilted back, giving him access and letting out tiny whimpers as he gently sucked on her skin there.

He was leaving a mark on her delicate skin, and he wanted it there.

Wanted everyone to know she was his.

He kissed the scars she had on her neck, hating that she got them in the first place.

She wrapped her fingers in his hair, “It is all right. I’m fine.”

He growled softly, kissing her skin once more.

“You went through so much and I wasn’t there to keep you safe.”

She smiled gently at him, “You are here now. I know you will keep me safe from here on out.”

He kissed her hard, “Damn right.”

Pulling back from her, she ran her hands down his chest, biting her lip when she got to all the tears in his shirt.

She used her fingertip to gently trace his skin where it ripped clean through, and he shivered.

“I love your hands on me.”

She looked up at him, “Can I take this off?”

He raised his eyebrow, “You can do anything you want to me darling.”

She slowly reached up and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, then the next one down until his shirt was open completely.

She pushed his shirt off the swells of his shoulders, and he let her do what she wanted.

The shirt dropped to the ground, and she looked up at him, “Is this all right?”

He nodded, and she slowly ran her hands over his chest, tracing each new scar he got, then down the swells of his abdomen.

They clenched involuntarily. He barely held back a shiver as she lightly touched his skin everywhere.

“I have never done anything like this before. I stay as far from men as I can normally.”

“I stay far from females too.”

She smiled up at him, “I’m grateful for that.”

He laughed a little, “You have no idea what it does to me to know you are so jealous.”

She growled lightly at him, making his mountain lion flash in his eyes, loving the jealous streak she had.

“I’m all yours darling. Every single inch of me.”

She leaned in, pressing her lips to the center of his chest, causing him to clench his eyes shut as his cock kicked hard in his pants at the contact.

He had been hard since his lips touched hers and doubted it would go away anytime soon.

He snapped his eyes back open as he felt her kiss slowly up his chest to his neck, biting softly on his skin there, ripping a groan from his throat as she did so.

“Fucking hell darling.”

She pulled away, “Did I hurt you?”

He shook his head, “Far from it. You just almost made this end too soon.”

She looked down at his lap, seeing the hard evidence of his cock through the thin pants he wore.

He knew she could see the entire outline of his cock, and that, at the tip, the pants were slowly getting wet from all the pre-cum that flowed from him.

She lifted her brows, “You are rather large down there.”

He bit back a laugh, “I’m a large man darling. It suits me. And you. This was made only for you.”

He reached down and ran his hand over the top of his cock, barely holding back a groan at the feel of his hand.

She looked down at it again, “Can I touch it? See it?”

He shook his head, “I don’t wish to rush you or push you in anyway.”

She stood, “You aren’t rushing me Rygan.”

In a move that shocked him, she untied the few ties on the front of her dress, pulling her outer dress off, leaving her in only her chemise.

Her breasts were heaving under the thin material, her nipples hard points, showing him how much she wanted this.

She dropped back down to the stump, but he didn't like how far away she was, so he pulled her onto his lap instead.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, leaning in to kiss him.

He hungrily kissed her back, running his hands up her back, and into her wealth of hair, wrapping it in his fist and pulling her mouth back from his.

“I'm going to mark your neck. Right here. Going to claim you so every man knows you are mine.”

She panted, her eyes closing as he sucked on the spot where his mark would go.

“If I am yours, and you are mine, do I get to mark you too?”

He nodded against her neck, “Mark me all over my fucking body darling. I'm all yours. And would wear your marks proudly.”

He locked eyes with her, then let her hair go to put his hands under her ass, lifting her in his arms, nuzzling between her breasts.

She held onto his hair, her fingers digging into his scalp as he did.

She let out a moan when he closed his mouth over the tip of one breast, sucking on her nipple through the thin fabric, flicking it with his tongue.

He switched to the other breast, and she keened slightly when he bit down softly on her hard nipple.

“Oh god. Oh, Rygan.”

He loved hearing his name pour from her lips.

Bringing her back down, he wrapped her hair in his fist again, kissing her, their tongues dueling as she, too kept his hair in her fist.

The slight sting on his scalp only brought more pleasure to him, and his cock felt like it was going to explode.

He turned them so that she was laying on the ground, and he let go of her hair to bring both of her hands together, holding them in one hand while he brought them above her head.

It raised her breasts higher, her nipples now seen through the fabric, made sheer by his mouth.

He sucked on her hard nipples again, making her arch her back as he did so.

He used the hand not holding hers down to start pulling her chemise up her legs, running his fingers up the inside of her leg as he did so.

Some of the skin was smooth, other parts, the smoothness was interrupted by patches of scarred skin.

He lifted his body up slightly, seeing the scars there, and letting go of her hands to lean down to kiss the scars.

“Leave those there.”

She sucked in a breath, and left her hands pressed to the dirt.

He moved between her legs, lifting her leg up a little, kissing her skin there, causing goosebumps to rise on her skin.

“God you are so soft.”

She shook her head slightly, and he lifted an eyebrow, “You are. Soft every fucking where.”

She started to reach for him as he spread her legs a little further, her chemise falling to her waist, showing him her perfect, wet little pussy.

She tried to push her chemise down, but he grabbed her hands, “I told you to keep your hands there.”

She bit her lip, “You are not in charge of me.”

He smiled, “That’s where I beg to differ. I’m in charge right now.”

She shook her head once more, and then he was shocked when little vines wrapped around his arms, pulling him off her

and causing him to lay flat on the ground, his arms tied above his head, his legs spread slightly and tied down.

He tried to push up, but the vines were stronger than he was and quick as a flash, Brianna was sitting on his stomach, leaning over him, “You were saying?”

He growled at her, his mountain lion flashing in his eyes, his arms growing as he tried to break free from the vines holding him down.

More wrapped around him, and he laughed as she raised her chin.

“Kiss me. Right now.”

She leaned down, “Even tied down you are bossy.”

“Darling, I’m the Alpha. It’s in my nature. You are the only one I would bend for.”

She went still above him, then gave in, kissing him and the vines unwrapped from his arms.

He crushed her to his chest, “Damn my woman is amazing.”

She smiled, “You think so?”

He nodded, “I know without a single doubt. You are perfect.”

He flipped them over, and held her hands over her head, “Hold these there.”

The vines came back, wrapping around her wrists this time.

“That is something. Damn darling.”

“I need you.”

Rygan dipped his head, kissing her, “I am trying to do this right. I don’t want to rush you. Rush our first time.”

“I think we were rushed from the very moment we met. Nothing about us is conventional. And I don’t want it that way.”

Rygan nodded, "I know. Our bond is too strong to wait much longer. Can you feel it?"

She growled at him, "Feel it? I'm going insane over it. I need you. Please. Don't keep going slow."

Rygan lifted a brow, "Your wish is my command."

He lifted the chemise, but it got caught on her trapped hands, and she growled, "Leave it."

He did as she asked and looked down at her perfect nude body.

Her nipples were hard in the cool air, and he leaned down to suck on them bare this time.

Her flavor burst over his tongue. Apples and cinnamon.

He had no idea how she tasted so good, but he didn't care.

He kissed down her body, getting to her mound of curls that matched her hair.

He spread her legs, "You are so wet."

She nodded, "I can't help it with you."

He leaned down, licking up her slit, causing her to cry out, and her incredible taste washed over his tongue.

He growled against her, licking, and sucking at her folds, holding her legs spread wide.

She was lifting her hips, chasing his mouth as he licked at her clit, then retreated to lick at her entrance again.

"Fuck. You taste incredible."

He watched as she held onto the vine tighter, and he licked up to her clit again.

He sucked it into his mouth, flicking it over and over until she was writhing under him, calling his name.

She arched once more after he growled slightly and came apart in his arms.

He ripped the pants down his legs after savoring her flavor and notched his cock at her entrance.

She blinked up at him, still holding tightly to the vine.

“Hold onto me love.”

She nodded, and the vine slithered away.

“Do it. I need you inside me.”

He gave her a look of apology and shoved deep, her wince causing him to still inside her.

He was panting, his cock being strangled by the tightness of her pussy, and he groaned.

“Fuck, you feel so good. I’m so sorry I hurt you.”

She shook her head, “It needed to be done. I feel so full of you.”

He pulled out slightly, seeing the streak of blood left on his cock, and pushed back in.

Her eyes rolled back, “That feels so good.”

He pulled out and pushed forward again, slowly making his strokes go deeper, and gained a little bit of speed as he went.

She was clawing at his arms, the bite of pain filling him with more pleasure, loving that she was so far gone she had no idea what she was doing.

He grabbed her hips in his hands, lifting her slightly for a different angle, and Brianna’s eyes popped open, “Oh, there. Right there.”

He kept his pace slow and even, until he felt her start to writhe under him again and her hand snaked down her body, and she rubbed at her clit, until she was crying out his name, her pussy strangling his cock, and she came all over him.

He grunted as her pussy tightened, and his eyes rolled back.

He quickened his pace, feeling his spine tingle, knowing an orgasm wasn’t far behind.

He went even faster, and she was crying out again, and after four more hard thrusts, the knot on the end of his cock

swelling, locking them together, Rygan poured himself into her willing body.

He leaned down, feeling his canines grow, and he struck as fast as a cobra, biting the side of her neck and feeling her orgasm once more.

His cock kicked hard; his seed left him as he pulled back, licking her mark to seal the wound.

She was panting on the ground, and Rygan noticed they were tied together with vines.

He chuckled, "I'm not going anywhere love."

She was breathing hard, "Oh. Sorry. This hasn't happened before."

He looked around them, seeing that they were almost enclosed in branches and vines as if they were in their own little world.

She looked around them, in shock. "I really didn't mean to do that."

He leaned down, kissing her once more, his cock still stuck inside her.

She wiggled a bit, "You have not gone down."

He lifted his eyebrows, "We are stuck together for the time being love."

She looked down at him, "We are?"

"My knot needs to come down."

"Your knot?"

He nodded, "As a mountain lion shifter, we share their traits. Apparently, I knot with my mate. I wasn't certain as I haven't felt desire for someone else before, but the knot will go away soon."

She nodded, "All right."

She started panting again, and Rygan finally pulled out of her, "What is wrong?"

She was breathing hard, "I do not feel so well."

Rygan's eyebrows lifted, "What? What is wrong?"

Her back arched, and her eyes flashed gold to his shock, then faded to gray.

He pushed away from her, "You are changing. Fuck. I wasn't certain if you would."

Her eyes were wide, "W-w-what?"

"You are changing into a shifter."

"H-h-how? I a-am h-h-uman."

Rygan shrugged, worry filling him at how she was shivering, her body arching and then lying flat once more.

"I knew that human mates change to the animal of the shifter, but I didn't even think. Shit. Are you all right?"

She nodded but then groaned and then growled as her back arched again.

Fur burst over her skin, and then her body shook as she broke apart into a gorgeous tawny mountain lion.

He shifted, rubbing his head against hers, licking her there, and she stood on shaking legs, letting him rub his head against her again.

She stood on shaking legs, stretching her body out, butting her head against his.

He purred, loving that she was just like him now.

She licked his face and rubbed her head down his side as he had done to her. He knew she was marking him with her scent.

After a few seconds, she started to shake; then she shifted back.

He shifted back, and she collapsed into his arms, holding a hand to her head.

"I hear her. In my head," she looked up at him, "Is this what you feel with your animal?"

He nodded, "All the time. Especially now. Since you."

Brianna nodded, “She wants me to mark you.”

Rygan lifted a brow, “Do it. Mark me so everyone knows I’m yours.”

She pulled her head back, kissing his neck, before biting down, causing him to roar in ecstasy.

They were claimed. Mated for life.

She was his forever now.

chapter
six

Brianna

AFTER THEY MADE love another time, Rygan took her for a run in the woods, letting her see what it felt like to be a mountain lion.

It was freeing in this body. And she never wanted to go back. Her scars weren't as deep in this body, and it was easy to run and jump like she always longed to.

Her magic still worked in this form. She could call to the trees and grasses, making them grow for her so she could climb the branches or disappear in the deep grass, having Rygan find her.

He would pounce on her, and they would play and then do it all over again.

She finally sat on a large rock looking over the bayou, and Rygan lay next to her, and she let the shift take over her body, as easily as breathing.

Rygan had her in his arms seconds later, kissing the side of her neck.

“You are magnificent.”

She smiled, looking over the sunset, “I feel like it now. Like I can do anything, and I'm not scared anymore. Not afraid that anyone can hurt me.”

Rygan's arms tightened around her, “No one will touch you again. I will keep you safe.”

She lifted her head, “I know you can. But I feel like I can be strong on my own too. I have had that worry for a long,

long time. But because of you, I have this new freedom. I cannot believe it.”

She laughed, throwing her arms around Rygan, then kissing him.

He kissed her back, then stood with her in his arms.

“We need to get back.”

She sighed, “I know. But can’t we stay close and not in the same house? The quarters are rather close.”

He nodded, “Spending time with my mate alone is always my choice.”

She smiled and he walked them back to where their clothes were, helping her dress and then dressing himself.

Hand in hand, they walked back toward her home, and she stopped him about thirty feet away. “Hold on. Let me fix us a place.”

He raised an eyebrow, nodding at her and she pulled on her powers, growing the trees, twisting them into a shelter around them.

Rygan looked around in awe as the trees restructured into a small home, with a bedframe that had twisted vines in between the frame to make a bed.

He turned to her when she grew a few plants that glowed in the dark out in the deep bayou, lighting up the walls so that they could see in the dark.

“You are pure wonder. I knew you were.”

She smiled, “Let’s try out our new bed.”

He followed her over to the structure, “Will those hold me? Really?”

She laughed, “Of course. They did in my other bed.”

He sat down gingerly, and when it held steady, he lay back, laughing.

Pulling her down with him, she smiled and within moments, he divested both of them from their clothes, lifting

her to her knees and guiding her hips to encircle his.

“I need you. You make me insane with want for you.”

She lifted up, holding his cock in her hand as she put it to her entrance and shoved down.

He filled her so well, and she groaned as she took him in, her pussy a little sore from earlier.

His hands tightened on her hips, “Fuck. Darling. Ride me.”

She did as he asked, lifting her hips over and over, learning what rhythm to use that pleased them both.

She could feel her orgasm building, and she started to rock on him a little faster, chasing that feeling.

His fingers dug in, making her moan at the contact and her mountain lion loved that he was in charge.

That he was the Alpha in all things.

She did too but liked that he let her lead this time.

As his cock hit someplace inside her, she gasped, loving the feel of him and did the same move again.

He was hitting something inside her that made her orgasm flow right at the surface and finally she tipped over the edge, crying out his name.

It felt so good and then he was lifting her up and down on his cock, using her body to get himself off.

Another orgasm started to rise, and she chased it with him, shoving down when he pushed up and before long, she orgasmed again and he buried his cock inside her, the knot on the bottom of his cock notched at her entrance and she could feel the heat wash through her.

She could only hope that they had a child. She so longed for one with this man. Even though they hadn't known each other for long at all, she wanted a future with him.

When she came back down from her high, he was staring at her, his chest rising and falling at a rapid pace.

She lay down on him, “I don’t know how that gets better, but it does.”

He laughed, “It’s like that with mates. We please our mate every time.”

She smiled, kissing his chest, nipping at his skin, “Good. I expect that every single day.”

He kissed the crown of her hair, “Your wish is my command darling.”

His knot finally slipped free, and she curled up against his side, “Do you think Thurston will find his friend? And that he will help us?”

Rygan ran his hands over her hair, using his fingers to comb through the strands, “I do not know. I hope he will, but I can never be certain. Vampires are different than shifters. They have their own set of rules that they live by. Each coven even. They are all different and live the way they want to live.”

She raised her eyebrows, “They are really so different?”

Rygan nodded, “A lot of people, shifters included don’t know much about them. They stick to themselves and have their own royalty. They mostly stick to a certain set of rules that they mostly follow, but sometimes, things happen, and they can get out of hand. Like with this battle and this vampire leader. If the royal vampires hear of too many human deaths, they will sometimes step in, but they mostly stick to themselves in their little hideaway. I don’t even know where it would be.”

“Oh. That’s not what I expected.”

“It’s a strange world we live in. Other shifters are different than mountain lion shifters as well.”

“How many other kinds of shifters are there?”

Rygan shrugged, “I can’t even count them. But I know of bears, lions, tigers, wolves, griffins, eagles, panthers, even dragons.”

“Dragons aren’t real.”

Rygan laughed, “Love, two days ago you didn’t think shifters even existed. I assure you that dragons very much are real.”

“Have you met a dragon shifter before?”

Rygan shook his head, “They are very rare. Like so rare, most people haven’t met a dragon shifter. You see, dragon shifters only shift into their dragon when they meet their mate. If they haven’t, their dragon won’t manifest. And their dragons have healing blood. Or so they say. No one really knows for certain.”

“That is insane. Shifters and the world you are from are not what I’m used to. I thought I understood that the world was different from the fact that I have magic in my veins, but I wasn’t prepared.”

Rygan chuckled, “I was born a shifter and I still don’t know all the things about being a shifter.”

She nodded, “I’m glad we can learn together then.”

Rygan ran his hand down her arm, “I am too darling. Back to your thought, I do think that whoever Thurston is going to find will help us. If not, then I have no hope. I just want a stable home for my clan, my mate, and our future cubs.”

She smiled, “Future cubs?”

Rygan nuzzled the mark on her neck, “I have knotted inside you three times now. If you don’t get with my child soon, then we will just keep trying.”

She laughed, “Good to know. I want to have your cubs as well.”

Rygan lifted to his elbow, “You do?”

“I have always wanted my own family, but everyone in New Orleans shunned my sister and me. No matter how hard we tried, it hurt me. I wanted someone to love me. And now I finally found him.”

Rygan kissed her, and they made love once more before falling asleep in each other’s arms.

A week later

After she and Rygan completed their bond and came back to spend the evening in the small structure she built them, his clan welcomed her with open arms.

They didn't shun her when she showed them her magic, and in fact, the small children often had her make them flower crowns to wear as they played.

She helped enlarge the home she and Brielle made so that everyone was comfortable, and she and Rygan took over the one she built them.

If someone wanted privacy, they asked her to build them their own shelter and she gladly did so.

It didn't hurt the trees. They weren't cut in anyway, so she didn't mind helping.

And everyone loved her for it. She would run with the clan through the woods and felt freedom for the first time in a long time.

But after the first week, she started to worry about her sister, but Brielle and Thurston showed up within a sennight of being gone, a large man in tow behind them.

He had long, blond hair that reached his waist. It was twisted in braids and was cut into a strange style on his head, the sides of his head clean shaven, showing off the tattoos he had there.

He also had a beard and was brawny, with huge muscular arms and a big body.

His name was Kol Torstein. He was from a distant land, though his accent was long faded and when she talked to him, was shocked to find out he was over a thousand years old.

That he had been turned when he went on a raid with his people and everyone, but his brother was killed.

He avenged his people, after being turned into a vampire, and never saw his family or people again, feeling far safer to leave, than to be around them.

He worried he would lose control, and she could tell he still missed his family.

Her heart broke for him.

She liked speaking with him and knew Rygan learned a lot.

Mainly Kol didn't like the leader of the vampire clan that took over Rygan's territory.

That he was a bully and was on the King's radar for taking over too much land and hurting the humans living near him.

Felix Moreau was chased out of every country in Europe and when he landed in Boston, took over there, but after too many young women died, was chased out of that town, then chased out of New York.

He went silent for a year or so, but then came back strong with his small army of vampires that helped him take Rygan's territory.

Thurston said he had been with Felix since Boston and was embarrassed by the way Felix ran things.

He never went on hunts with the other vampires Felix acquired.

They always came back, joking and laughing with each other about how the women often ran scared, or the men cried when they were chased.

Thurston refused to hunt for blood. He would go out of town and find animals, or if he couldn't find an animal, he would find a man, use his powers, and take what he needed, nothing more.

Brielle wasn't a fan of hearing that part, but Thurston assured her he didn't take blood from other women, just men.

She and Thurston consumed their bond, which she smelled when they walked up.

Brianna hugged her sister hard, pulling her to the side, hearing all about their adventure and telling her about everything that happened with Rygan and their mating.

Brielle smiled, “You do smell different. Do you feel all right about it?”

Brianna nodded, “I do. I feel free for the first time in a very long time.”

“I feel the same. Thurston is wonderful. He gave me the greatest gift. I don’t have to be afraid anymore.”

“I know. It’s the best feeling. We have two different powers.”

Brielle grinned, “Mother did do one thing right in that regard. Passing our powers down to us.”

Brianna nodded, “She did.”

Brielle sobered, “Do you ever think about her? Wonder if someone finally killed her?”

Brianna shook her head, “I stopped wondering a long time ago. She was never meant to be a mother. The fact that she chose herself over being a mother to the girls whose life she ruined was the final choice for me. I no longer respected her, loved her, or thought of her as our mother. We didn’t need her. We still don’t. Whatever happened to her is no longer our concern. She made her choices; she must live with them.”

Brielle took a deep breath, “You certainly have changed.”

Brianna shook her head again, “I haven’t. Not really. I just finally realized that I am allowed to have happiness and love. That just because our mother tried to rip that away from us, doesn’t mean we can’t have it now. I finally get to just be me. I get to accept who I am. Embrace my powers, and you know what? It feels wonderful.”

Brielle hugged her once more, “I love that for you. You needed that. I needed it too.”

Brianna hugged her sister back and Rygan stepped over, “We need to figure out a strategy. Do you think we could have a table large enough to fit everyone?”

Brianna nodded, concentrating on the open area in front of the house.

She made a long table, and several chairs with branches around them and everyone smiled over at her when it was done.

Rygan sat at the head, gesturing for her to sit beside him, and she did so.

“We need to work out a strategy now that Thurston is back with Kol,” Rygan looked over at Kol, who was sitting back in one of the chairs, his arm slung over the back, his large legs kicked out in front of him.

Kol nodded, but stayed silent, and Rygan went on, “I want what is best for everyone involved. This not only includes us, but the humans that live in New Orleans. They didn’t ask to become food for the vampires who stole our land, and they don’t deserve to die because of it either. They haven’t done anything to me to deserve that. Though I know they aren’t the kindest humans, but no one deserves to live in fear.”

Rygan looked over at her, his eyes soft. He held out his hand to her, and she knew he was thinking about her and Brielle, and what they went through.

“The time for that sort of man to live here and hurt the innocent is done. I know we don’t have enough people on our side, and I’m afraid for that, but we must try. As Alpha, I will not allow that man to ruin everything we worked hard to build.”

“What if we just get slaughtered at the next battle? What if he gained more vampires?”

Rygan let out a soft breath after one of his clan asked the question.

“I hope that won’t be the case. This battle is going to be slightly different though. We won’t be taken off-guard this time, and we have Thurston, Kol, Brielle, and my mate on our

side. You have seen what Brianna can do in aiding us. She has powers that I doubt she has even let out fully.”

All eyes turned to her, and she fought to keep her head high. These people hadn't judged her for her powers. They hadn't condemned her either. She lifted her chin, “I may not have used them in battle before, but my powers have grown since I was a child, and I know that I can help you all. As can my sister.”

Someone said, “What can your sister do?”

Brielle's eyes flashed and she smirked as a thundercloud appeared above the table, letting loose a torrential downpour just over the person who asked the question.

She stopped it after a moment and the cloud disappeared as quickly as it had come.

The person was soaking wet, their eyes wide and they sat back, wiping water from their face.

They were smiling, nodding, “I understand.”

Brielle grinned, “I can dry you off if you wish?”

The man shook his head, “I am good.”

Brianna bit her lip so she didn't smile, and she looked up at Rygan who coughed, and she knew he was covering a laugh.

Thurston coughed as well when Kol sat forward with his eyebrow raised, “I wasn't expecting that.”

Brielle shrugged, “I did try to tell you.”

Kol nodded, sitting back, then inclining his head.

Rygan cleared his throat, “Does anyone have any other questions? Or can we proceed?”

No one said anything and he went on, “We will have the girls in the back, ready to unleash their powers. We will have Kol and Thurston help us know what places are vulnerable on a vampire, and with this knowledge as well as them helping us, I have no doubt we will be victorious.”

Kol sat forward again, “Despite what people have heard or believe, vampires can be killed. If you cut out their heart, or cut off their heads, they die. No one, not even an immortal vampire is immune to decapitation.”

One man sat forward, “How do we cut their heads off?”

Kol smirked, “You have claws do you not? Just keep at them until the head is off. I guarantee that they will die. Most shifters are made to kill vampires. We are more vulnerable than you believe. We are just faster than the average person. Even a little faster than a shifter, but we can be killed. Don’t get too overwhelmed when fighting a vampire. Go for the throat, or the chest and they will be done.”

The man nodded, looking down at his hand as he flexed it over and over.

Kol leaned his arms on the table, “We need to lure them out into the open. No need to ruin the house you worked so hard to build.”

Kol looked over at Rygan, who inclined his head.

“Once they are in the open, they won’t have places to hide. Keep them occupied. Rygan, you lure them out. Get the leader outside and occupy him until the rest of the vampires join him. Then, Thurston and I will attack the leader. Everyone else can take the others. The girls need to keep everyone in one spot. Attack anyone who tries to run. If one gets away, he will no doubt come back with others.”

The girls nodded and Kol said, “We must work together on this. Don’t let them get behind you. They will drain your blood and rip your throat out. They don’t care if they fight fairly. It doesn’t matter to them, as long as they win.”

People nodded and Rygan bared his throat, “I can attest to that.”

Kol’s eyes went wide for a second, then he nodded, “See? Vampires only care about themselves. Fighting fair isn’t something that even registers. So, don’t fight fairly with them either. Don’t be afraid to use your claws or teeth. Change into your animal if that helps. If you can fight dirty, do it. Whatever

helps you feel better, do. We can win this is we work together.”

Everyone nodded, and Kol sat back, “I know your clan is a good one. You care about humans even though humans don’t care about you. That’s why I’m here. I would never interfere even if Thurston came to me. Yet, I’m here because I know you deserve your home back. You want to protect the people who have no clue what you do. Who probably would hate you for being different. But that is the mark of a good leader and a good man. Your Alpha is probably one of the best I have heard of, and I have been around for a long time. He cares about life in a way most don’t. Humans are simply fodder to most shifters and yet, here is a man who cares that they are kept safe. I will do all I can to help your clan for that reason. And if you ever need me in the future, I will do all I can to help.”

Rygan stood, “Thank you Kol. That means a good deal to us. I didn’t want to save the humans, not after what they did to my mate and to Thurston’s, but I know that most humans aren’t the same. They aren’t hurtful or full of vengeance. And that is why we do what we do. We will fight to keep our way of life safe and help them in the long run.”

Kol raised his brows, and nodded, “As I said, I will help you. Had you been any other Alpha, I would have let you fail.”

“Then I am grateful I hold no grudges toward the people in New Orleans.”

Kol chuckled, “I am too.”

Brianna knew that Rygan was right. Holding grudges only hurt the person holding the grudge. Not the one who did the hurting.

They didn’t feel that pain. They didn’t care. She took a deep breath, loving that Rygan was such a good man.

He didn’t have to help the people of New Orleans, but he did. Because he cared about their fate.

Cared that innocent people were hurt because of someone else’s choices. Just like she was.

And she fell in love with him right then and there. Because he cared.

He cared about the innocent. The people who had no reason to be killed for someone else's war.

He cared about her and was angry on her behalf that she too was an innocent, but he wouldn't let the humans be hurt anymore because an evil man decided it was his right.

He was her perfect match. He really was.

She knew that she would follow anything he had to say because he was a good leader.

It was no wonder he was the Alpha. Others wouldn't care about anyone else, but Rygan did.

And she knew she wanted to be like him. She may have hated the men that hurt her, but they were just a pawn in someone else's war.

They didn't hate her. They hated the uncertainty. Were fearful. She understood that.

And she let her hatred go. Those men were following orders. They didn't mean to hurt a little girl and she would do all she could to keep them safe, like Rygan wanted.

Once again, because of him, she felt free. She felt so light that it was as if she could fly.

Rygan looked down at her, "What?"

She reached out, grabbing his hand and kissing it, "Nothing that needs to be discussed here."

He cupped her face in his hand, "You are beautiful. Perfect."

She smiled, loving him even more.

chapter
seven

Rygan

THE NEXT DAY, it was time. Everyone was prepared and ready to go.

They were ready for this fight. Kol was sitting in front of the small home that Brianna made for him and was sharpening an ax.

It looked old. Older than any other weapon Rygan had ever seen. The handle carved and molded to Kol's hands.

It was beautiful. Even the blade had small carvings in it, symbols that looked a lot like the tattoos on Kol's head.

Kol looked up at him, his blue eyes meeting Rygan's.

"Good morrow."

"Good morrow. That is a fine blade."

Kol finished sharpening it, putting away the small tool in a pouch at his waist.

"This ax has been by my side for a very, very long time. It has kept me alive through many battles and wars."

"Did you make it?"

Kol shook his head, "It was made for me when I became a man back in my village. Long ago. Every young boy who goes out into the world to become a man gets their choice of weapon when they come back victorious. I chose this. It was made by the best blacksmith I have ever seen. And hasn't failed me yet. Not once."

"It is a beautiful blade. I haven't seen one like it."

Kol grinned, “It is. Bjorn was a legend. His father taught him, and his grandfather taught his father. They were sought out far and wide because of how amazing their blades were. They never broke or chipped. Those blades could stand the test of time.”

He held the blade out, and Rygan took it. It was perfectly balanced, wasn’t too heavy or too light.

He weighed it in his hands, “This is an amazing blade. Your blacksmith certainly should be known far and wide.”

“I wish I could tell him. He is long dead, his bones turned to dust.”

Rygan shook his head, handing Kol back the ax, “I’m sorry. That must be hard.”

Kol nodded, “Knowing all the people you love are long gone is hard.”

Rygan went to say more, but Brianna walked out of their small home, her hair pulled back, wearing a tight dress he hadn’t seen before.

Kol smiled, “Your mate is fierce. I haven’t met a woman like her and her sister since the women in my village. Most women cower and simper. They want to be saved. Not do the saving. Your woman is a rare breed.”

Rygan looked over at his mate, “That she is.”

Brianna walked over to them; her limp less noticeable since she changed into her mountain lion the first time.

It was as if her lion was changing her. Making her stronger and for that he was grateful.

She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek, and then nodded to Kol.

“I haven’t seen an axe like that before.”

Kol smiled back at her, “This is one of a kind.”

“You are lucky to have a weapon that fine.”

Kol looked down at it, “I know. Do you have one?”

Brianna's eyebrows rose, "No."

Kol stood, turning to go back into the small home he was staying in and was back in a few seconds.

In his hand, he held a small knife wrapped in a fine leather sheath.

It was strapped to a small belt. "Wear this. Use it. It will keep you safe."

Brianna reached out, but then pulled her hand back, "I couldn't. I wouldn't even know how to wield it."

Kol smiled, holding the blade out to her and she took it, weighing it in her small hand.

He pulled it from its sheath, the blade marked with small symbols again.

Brianna gaped down at it, "What do those symbols mean?"

Kol grinned, "They are for the wielder. They are a spell to help the wielder keep the blade steady, sure. It helps the blade to find a home where it will do the most damage and not miss the intended target."

Brianna looked down at the blade again, "Why would you let me use it? Don't you need it?"

Kol shook his head, "Most of the time, this blade never sees battle. I use my axe, or I use my claws or fangs. I have been in many battles, my lady. Seen much death and destruction. I am not afraid of either. You haven't been in battle. This will help keep you safe. Which I know your mate longs for. He wants you to be safe."

Rygan nodded, "Use the blade, my love. I will feel better if you have it."

Kol grabbed Brianna's wrist, "Aim for the chest. Or the throat. Catch them off guard. This blade will not miss."

She swallowed hard and nodded, "Thank you."

Kol inclined his head, "You are welcome."

Rygan turned to the people who were coming out of the home, their faces grim with determination.

He cleared his throat, “We go into the final battle today. I want all of you to know how grateful I am that you followed me and that you give me the chance now to fix my mistakes. I will not fail you again.”

One woman stepped forward, “You didn’t fail us, Alpha. We have never thought that.”

Rygan put his head down, then looked back up at her, at all the people there.

“I don’t deserve you all.”

One man dropped to his knee, his arm over his chest, “You are my Alpha from this day to the day I die.”

Everyone else in the clan did the same, and Rygan looked around in awe.

Kol clapped him on the shoulder, “You are a great Alpha. One of the best.”

His clan nodded, and Brianna squeezed his hand, “We will follow where you lead.”

Rygan nodded, “Then let us win back the home that is rightfully ours.”

Everyone stood, cheering and they followed Rygan and Brianna into the woods.

—

When they got to the edge of the property that used to be theirs, everyone stopped.

Rygan kissed Brianna, “Stay out of sight. Do what you can but stay safe. Stay alive.”

She kissed him right back, “You stay alive too. I won’t lose you. Not after I just found you.”

Rygan nodded, “Torin. We go.”

Torin followed Rygan, and from where the rest of the clan stood, they could see the front of the house, Rygan made certain that they could be close by, so that they could see and hear all that was said.

Rygan took a deep breath, then yelled, “Come out you cowards!!!! You stole what doesn’t belong to you!”

The door opened and one of the vampires walked out, his lip curled into a sneer.

“I thought we got rid of the filth when we attacked this place. You didn’t die when Stephan tried to rip your throat out?”

Rygan held his hands out, “I’m stronger than you believe. Now, bring your leader to me. He and I have things to discuss.”

The man scoffed, “I don’t take orders from you.”

Rygan growled so loud the windows in the house rattled, “Bring me your leader, or you die first.”

The man glared at him, but the door opened again, and a man walked out, his black hair combed back from his face, his nose long, hooked a little at the end.

“What do you want?” The man asked, his voice nasally and an accent bleeding through his words.

Rygan barely bit back a growl, “I want the home that is rightfully mine. You stole it from me. Brought battle to my people that were innocently living their lives in a city you wanted to take over. You didn’t even give us the courtesy to speak to us first. Just attacked us unprovoked. Two boys lost their lives to your selfish whim. I almost lost mine. And you sit here, hurting the innocent women and men of New Orleans by killing them. Taking their blood like they are nothing to you.”

The man rolled his eyes, “Holier than thou, are you? I do not care about the stupid humans that live in that city. They are

mine for the taking. As is any of the homes I choose. You cannot stop me. No one can. I'm immortal."

The other vampires started coming out of the house, one by one, drawn by the conversation out front.

Rygan lifted a brow, "Are you so certain that you are immortal? Because men like you are nothing."

The man leaned forward, growling, his canines flashing.

Thurston and Kol stepped up behind Rygan, and the man's eyes snapped at Thurston. "So, this is where you disappeared to. You desert me for this animal? I gave you everything."

Thurston snorted, "You did nothing for me but kept me safe from others. That's all. You are nothing."

Felix growled again, "No one calls the new leader of New Orleans nothing."

He took a step forward, and Rygan could see the other vampires getting ready for a battle.

Felix streaked down the stairs toward Thurston, and Rygan lifted his arm and brought it down, and his clan melted from the trees as Kol intercepted Felix.

Felix wasn't expecting Kol, and Rygan watched as Kol picked him up by his neck, throwing him into the trees.

Felix hit hard and was back up and Rygan was pulled into the battle, knowing Kol had things in hand.

Rygan attacked the first vampire, his fangs bared, crashing into the smaller man, taking him to the ground and ripping the man's throat out.

He used his claws to rip the head off and then stood, his clothes covered in blood.

His shirt was ripped to shreds, because his body had grown and he ripped it off, knowing he didn't need it.

He saw one of the men come forward and he smirked at Rygan.

“Your blood was delicious and kept me strong for a long time.”

Rygan growled, his canines growing even larger in his mouth, “Come and try for more then.”

The man grinned, running at Rygan, but Rygan took a few steps forward, and he felt the ground under him lift and knew Brianna was giving him leverage.

He flew at the man, jumping right over the man’s head, coming up behind him and burying his fangs in the man’s throat.

He ripped the man’s trachea out, and then watched as the man dropped to the ground, “See how it feels fucker!”

Then Rygan slashed through the rest of the man’s skin and spine, watching as his head rolled, his body dropping to the ground.

Rygan turned to the next man, facing off with a mountain lion, but before he could use his claws on the mountain lions hide, vines raced up his legs, and wrapped around his arms, holding him immobile and a bolt of lightning struck the man, frying him, and he dropped in a smoking husk to the ground.

Rygan ripped his head off, just in case and moved onto the next man, but before he could, Brianna and Brielle worked together, killing the other man.

Soon, there were only a few vampires left, and they were finished off quickly.

Rygan looked around at Kol and Thurston, who cornered Felix and Thurston grabbed Felix’s arm, ripping it out of the socket when Felix tried to claw him.

Kol grinned as Felix screamed in agony and pulled his axe from his sheath on his back, it whirled through the air, then Felix’s head rolled.

Thurston dropped Felix’s arm and looked around at the clan of mountain lions.

They were hugging, and celebrating, but Brianna let out a cry as someone came up behind her and Rygan’s body went

cold.

But Brianna's eyes were flashing gold and before the man could bury his fangs in Brianna's throat, she pulled the knife out that Kol had given her and plunged it back into the man's eye.

He screamed and she turned, her claws out, her face a mask of rage.

She punched him in the chest, the knife still in her hand, and Rygan watched as Brielle called, "Stand back Bri."

Then a bolt of lightning bigger than the other one came out, hitting the man in the hole in his chest and his entire skeleton lit up and then his body caught on fire, and he dropped to the ground, dead.

Brianna was gasping and looked down at the dead man at her feet.

She looked over at him, and Rygan rushed to her side, "You are fucking magnificent."

She threw her arms around him, "I did it. Did you see? I wasn't afraid."

Rygan took her mouth in a kiss, "I saw."

Kol walked over to them, "Damn girl. Are you certain you aren't a Viking?"

Brianna shook her head, "Thank you for the knife."

She held it out to him, and Kol shook his head, "That is meant for you. It answered your call and didn't miss. You were meant to wield that blade."

Brianna looked down at it and then back up at Kol, "Thank you. You don't know what this means to me."

Kol smiled, "I do. You remind me of a dear friend of mine. She too was magnificent, like you. Fierce and tough. You must have some of her spirit. She would want you to have that knife too."

"What was her name?"

Kol grinned, “Lagartha. She was tough. Married to one of the best men in my tribe. A brother in arms. She would have liked you.”

Brianna grinned, “I would have liked her too. Thank you, Kol.”

Kol nodded, “Anything for my new friends.”

Rygan held out his hand and the two grasped forearms, “You are welcome here. Always. You are clan now.”

Kol’s grin widened, “Thank you. It feels good having people again.”

Rygan nodded, “Let’s go see what they did to our home.”

Brianna took Rygan’s hand, and all the clan walked behind them, except Kol and Thurston.

They burned the bodies of all the vampires and Rygan was grateful.

When they walked in the house, Rygan sucked in a breath to see things were destroyed.

He growled, and Brianna grabbed his hand, “I sort of expected this.”

Rygan nodded, “I did too.”

As they walked deeper into the home, he saw more things that were destroyed, and he wanted to roar.

These were things he had made. Or someone in his clan had painted. Had taken their time to give to the clan.

He sighed when they walked in the kitchen and saw parts of small animals thrown all over, their blood was drying on the countertops.

He turned, walking away, and going upstairs, cringing as he saw blood on the stairs, on the imported carpets that he had spent a small fortune on.

Each person had their own suite, and some were left the way they were found. Others? Not so much. Rygan’s heart broke for his clan then.

They had lost a lot and now the security they had was gone.

He dreaded going into his rooms and when he walked inside, he growled, seeing two dead bodies on his bed.

Both young women, both with their blood drained, their eyes glassed over, still open.

He heard Brianna suck in a breath, “Oh no. He didn’t.”

Rygan couldn’t answer her, and he heard a noise coming from his washroom.

He walked over to the door, his claws lengthening at the threat behind the door, and he wrenched the door open.

Another young girl was behind the door, her knees brought to her chest, blood dripping down her neck where two puncture wounds were.

She had such light blond hair it was almost white, and she looked young. Really young.

But when she looked up at them, her lavender eyes shocked them both.

They were full of fear and tears dripped down her cheeks, making the blood on her neck turn slightly pink.

Brianna gasped, “Oh!”

She shoved past Rygan, dropping to her knees, and ripping some of the fabric from her underskirt off.

The girl swallowed hard, “Is he coming back? The monster?”

Brianna shook her head, “May I wrap your neck?”

The girl nodded, “Is he dead?”

“He is. He will never hurt you again. I promise you. What is your name?”

“Celeste Emerson.”

Brianna gently wrapped her neck.

“Do you live in New Orleans?”

The girl nodded, "I live at the orphanage. That's where the man found me, Iris, and Clara."

She looked around, "They were with me earlier, are they all right?"

Rygan knew that this conversation wasn't easy, and Brianna had it handled.

She slowly shook her head, "I'm so sorry sweetheart. They are gone."

"Like they left? Or are they dead? Please say they aren't dead. I was supposed to watch out for them. I was the oldest."

Brianna took Celeste's hands, squeezing them, "There is evil in this world that you have seen. Men like the one who took you and your friends. Evil men like that don't care if they hurt you. They revel in it. He was one of those men. He killed your friends because he was an evil man. You were the lucky one."

Celeste shook her head, "I'm not lucky. He was drinking my blood when we heard the loudest growl I have ever heard in my life. He left me in here, locked the door and I have been alone ever since. I thought the other girls were all right. That they were just sleeping. He toyed with them for a few days. Taking their blood, enough to make them pass out, then when they would come to again, he would drink it again. He did this over and over to the other girls. He said I was special, and he had a feeling about me. I didn't think he would kill the girls."

She put her head down on her knees, "They are gone. I got them killed."

Brianna squeezed her hand again, "You did nothing wrong. He stole you, didn't he?"

She nodded, "He did. Took the other girls first and then me. Had some help. I was just sleeping."

Brianna's face went soft, "You did nothing wrong."

Celeste looked at Brianna, "Can I go home?"

Brianna nodded, "We will help you."

She tried to help Celeste to her feet, but the girl was too weak.

Rygan turned when he heard Torin walk into the room, “The house is a mess, isn’t it?”

Rygan nodded, “It is. We found a girl in here. She isn’t doing well. Needs to heal.”

Torin’s eyebrows raised, “What do you need from me?”

“Bring her downstairs so that Brianna can treat her. In the main room. It’s the least destroyed.”

Torin nodded, and went to walk past him, but stopped, and he took a deep breath, “What is that? It smells so good.”

All Rygan could smell was the scent of death and Brianna.

Torin walked into the washroom and Rygan heard his low growl of anger.

The girl gasped, “Torin?”

Rygan looked inside the room to see Torin on his knees in front of Celeste, her face cupped in his hands.

He kissed her in the next second and she melted into his arms.

Brianna looked up at Rygan with wide eyes, “I was not expecting that.”

Torin turned to them, “She is my mate. I thought I lost her.”

Celeste snuggled into Torin’s arms, “I thought I lost you. I wasn’t the one who disappeared. How did you find me? Here of all places?”

Torin gently touched the bandage on her neck, “I couldn’t stay with you. I had to let you grow up. My life changed a lot a few years back. I’m not the man I was.”

Celeste looked him up and down, “You certainly are not.”

Torin put his forehead to Celeste’s, “I was attacked when I was only ten and five years old by a rabid mountain lion. I had no idea that with the bite I received what I would turn into.

And after the first change, I was scared I would hurt Celeste. She had already been through too much. I had no idea that Celeste lost her family around the same time I got changed and my own family passed away from a terrible sickness. I didn't know what else to do, then Rygan found me and made me his beta. I wanted to go back and find Celeste, but she was no longer at home, and no one had any idea where she was. It was harder than I realized. I always knew she was important; I just didn't know how much until now. My mountain lion knows she is my mate. So do I."

Celeste looked up at him, "What does that mean? Your mountain lion?"

Torin sighed, "I am a shifter now. Do you know what that is?"

Celeste nodded, "My father's friend was a bear shifter. I just didn't know there were other types."

Torin's eyebrows rose, "You knew about shifters?"

Celeste nodded again, "That's how I knew that the man that took me was a vampire. Iris was drawn to him. But it was all a lie. I knew there was something off with him."

"There was. He was pure evil. I would never hurt you though."

Celeste smiled, "My father's friend was the kindest man. He even let me ride his bear once. I know most shifters never harm humans. I am not afraid of you Torin. If that is what you are worried about."

Torin nodded, "I was. You just went through a trauma, and I wasn't here to help you."

Celeste smiled, "Like Brianna said, it wasn't your fault. Or mine. It was the vampire who took me. All him. He is the one to blame and now he is dead. I'm safe now with you by my side. Right?"

Torin nodded again, "I'm never leaving your side again."

"Good. Now, tell me about this mate thing."

Rygan helped Brianna stand, "Let's let them speak."

Brianna nodded, “Was this your quarters?”

Rygan nodded, “I’m afraid all of the furniture needs to be burned.”

Brianna smiled, “I can help with that. Come on, we can fix this house up.”

Rygan looked around, “I’m so angry that it was destroyed in the first place.”

Brianna looked around, “But look at the potential it has. It’s beautiful Rygan.”

Rygan looked around, “It is, isn’t it?”

Brianna nodded, “I love it here.”

Rygan pulled her into his arms, “I knew it was perfect for a future family.”

“I think so too.”

She bit her lip, moving away from Rygan to look around a little.

She went into the great room, running her hand over the mantle gently.

She was smiling as she did, then turned to look at him, “This house is everything I used to dream of in a home.”

Rygan walked over to her, “It is?”

She nodded, “I used to long for normal. For a house filled with laughter and love. One that I could raise a family in. One that everyone came to, stayed at. Felt welcome in. That was my dream. But after a while, I stopped dreaming about it. I knew that would never be my life. Yet, you walked into it and somehow, my dreams get to come true. I get to live in a beautiful home, with the man I love, with people who don’t hate me, and finally feel accepted.”

Rygan kissed her, “You love me huh?”

Brianna nodded, “I do. Very much.”

Rygan put his finger under her chin, “I love you too. More than I can possibly say. I’m grateful I got to give those things

to you. To make your dreams come true. I have longed for that too.”

Brianna smiled, “Do you think we could celebrate Christmastide?”

Rygan grinned, “Absolutely. I was supposed to go with Torin a few days ago to get a tree, but then everything happened.”

“You were going to have a tree?”

Rygan grinned, “The children love Christmas, and their enthusiasm makes it fun for the adults too. Everyone makes small gifts, or we buy them. Usually we exchange made gifts.”

Brianna sighed, “I haven’t celebrated Christmas since my accident. My mother used to say we had better things to do with our lives. I have missed it.”

Rygan kissed her, “You will get it now.”

chapter
eight

Brianna

TRUE TO RYGAN'S WORD, they got the house fixed up, brought in new furniture that Kol helped craft and had the house filled with the scent of pine from the tree and the boughs scattered through the house.

Brianna would walk through the house, finding new things she hadn't seen before and falling in love with it a little more.

Thurston and Brielle decided to keep the house in the woods but would come to visit often.

Thurston knew that while he was accepted by the clan, that he was happy to be alone with his mate.

Brianna missed Brielle, but knew it was for the best.

Kol stayed with them for a few weeks, getting to know everyone and helping put the house back in order.

He didn't hesitate to bury the girls and clean out the room Rygan and she now shared.

He even helped whitewash the walls and painted a few symbols in the white paint.

He told them they were for love, fertility, and joy. That some of the symbols were for the protection of the family and that the house would forever stand as a test to their love.

It made Brianna happy to see those symbols, and a week after the entire clan all moved back into the home, Brianna couldn't change into her mountain lion any longer.

She knew something was off and could smell her body changing.

She knew she was having Rygan's baby and was thrilled.

She went to the woods with Kol, cutting some wood and watched in awe as Kol crafted the most stunning cradle she had ever seen.

She would give it to Rygan as a present.

She wanted to do something for Kol, so she took some scraps of some of her old clothes and made him a lovely new travel bag.

His other one was frayed, the leather old and faded.

She knew it had to be important, but she wanted to do something for him.

The night before Christmas, she, Celeste, Sybil, and Cora were baking in the kitchen.

Celeste and Torin consummated their bond after Celeste healed and she and Brianna became close.

As did Brianna and the other women in the clan. Including the girl who wasn't happy with her when they first met.

Now everyone accepted and loved her, knowing what a good match she was to Rygan.

Everyone was happy in their home; the children were excited for Saint Nicholas to come, and Brianna felt the excitement in every inch of her as well.

Brianna looked around at the women in the kitchen, the three of them laughing and talking as they made gingerbread.

Brianna took a deep breath, happy for the first time in a long time and it was all because of Rygan.

If she hadn't found him in the woods, none of this would have happened and she couldn't be more grateful they found him.

She hugged each of the women, "I'm going to find my mate."

All the women nodded, knowing all too well what she meant.

She went outside, the temperature dropping as the night wore on.

Rygan was standing on the back porch, a white shirt stretched over his broad shoulders.

He looked over at her, grinning. “I thought you were baking.”

He lifted his arm, and she hurried to his side, letting him pull her into his chest.

“I was. I just missed you.”

Rygan kissed the crown of her hair, “What brought that on?”

Brianna looked up at him, “I was thinking about how if I hadn’t found you, none of this would have happened. And I’m so glad I found you.”

Rygan kissed her, “I am too. You are the best thing to happen to me.”

Brianna shivered a little, and Rygan brought her back in the house, “Come upstairs. I have a fire going.”

Brianna nodded, letting Rygan pull her along.

When they got to their room, Brianna looked at the new bed that Kol made them and ran her fingers over the smooth wood.

They had changed everything in the room so that none of the memories were the same.

Rygan leaned against the door, “What are you thinking love?”

“I wanted to give you my gift tonight.”

Rygan lifted an eyebrow, “It’s not Christmas.”

Brianna smiled, “I know. But this is a gift the two of us can share.”

Heat filled Rygan’s eyes, making Brianna laugh, “Not that. Well, not just that.”

Rygan waited and Brianna put her hand to her stomach, “I’m with child.”

Rygan grinned so wide, it showed most of his straight, white teeth.

“I know love. I just wanted you to tell me.”

He walked over to her, dropping to his knees, then kissing her stomach, taking a deep breath.

“You smell different. And you haven’t been able to shift.”

Brianna rolled her eyes, “How long have you known?”

Rygan looked up at her, “From the beginning. I just wanted you to figure it out first.”

Brianna ran her hand over Rygan’s hair, “Are you pleased?”

Rygan smiled, kissing her stomach once more, “More than you know. More than anything. You are here, we are bonded for eternity, and you carry my cub in your stomach. I could fly.”

He stood, lifting her into his arms, then placing her in the bed.

He pulled her shoes off her feet, dropping them to the floor.

Then he pulled her dress up her legs, over her hips, which she lifted so that the dress didn’t get stuck and finally over her head.

He leaned down, kissing her, their tongues dueling, playing.

He pulled his shirt off, then went back to kissing her.

He shucked his pants off next, pulling her up in his arms, their chests pressed together.

“Darling, you are my everything. You gave me the entire world.”

She pulled him down, kissing him again.

He flipped her over, pulling her hips up, making her moan.

“I need to be as deep inside you as I can.”

She nodded, and he plunged himself into her core, making her cry out.

He put his hand in front of her mouth, “Don’t be too loud darling. Don’t need any of the clan hearing my mate.”

She nodded, biting the pillow and he brought his hand around the front of her, grabbing each breast and tweaking her nipples, making her cry out against the pillow.

Her breasts were sensitive, and it only drove her pleasure higher.

Rygan was thrusting in slow, his cock hitting something inside her that made her moan.

He started thrusting faster, his hand moving down her body, circling her clit softly.

She bit the pillow hard, her hips pushing back against him of their own violation.

It felt so good to feel him move inside her like that.

She needed more.

She lifted her head from the pillow long enough to say, “Faster.”

He did as she asked, thrusting faster inside her, his finger rubbing in slow circles, driving her mad.

Her orgasm was right on the surface, and Rygan plucked at her clit with his fingers softly and hit the spot inside her that made her see stars.

She came apart in his arms, and he grunted behind her as her pussy clenched on his cock.

He thrust a few more times and buried himself inside her, heat filling her as he did.

His knot was absent, and she knew it was because she was already with child.

She missed it though. The pressure it caused made her orgasm even harder.

Rygan collapsed to the side, pulling her in his arms, “I love you.”

“I love you.”

She shut her eyes, trying to catch her breath, and Rygan kissed her shoulder and the mark he left on her neck.

She smiled and fell asleep in his arms.

When she woke the next morning, Rygan was standing by the side of the bed, fully dressed.

She yawned and then sat up, “It’s Christmas.”

Rygan grinned, “It is. Come on love, everyone is waiting to open presents.”

Brianna threw on a dressing robe, tightening it, then taking Rygan’s hand as he led her down the stairs.

The children were bouncing with excitement and Brielle was there with Thurston, smiling at her.

Kol was standing in the corner, his arms crossed, but a small smile tipped the edges of his lips.

Brianna waved at him and Rygan led her to the small settee, having her sit.

“All right children, open your presents.”

The children rushed to the tree, pulling out which present belonged to them, ripping open the paper that they were wrapped with.

They all exclaimed over the new toys they got and then it was the adults’ turn as the children ran off to play with their new toys.

Brianna stood, showing Rygan the cradle Kol made for them and Rygan pulled her in for a hug and gave her a wrapped present.

She sat down, pulling it open to see a small rattle, and a down soft baby blanket that was butter yellow.

“Rygan, these are beautiful.”

Rygan smiled, “Kol helped with the rattle.”

Kol lifted his chin, his eyebrow quirked, and smiled.

Brielle stepped forward, “And I helped with the blanket.”

Brianna hugged her sister and her sister’s mate and handed Brielle the small package of spices that she gathered for her.

Brielle exclaimed in joy, showing Thurston her new treasures and Brianna handed Thurston a small gift as well. It was a scarf she knitted for him, and he immediately wrapped it around his neck, kissing her cheek.

Brianna was happy for them.

They were in sync and truly in love. Like she and Rygan were.

She walked over to Kol, handing him the package she had in her hand.

He looked down at it in shock, “What is this?”

Brianna smiled, “You can’t have Christmas without presents. You helped everyone else. I thought you needed one too.”

Kol blinked down at it, then slowly unwrapped the paper, careful not to rip it open.

When he saw the new sack that she made him, he looked up at her, “You made this for me?”

She nodded, “Of course. Kol, you cannot know how grateful we are for everything you have done for us. For our clan and my family. I know it’s not much, but,”

Kol reached out and hugged her, then shook Rygan’s hand, “I consider you my family too.”

Rygan nodded, “Good. You are my brother now. Just as much as Thurston is. We hope you don’t become a stranger when you must leave.”

Kol shook his head, “Never.”

He put the pack on, “It fits perfectly.”

Brianna grinned, sitting back down, and smiling at her new family.

She had no idea that her life would turn out like this.

From a girl who was ostracized and shunned, to one who had a man who loved her, a family that supported her and appreciated the magic she used, and she was expecting a child.

She leaned back against the settee, life was complete. Perfect.

It was the best Christmas she could ever remember.

epilogue

Rygan

Two Years Later

RYGAN WALKED IN THE HOUSE, a letter in his hand, “Brianna! Kol sent a letter!”

He heard a voice exclaim and Brianna came into the main room, a hand on her round stomach.

“He did? What does it say?”

“Just that he is happy out west and hopes to come back one day to visit. He is happy for us and our new addition and to tell Adam hello.”

Brianna put her head on his shoulder, “I hope he finds what he is looking for.”

Rygan kissed her forehead, “Me too.”

Brianna gasped softly, “Your daughter seems to think so too.”

Rygan put his hand to Brianna’s stomach, “Are you giving your mother issues little one?”

The baby kicked again, making Brianna laugh, “More like letting us know she shouldn’t be left out of the conversation.”

Rygan grinned, kissing his wife, “Where is Adam?”

“Sleeping. He was busy today.”

Rygan didn’t doubt that. Their son was a handful. He was strong and could already turn into his mountain lion, despite his young age.

He kept everyone in the clan on their toes.

“Who helped put him to sleep?”

“Torin. He has a way with Adam. And their son must have helped, as he can soothe Adam like no one else can. They are both asleep in our bed.”

Torin and Celeste’s son, Tace, had a way about him. Rygan knew Brianna had a feeling that deep in Celeste’s family was a

witch. An empathic witch.

Her son channeled it completely. He could calm Adam if they were touching, and often Tace wanted to be near Adam as they were close.

He knew she appreciated Torin and Celeste for that. For helping when Adam was a bit too head strong.

Celeste was patient, kind and didn't take Adam's nonsense.

Neither did Rygan. But Brianna found it hard to discipline him the way he should.

Brielle always gave her a hard time, and Brianna would just roll her eyes, knowing that her sister was right.

Thurston and Brielle had twin girls a few months after she had Adam, and Rygan knew the girls took after their mother and aunt in the magic regard, much like Tace.

They were strong. Mercy and Faith.

He loved those girls like they were his own and was grateful that Brielle lived close, so that their children could grow up together.

Brianna and Brielle were also pregnant together, and Rygan knew how excited his wife was.

He loved her more today than he had the day before and knew it would never change.

His home was happy and full of life. The clan was prospering under her care, and they had had to build onto the home and add a few of the homes Brianna was so great at building out in the back for those who wanted privacy.

He loved that the clan had grown with her by his side, and they had even started to venture into town more.

The people in town didn't revile Brianna any longer. They spoke to her kindly, helped her when she shopped and bought the trinkets she sold.

She made the most intricate rattles after the one Kol fashioned for Adam, and the women in New Orleans couldn't

buy them fast enough.

She never had any left when she came home and Rygan knew she was thrilled.

That she was finally accepted by the people who had once hurt her.

Her scars had faded as well. They were barely noticeable, and her limp was gone.

She was strong, brave, and kind.

His mate was perfect. Through and through.

epilogue

Brianna

Ten Years Later

BRIANNA WALKED INTO THE HOUSE, her shawl wrapped around her arms, “Rygan? Are you home?”

Celeste poked her head out of the kitchen, “He is outside. You have a visitor.”

Brianna lifted an eyebrow and walked out back, stopping in shock when she saw who it was.

“Kol!” She yelled in excitement, rushing down the stairs to hug her friend.

He lifted her in his arms, “My dear Brianna. How wonderful you look.”

Brianna smiled, and Kol put her down, “What are you doing here?”

Kol grinned, “I was around. Thought I would stop in and see your brood.”

Brianna laughed, “Have you met them then?”

Kol nodded, “Two boys and two girls. It’s perfect.”

“It was. Rygan had to have planned it.”

Rygan chuckled, “I like that you believe I am that powerful love.”

Kol rolled his eyes, “Your children are beautiful.”

After they had Joy, she had another girl named Leah, and another boy who they called James. Adam was a great older brother and helped a lot.

After he turned three, and Brianna had Joy, Adam mellowed out.

She knew Tace had a lot to do with it, and the small girl that Celeste had a few weeks after Joy didn’t hurt.

Their little girl, Rebecca, Adam stopped giving anyone a hard time, and helped with both babies as much as a three-

year-old could.

Brianna knew that Rebecca had to be Adam's mate. He followed the girl around like a puppy to this day, endlessly patient with her and kind.

Tace was the same with Joy. And Brianna loved it.

She turned her attention back to Kol, "How long are you staying?"

Kol shrugged, "A fortnight at least. If that is all right?"

Brianna nodded, "Of course it is. You came just in time for Christmas again."

Kol grinned, "Good thing I have some time before then to make all the children presents."

Brianna grinned right along with him, "Well make certain you get enough for Brielle's brood. They have more children than I do."

Kol laughed, "I met them. She had three sets of twins?"

Brianna nodded, "I am grateful they are hers, and not mine. Though I would do anything for those children."

Kol smiled, "I know you would. Come, if we walk in the forest, I can see what calls to me."

Brianna looped her arm through Kol's and Rygan's. "Lead the way."

She knew that life couldn't be more perfect than this.

She would try to savor every moment of it.

acknowledgments

Kids. You are all rock stars and I love you more than words.

Hubby. You have been my rock for 19 years. I love you.

My girls. My freaking tribe of the best girls around. Jackie, Kayla, Jes, MK, Iwa, Lindsay, Lizzie, Kaysha, Nikki, Natalia, and more. You are the most amazing women on this planet. I'm so lucky you are my best friends and are in my corner. I don't know what I would do without you. I love you all.

Also, cute Jacie and Elly, you girls are the best, I adore you and I love you.

To my amazing kick freaking ass PA- Ashley, I am so grateful to you and your love and support. Love you, Wonder Woman.

To my readers, you are the best.

To the amazing author friends, I have made, I love you all. Thank you for helping me on this journey and giving me the support, I so desperately needed. You are amazing.

LOVE YOU ALL!

Rachelle
Stevenson
ROMANCE NOVELIST

about the author

I'm Rachelle Stevensen, I write all things romance and love it! I always make certain you get a HEA and that there is no doubt that it will end happily. There is no cheating in my books, and each couple is the other's first and only.

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