



UNDERCOVER DRAGON

BETHANY SHAW

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There's nothing worse than finding your husband cheating on you with your best friend.

Except living in a small town and having nowhere else to go. I'm living in my personal hell where I have to see the new happy couple everywhere and everyone knows what happened.

At least I got the dog in the divorce. But my life is in a downward spiral and I don't know how to stop it.

My social life is nonexistent.

My wayward sister just dropped her son off and left.

Now I have a special agent knocking on my door, telling me he's there to protect us, and he needs to stay with us for the foreseeable future.

Did I mention he is sexy as sin?

Myles ignites something in me that no man ever has. He's kind, gentle, and funny. My own Prince Charming.

But he's secretive.

He won't tell me what happened to my sister or why these men want her son. All he will tell me is we are in danger. But from what?

My heart wants to believe him. The more time we spend together, the more the sparks fly, but I know he's lying to me.

I've been burned once before; I'm not letting it happen again. I need answers. Now!

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

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About Bethany Shaw

Also By Bethany Shaw

I chased my sister into the front yard. “What do you mean you’re leaving?” She kept going, making a beeline for her car.

I raced to catch up and shoved my body against the car door when she tried to open it. My chest heaved as I tried to catch my breath. “Candice, what is going on?” I put my hip against the door and crossed my arms over my chest.

She shook her head. Tears filled her eyes. “I’m sorry, Elena. I have to go. Someone from the SPS will be here soon to help you. It will be okay. I promise.”

SPS? What?

Too many questions raced through my mind. “Who gave you that black eye, Candice? Are you going back to them? We can figure this out. Let me help you. But I need you to stay. Please. If not for me, then for your son.”

Her son. My nephew. The one I knew nothing about. Heat scorched its way up my neck as angry tears pricked my eyes.

Her bottom lip trembled, and she swiped her hand across her cheek to wipe away tears. “I need to go. You don’t understand. He will find me. Tyler isn’t safe.”

I grasped her hand. She flinched at the contact. My brows dipped down into a scowl. “We can go to the police. Let’s get Tyler and go right now. Sheriff Hastings is good at what he does. He can keep both of you safe.”

“No!” She jerked away from me so hard she rammed her elbow into the car door’s mirror, making it go cockeyed. “They can’t help. Not with this. You can’t go to them either. Just look after Tyler for me. SPS will be here tonight. They promised.”

“What is SPS?” I asked, throwing my hands up in the air.

What the hell is going on?

Candice huffed. Her brows furrowed, like she was irritated.

Good. I was pissed.

She tried to get in her car again. I bumped the door back shut with my hip and put my back against the door handle.

There was no way in hell I was letting her leave without answering my questions.

She looked over her shoulder for a long moment; her gaze toward the road like she was looking for something or someone, before turning back to me. Her bottom lip trembled and a few tears trickled down her cheeks. “Elena, I have to go. Just look after Tyler and keep a low profile.” She grabbed my arm and yanked me toward her, then pushed me away, making

me stumble. Candice wrenched the car door open and climbed in.

Oh, hell no!

I grabbed the door before she could shut it and squeezed inside the opening. “You don’t get to show up here after eight years without a word and drop your kid off and leave all in the matter of ten minutes. I want answers!” My voice rose with each word I spoke.

I pumped my trembling hands at my sides, trying to control my rage.

Tears pricked my eyes. I hated that I got emotional and teary when angry.

Candice closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the headrest. “I’m sorry, Elena. For all of it. I can’t imagine how hard things have been for you. I know what you did for mom and I’m sorry I wasn’t here when she passed. Things have happened...”

She sighed and opened her eyes so she could meet my gaze. More tears filled her eyes and a few slipped out, gliding down her cheeks. “I’m not safe. He’s coming after me and if Tyler is there, too, then...I don’t know what he’ll do to him. I need to leave. SPS will be here soon. His name is Myles. You can trust him.” Candice gave me one last look and then turned the car on and put it in reverse, with the door still open.

The door hit me as the car rolled down the drive, making me gasp and dart out of the way. She used that to her advantage.

She hit the gas and yanked the door closed, peeling out of the driveway.

“Candice! Wait!” I called as I chased her down the driveway.

My heart hammered in my chest and I fought to catch my breath.

Candice gave me one last look and then sped down the street. I put my hand on my chest and stared at the empty road. What was I supposed to do now? The front door squeaked open, and I turned back to it.

Tyler stepped out onto the porch, his brown eyes wide and full of tears. Maggie, my dog, sat beside him, trying to nuzzle him with her nose.

My gaze went back to the road. Candice was long gone, and her son, my nephew was crying on my doorstep.

I hurried up the steps and pulled him into a hug.

Poor kid. He looked as devastated as I was.

“Hey, it’s okay, sweetie.” I patted him on the back.

He wrapped his tiny arms around me and squeezed as he cried. I squatted and picked him up, carrying him back into the house.

Maggie padded in behind us. My neighbors already talked about me enough as it was. This was a small town and having my husband run out on me with my best friend made me the

topic of every conversation. I didn't need to give them anymore to gossip about.

It was probably already too late. The whole town would hear about this by tomorrow morning.

I kicked the door shut behind me and took him to the couch where I sat him down. I grabbed a few tissues from the end table and dabbed at his face.

He looked so much like Candice; it was uncanny. He was her mini me.

A child I hadn't even known existed until a few minutes ago. I was an aunt. And I was now caring for my nephew because his mother couldn't. I didn't have any kids and didn't spend much time around them. What was I going to do?

I didn't know the first thing about raising a kid.

Tyler let out a guttural sob and buried his face into my neck.

I drew in a steady breath. He was freaking out. I needed to pull myself together, even if I did not know what I was doing or what was going on.

I pulled back and blotted at his face with the tissues. "Hey, Tyler, I have some Snickers bars in the fridge. Do you like candy bars?" I asked.

He blinked at me a moment and then nodded. I smiled. If I'd learned anything over the past year, it was that chocolate could at least temporarily cure all woes.

I bopped him on the nose. “Let me go get one for you.” I stood up and went to the fridge. I grabbed one of the mini bars and searched the fridge for dinner ideas.

I usually just ordered takeout, but if I was going to have a kid here and some random guy...then I might need to hit the store.

Some random guy. Oh boy. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. And what was SPS?

I glanced at the clock on the stove. It was already after five. Tyler was probably hungry and this mystery man might want to eat, too. Maybe pizza tonight and the store tomorrow.

I blew out a breath. I'd always wanted kids, but right now, I felt a little out of my element. What did you do with a six-year-old?

I think that's how old Candice said he was. It was hard to remember. I'd been so consumed with anger and trying to figure out what the hell she was doing.

One step at a time. I grabbed myself a Snickers, make that two. It was turning into one of those days and went back to Tyler.

I handed him the candy bar, which he then ripped open and devoured in a single bite. I smiled and handed him one of mine. I didn't need two of them anyway. “We'll have to make sure we get more of those from the store tomorrow. Is there anything else you like? Anything special?”

He shrugged and rubbed his hand under his nose. “Mommy said that I should do whatever you wanted. That I needed to be good for you.”

I put my arm around him and pulled him close. “Can you tell me what’s going on with your mommy? She didn’t give me a lot of details.”

“Daddy is mad at her. He’s been chasing us.” His big, brown eyes got wide, and he looked at me. “He found us a few nights ago and...” he trailed off. His bottom lip trembled and he sniffled. I pulled him into a hug.

I shushed him as I rocked back and forth. We sat like that for a while. *What did you get yourself into, Candice?*

“Mommy said I would be safe here. Is that right, Aunt Elena?” he asked. He pulled back and blinked as he stared up at me. “Daddy can’t find me here? Only when I’m with mommy?”

I bit my lip, wishing I knew more about what was going on. I didn’t want to make promises I didn’t even know if I could keep. I pulled back and ruffled the hair on top of his head. “You seem to know about me. Why don’t you tell me more about you?”

I had a nephew. One I hadn’t known existed until thirty minutes ago. And now I was supposed to care for and protect him from some unknown threat. This is not how I thought my day would go.

He held up the empty wrappers. “I haven’t had candy in a really long time. I like it.”

I beamed, a kid after my own heart. “Me, too.”

Chocolate had become a good friend this past year. In the past year, my mom had died, I caught my husband and best friend sleeping together, and now the latest development—I was the caretaker to a kid. “Do you like pizza?” I asked.

His eyes got big and his mouth popped open as he nodded.

I laughed. “Good. I’ll order us some and then tomorrow, we can go shopping for some food and more chocolate.”

After I ordered the pizza, I turned on some cartoons for Tyler. He seemed content to sprawl on the sofa and watch them. It gave me a few minutes to do some research. I googled Candice first, trying to find what I could about her.

Like what had she been doing the past eight years? Maybe I could figure out more about what sort of trouble she was in.

That got me nowhere other than her Facebook page. I was about to scroll through it when there was a knock at the door. Maggie leaped up from her doggie bed and went to the door, barking. I got up and hurried to the door, throwing it open.

It was not the pizza guy. For one, he wasn’t holding any pizzas, and two, a pizza guy should not look that hot. I swallowed as my heart hammered in my chest. “Um, hi.” I lifted my hand and waved at him.

I wanted to smack myself. No wonder I was single. I was such a dork.

He lifted his hand and waved back, giving me a goofy grin. “Is this the Sorrero residence?” he asked.

Oh my god and he had an accent. An Irish or British one. I put my hand on my chest and nodded, not sure I could speak right now. “Yes, can I...can I help you?” I managed to get out.

He cleared his throat. “I’m Myles Daughtry. I’m with the SPS. Do you mind if I come inside?” His eyes darted from me to something over my shoulder, and then to Maggie. He dropped to one knee and Maggie rushed out to greet him, giving him doggie kisses.

I sighed and shifted on my feet. Candice had said to expect him, and Maggie seemed to love him. And she didn’t like most people. She wasn’t mean, just didn’t go out of her way to visit them.

I scrutinized the cute guy on my doorstep. How could I trust a sister who showed up out of the blue that I hadn’t spoken to in eight years? She hadn’t even returned my calls when our mother passed.

I bit my lip and looked down, meeting Myles’s gaze. I swallowed as my belly did a somersault.

His eyes were gorgeous, with a mix of green and blue in them. As we held each other’s gaze, calmness washed over me. I didn’t know why or how, but my gut told me I could trust him. Tyler and I would be safe.

It didn’t mean I had to like it. I opened the door wider. “Can you tell me what exactly it is that my sister has gotten herself

into?”

Myles came inside and shut the door, locking it behind him. He went to the windows and drew the curtains shut. I chewed on my thumbnail, watching as he worked. When he'd finished securing the house, he turned to me with narrowed eyes. “What did your sister tell you, Mrs. Sorrero?” he asked.

“It’s Elena. And not much other than to expect you and that some guy was out to hurt her and Tyler.” I took a step closer to him and crossed my arms. Geez, he was tall. Probably a whole head higher than me. I bit my lip and blinked up at him. “Tyler said it was his dad doing this. Who are you? How do you know Candice?”

Myles’s eyes widened, and he rubbed his hand across his jaw. “I, uh, don’t know her. Your sister fell in with the wrong crowd and they are after her and your nephew.”

“Like a gang?” I asked.

Jesus. What had Candice gotten into?

He frowned. “Yeah.”

“And you work for the SPS. Is that short for special protective services or something?” I’d never heard of it before. I knew nothing about this guy that I’d let into my house. And I was supposed to what, let him stay here? Because my wayward sister said I could trust him.

I wrapped my arms around myself and stared at him as my brows knitted together.

I gave him another once over. Goodness, he was sexy as hell. Maybe him staying here wasn't such a bad idea.

Snap out of It, Elena. Pull yourself together. You don't even know him.

Myles was silent for a moment, and then he nodded. "Yes, you got it right. We are a division of the FBI." He reached into his back pocket and handed me something.

I flipped it open. It was a badge with his name on it and it said SPS. Huh. Okay. I'd never seen a real federal badge before. It looked real, though. And even though I didn't know him, having Myles here made me feel safe. I couldn't explain it. But in my heart, I knew I could trust him.

No. No. No. Don't go there, Elena.

I couldn't possibly trust my heart after everything I'd been through.

"Is this Tyler?" Myles asked. He moved around me and went to the couch.

Tyler looked up from his TV show. His eyes got big the second they landed on Myles. I couldn't blame him. He was impressive to look at. Tall with muscles, dark hair, and just the right amount of stubble. Well, Tyler didn't care about most of that.

And I had no business finding this guy hot. I was done with men. Period. End of story.

"My mom said you'd be coming. That you are like me. Right?" Tyler asked as he got up and went to Myles.

“That’s right. I’m going to look after you and keep you safe.” Myles ruffled the kid’s hair.

“My dad wants to hurt my mommy and take me back to the pride.” Tyler’s eyes got huge, and tears welled in them.

‘Pride?’ Was that the name of the gang?

I kneeled next to him, too, and put my arm around him. “We won’t let that happen, sweetie. I promise.”

“We are going to stay here with your Aunt Elena and lie low for a while until all this blows over, all right?” Myles asked.

Tyler nodded. “Is my mommy going to be okay?” he asked. He sniffled and rubbed his hand under his nose.

I held my breath. My gaze went to Myles.

Myles patted Tyler’s knee. “We are doing everything we can to help her. I promise.”

I needed to know more about what was going on. But didn’t want to ask in front of Tyler.

Maggie’s bark made me jump. I put a hand over my chest and let out a breath. A moment later, there was a knock at the door.

“You expecting anyone?” Myles asked. A tick formed in his jaw and he narrowed his eyes as his gaze shot to the door.

I shifted on my feet. “I ordered a pizza.”

“Stay here.” He walked purposefully to the door and peered out the peephole before opening it. He spoke to the delivery

driver and then closed the door, locking it again before bringing the pizza to my kitchen table.

I opened the box. “Dig in. There’s some for you, too. If you’d like.” I grabbed a slice after Tyler did.

Tyler watched us for a moment, like he wasn’t sure what he should do. “Go ahead and watch TV. It’s okay.” My mom had never let us watch TV during dinner. But I needed answers, and this poor kid had been traumatized enough. I didn’t want him to worry more than he already did.

Tyler looked between us and then headed over to the couch. He was extremely mellow, given the circumstances. How was he not freaking out right now? He seemed to have a grasp of the severity of what was happening. More than I did.

But it was time for me to get answers. “So, what’s really going on? Who is the ‘Pride?’” It had to be the name of the gang. I’d never heard of them, but that didn’t mean much. I grew up in a middle-of-nowhere small town and had never really gone anywhere.

“Your sister is in a lot of trouble. Her ex is after her and he wants his son back, too. I’ve been assigned to protect you and Tyler. Another team is working with your sister to help apprehend her ex and the people he works with.”

I gulped and stared at the pizza box as I processed his words. “When you say ‘a lot of trouble’...what do you mean, exactly?” I asked as I picked at a pepperoni. Was she looking at jail time? Or maybe by helping out she would go into

protective custody? My mind ran through half a dozen scenarios, all just as crazy as the last.

Myles scrubbed a hand over his face. “Your sister’s life is in real danger. Ours are, too. If he finds Tyler here, he will try to take him back by any means necessary.”

“You mean like kill us?” I whispered. I wanted him to laugh at me, but he didn’t.

He licked his lips and gave me a single nod.

My eyes drifted to Tyler and then to the door. My heart skipped a beat and then thumped painfully in my chest. This was bad.

Two

I wanted to be as honest with Elena as I could. I met her brown eyes and sighed. It was bad enough that she didn't understand what was going on. She had no idea the danger she was in, and now I had to lie to her on top of everything.

I closed my eyes, said a silent apology, and then met her gaze again.

“I will not let anything happen to you or to Tyler. I promise.” That was the truth.

I reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. She was warm. And beautiful. I could get lost in her gaze.

Her long, brown hair fell to her mid-back, and I wanted to run my fingers through it to see if it felt as soft as it looked. My free hand itched, and I wiggled my fingers, fighting the urge to reach out and touch her.

I yanked my hand away from her like she'd burned me. I shouldn't be having those thoughts. This was a job. One that could get all three of us killed if I let my guard down.

Elena huffed and let out a hollow laugh. She shook her head. “Yeah. Forgive me if I don’t take your word for it. People tend not to keep their promises.”

I frowned. Someone had hurt her. Or possibly many someones. Telling her I’d always keep my word would do nothing. I’d have to earn her trust. That was something I was more than willing to do. My boss told me to expect to be here for a few weeks, at the very least. I’d have plenty of time to get to know her.

She was my charge. Tyler, too. I needed to keep this professional. My eyes flashed to her lush lips. What would it be like to taste them? I bet they were soft. And she smelled like flowers with a tinge of vanilla. Goodness. I needed to get a grip. I never acted like this. It was almost like she was... Oh boy. She was my mate.

No. No way. Not possible.

Except it was, and I was sure of it. Elena was mine. My fated mate. The one woman on this Earth that could make my heart sing.

I put a hand to my forehead and scrubbed my brow. This was bad, but also good. I could tell her about my dragon.

Elena made a sound in the back of her throat, drawing me from my thoughts. “Well, I appreciate you not wasting our time trying to convince me otherwise. I guess that is something.”

Damn, I'd been so caught up in my thoughts I hadn't responded to her. She was my mate. I'd do anything to protect her. Even give my life. I shook my thoughts away. Before I could do anything, I had to get her to trust me.

That wasn't going to be easy considering I couldn't tell her what I was. Not yet. Not until I was sure I could trust her with *my* secret.

First things first.

I met and held her gaze. "My duty is to protect both of you, Elena."

She set her pizza down on the edge of the box and crossed her arms over her chest. "What exactly is it you are going to be doing here? Are you like staying in your car or...what?"

Right. That. "It would be safest if I stay in the house with you and Tyler. If Jason is to show up, I want to be close."

"Jason. So, that's his name." Her jaw worked. "Wait. In the house? Like in here." She pointed to the floor.

"Yeah." I held my breath. I'd leave and stay outside in the yard if she asked me to. I didn't have a car, seeing as how I'd flown here.

She shook her head so hard her hair swished back and forth. Her hand shot up. "No. No way. I'm not letting some man I just met stay inside with us. I still have basically no idea what is going on. You're lucky I even let you inside the house."

I pulled out one of the kitchen chairs and took a seat. The dog came trotting over and laid at my feet, rolling over so I

could pet her belly. I gave her a rub, fully aware that Elena was watching me. After a minute, I patted her a few more times than grabbed a slice of pizza. “Why don’t we talk some more? You can get to know me and then decide if it’s okay if I stay in here.”

Elena eyed Tyler and then took a seat. She picked up her pizza again but didn’t eat it. She plucked off a pepperoni and held her hand down so the dog could eat it. “All right. I want to know everything.”

‘Everything’ wasn’t something I could give her. I’d tell her as much as I could. “Jason Eastman is a possessive man who believes your sister belongs to him. He’s used to getting what he wants. Candice and he were together for some time before she broke it off after discovering his plans.”

“I guess we both have horrible taste in men,” Elena muttered as she picked off another pepperoni and took a bite.

So, it had been a man who had hurt her. That was his mistake. I cleared my throat. I needed to focus. “He plans to do something that could hurt a lot of people. She took Tyler and left, but he has been chasing after her ever since.”

“Is he, like, a terrorist or something?” Her eyebrows shot up and her eyes got wide.

“Not exactly. No.” He only wanted to hurt other shifters. Most shifters were smart enough not to expose us to humans. Jason, I wasn’t so sure about. The efforts he would go to, to achieve his goals were alarming.

“But he’s in a gang?” she asked.

“Yes.” That was more or less true. Pride. Gang. Same basic principle. “He is going after another group and starting a war of sorts between them.” He’d decided that his pride owned the entire state of Texas and was going to great lengths to make sure all other shifters left, even if it meant killing.

“And now, he is after Candice and Tyler because they left?” Elena asked.

I nodded. It hadn’t stopped his pride from continuing their attack while his attention was elsewhere. Although most of the SPS was working on this case, there weren’t many of us to speak of.

“And you think he’ll attack us or Candice to get Tyler back?” She looked to where Tyler was sitting on the couch. She put her thumb to her mouth and chewed on the nail.

I followed her gaze. “I don’t believe he will hurt Tyler. But he will go through anyone who is standing in the way of getting him back.”

“Including me,” she whispered.

I reached out and put my hand on her thigh. Her eyes darted down to her jeans and then back up to me. “Elena, I won’t let anything happen to you. Or Tyler. But I need to stay here. I’m just asking for a place on your couch.” I’d prefer her room. In her bed. Shit. I needed to get my head straight.

She sighed and then started eating again. She finished the slice without saying anything. “Whatever. I’m already the

town's favorite gossip piece, anyway. Why not give them something new to talk about? I can already hear it now. They've been trying to pry into my social life ever since..." she trailed off and shook her head. "It doesn't matter. You living here will be the talk of the town." She rolled her eyes as she grabbed another slice of pizza.

"I grew up in a small town. It's no fun. Everyone knows everyone else's business." I'd never even heard of this small, New Mexico town until Gavin told me about it. It was right on the border of Texas. There were only a few thousand people. I hoped it would make keeping a low profile here easy.

"Yeah, it totally sucks. I've been waiting for someone else to be the talk of the town, but it's been me for the past year. Now with Candice dumping her kid with me and you showing up and staying here..." She closed her eyes and massaged her temples. "The gossip is never ending."

"I'm sorry." I was. I didn't enjoy having attention on myself either. I preferred to fade into the background when I could.

"People are going to assume we are together." She moved her finger to show the two of us. "At least Ms. McGee will stop trying to set me up with her nephew." She stuck out her tongue. "He's ten years older than me and still lives in his mother's basement. Ugh."

I didn't mind if people thought we were together. She was my mate. If they thought we were together, they wouldn't make a move on her. How was she still single?

Focus on the job. This was serious.

I grabbed another slice of pizza.

“Where did you grow up?” she asked, catching me off guard.

“Massachusetts,” I blurted out.

She frowned and lifted one eyebrow. “You don’t sound like you’re from Massachusetts.”

“I was born in Cashel, Ireland. It’s only got about 5,000 people. I moved here after my parents died when I was twelve.”

One hand went to her chest and she drew in a shuddering breath. “I’m so sorry. That’s horrible.”

“It’s okay. You couldn’t have known. My adoptive parents, Dory and Sal, live in Boston.” It was hard growing up in such a populated city. Especially being a dragon shifter. But they needed to blend in so people didn’t notice them.

She picked up a locket that hung from a necklace around her neck and toyed with the charm. “My mom passed about a year ago. Cancer. I can’t imagine what I would’ve done if I’d lost her at such a young age. I’m sorry about your parents.”

“It’s okay. I’m sorry to hear about your mom. I’m sure that was hard.”

“It was. I had been caring for her by myself and couldn’t get ahold of Candice to come home.” Elena looked at Tyler and leaned back in her chair. Tears misted her eyes and she looked up at the ceiling. “I guess she had other things going on.” Her gaze flitted back to me. Her voice dropped to just above a

whisper. “I didn’t even know she had a kid until an hour ago. We were so close growing up. Best friends. She’s only older by a year, you know. And then she moved away, and we just lost touch. Do you have siblings? Are you close to them?”

“I’m an only child.” I didn’t have any family alive. “I do have some foster siblings, though. We talk occasionally. Especially me and Levi.”

“Oh. Dory and Sal...they took in a lot of fosters?” Elena asked.

“Yeah. Dory and Sal were godsend, and not just to me. They could not have children themselves, so they took in as many kids as they could,” I said. I’d been fortunate to find them.

“So, how did you end up in the US then? Don’t they have foster families in Ireland?” She frowned and met my gaze.

I’d been trying so hard to keep to the truth that I’d let too much slip.

Dang. I’d have to be more careful.

There were plenty of shifter families overseas. Not many of them wanted a dragon shifter who was just coming into their abilities. Dory and Sal had been the only ones interested in giving me a home.

I cleared my throat. My mind raced to catch up. “I had a great aunt living in the area. She originally said she would take me in, but then changed her mind. At that point, I was already here and...” I trailed off, not sure what else to say. The last

thing I needed was to be caught in another lie. “I’m not sure how all the legal stuff worked, to be honest.” I shrugged.

Elena closed her eyes. “Legal stuff. I don’t even know what I’m supposed to do. It’s the middle of the school year. He should be in school. I don’t have official papers or anything for him. What if he gets sick? Or hurt? Who knows how long Candice will be gone? Or if she’s even coming back.” She kept her voice low. Her eyes blinked open again as she met my gaze. “I don’t even know what I’m doing.”

I reached across and put my hand over hers. “We’ll figure it out one day at a time. The best thing we can do is try to give him some normalcy. The SPS can expedite stuff so we can get you emergency custody and get him into school next week.”

“I thought we needed to lie low?” Elena asked.

“We do. But we can’t stay holed up inside the house 24/7.” It’d be the safest, but we’d all go stir crazy and from what I’d heard, Tyler had been through an ordeal the past few weeks. He needed to have some normalcy in his life. I knew that from experience. “Trust me. I won’t be far away. And you...I understand you work from home?” I asked.

She bristled, shuffling in the chair and sitting up straighter. “I do. How do you know that?”

I licked my lips. “The SPS pulled up some information about you.”

“Of course, they did.” She rolled her eyes. “I suppose you know everything about me, then. That’s fantastic.” She picked

up a slice of pizza and started eating it in giant bites.

“I don’t know too much. I finished up a different case last night and got pulled into this one this morning. I didn’t have time but to get the basic details,” I said.

Gavin, my boss, had glossed over the pertinent details with Elena. She was single, lived alone, and worked as a web designer.

“You don’t get any break between cases?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Not lately. The past two have been back-to-back.” They’d been intense and stressful. “And this is my third one now, with no break between.”

“You don’t get vacation time?” she asked. “Or days off?”

“I do. I have eight weeks of vacation time built up. I just haven’t found a reason to use it yet. My team is actually off using some of theirs now.”

“Oh? And you didn’t go with them?” Elena asked, giving me the side eye.

“It wasn’t that they didn’t invite me.” Anna, Conner, Maisy, and Jace had invited me on their trips. Europe and Hawaii. I’d have gone if I had someone to spend it with. Maybe I could go with Elena sometime. I was getting ahead of myself. “I didn’t want to be a third wheel. I work with two sets of couples. They’re romantically involved.”

“Oh.” She crinkled her nose. “That’s a mistake, getting involved with someone you work with.”

I laughed out loud and held up both my hands. “They are madly in love. I know it sounds weird, but I think them being so in tune with each other helps the team.” They were soul mates. I hadn’t understood the way they acted until now. Seeing Elena being here with her. It changed everything.

“Love isn’t real.” Elena set her piece of pizza down and grabbed a paper towel to wipe her hands.

I frowned. “Why do you say that?”

“Trust me.” She stood up. “It just isn’t.”

Someone had hurt her. Badly. I gritted my teeth. How was I going to convince her that what we had was epic? There would be no other woman for me. I just had to make her believe that. Somehow. While also keeping her and Tyler safe from Jason and his pride. No pressure.

Three

I splashed some cool water on my face and then fixed my hair. My eyes darted to my reflection in the mirror.

At least I didn't look like a total mess. I smoothed my hand over my hair and sighed. It didn't mean I looked great either.

Why did I care what I looked like?

Because some hot guy was sleeping on my couch. Scratch that. He was already awake.

His deep timbre rumbled from outside my bedroom door. Tyler replied to him a moment later.

Great. They were both awake.

I put my hands on the bathroom counter and closed my eyes, counting slowly backward from ten. I could do this.

I'd slept like crap last night. How could I sleep with Mr. Tall, Dark, and Sexy out there on my couch?

It was okay to be attracted to him, so long as I never acted on it. Like that would be a problem.

My luck with people was the worst. I wouldn't make that mistake again.

But I couldn't hide in here all day. I opened my eyes, gave myself one last look over, and then pushed off the sink and went to the bedroom door. I patted my thigh, calling for Maggie. She hopped off the bed and hurried to the door.

I twisted the lock and opened it, ambling toward the kitchen.

Hushed voices filtered out.

Tyler was speaking. It sounded like he was trying to whisper, but he was failing. "Why can't we tell Aunt Elena about us?"

I frowned. Tell me what?

The floorboards creaked beneath my feet. I stopped in my tracks and held my breath, opening my hand so Maggie would stop, too. I wanted to hear what they were saying.

I gritted my teeth. No more secrets. I was tired of people keeping things from me.

Myles was quiet for a long moment. "Maybe one day, but for now, let's keep it between us, okay?"

"Are we the same, Myles?" Tyler asked.

My brows dipped into a scowl. What?

Myles cleared his throat. "For the most part. Cats aren't me, though." He peered his head around the kitchen wall and

grinned at me. “I’m more of a dog person.” He clapped his hands and Maggie went running to him.

Damn, my cover was blown.

Myles dropped to his knees and scratched Maggie behind the ears.

My cover blown, I made my way into the kitchen. “Good morning.”

Tyler looked wide-eyed at me as a deep crimson covered his face. I knew that look. Candice had that same expression when she got caught doing something she wasn’t supposed to.

I forced a smile. “What’s going on? Everything okay?”

Myles laughed as Maggie rolled onto her back, exposing her belly. “Just discussing how he has a bunch of cats back home. I’ve always been partial to dogs.” He looked over his shoulder at Tyler. “Sorry, bud, but I think your Aunt Elena should know you are scared of them. No more secrets now.”

Tyler let out a long sigh and gulped, his wide eyes meeting mine. He was scared of dogs. Why didn’t he say anything last night? To be fair, he had been shell-shocked. Poor guy. His whole world was turned upside down.

I went to him and pulled him into a hug. “You’re afraid of Maggie?” I kneeled to his level. His wide eyes met mine, and he gave me a nod. I brushed some hair out of his eyes. “Sweetie, Maggie is one of the sweetest dogs you will ever meet. I promise you have nothing to worry about with her.”

He swallowed and then bobbed his head up and down before throwing his arms around me. I let out a squeak of surprise and fell on my bottom. I curled my arms around him and held him close. “How did you sleep last night?”

He pulled away from me but didn’t get out of my lap. “Okay.”

I booped his nose with my finger. “You know you slept in your mom’s old bed.”

He wrapped his arms around himself. “It smelled like her.”

I doubted that, but I wasn’t going to argue with him. The poor kid missed his mom.

Tyler’s belly rumbled loudly, making him laugh out loud.

I giggled. “Are you hungry?”

He pulled away from me and rubbed a hand over his eye. “A little. Myles and I were going to have cereal, but there is no milk.”

Heat seared over my cheeks. I bit the inside of my lip to keep from cursing.

My fridge consisted mostly of takeout and junk. Cooking for one was hard. “Right. I haven’t been to the store in a few days.” I glanced up at Myles, who was watching us. My stomach did a little flip-flop. “Is it okay for us to get breakfast and then go to the store?”

His gaze drifted to the closed blinds. His eyes narrowed, and he was quiet for a long moment. “Yeah. That should be

fine. I want to get the lay of the land, anyway. I didn't see much of the town yesterday. My first stop was here."

"Oh, well." I cleared my throat as I ran a hand through my hair. "The place I had in mind was in the next town over. It's about a twenty-minute drive. The grocery store I go to is right next door to the diner."

So, maybe I was a little weird. I didn't shop in town. Or eat at the restaurants here. There was less chance of running into someone if you were in the next town over. Plus, the city was bigger, and the supermarket had a lot better variety. At least that's what I told myself when I went.

With Tyler and Myles, I didn't want any more gossip about me than what I was sure was already happening. The rumor mill was probably running rampant.

Ugh. I hated when people talked about me. And I'd given the gossipers plenty to talk about over the past year. Myles staying in my house was going to be the talk of the town.

Myles went to the blinds, drawing me out of my thoughts. He moved them back and peered out. Then turned back to me. "We should be good to go whenever you are ready."

I patted Tyler's leg. "Why don't you go get dressed for the day and then we'll go." I pushed to my feet and met Myles by the window. I dropped my voice to a whisper. "Do you think he's out there?"

I shuddered and wrapped my arms around my middle. My mouth went dry and a fine sheen of sweat beaded my brow.

Having the town watch me and gossip was bad enough. A stalker intent on kidnapping Tyler...that was an entirely different matter.

Myles drew in a deep breath and let it out. “No. Not right now. He likely won’t come looking for Tyler. He probably thinks he is still with your sister.”

I ran my fingers through my hair. “If he finds Candice and realizes they aren’t together, then we’ll have a problem.” I puffed out my cheeks and closed my eyes as I exhaled slowly.

Myles put his hand on my shoulder. It was warm. So warm. Hot even. I leaned into him, wanting to be closer to him. His scent surrounded me. It reminded me of a campfire and smores.

He gave my shoulder a squeeze. “The team watching her is one of the best.”

I opened my eyes, my gaze drifting to his hand. It was big and callused and my mind ran wild, wondering what his hands would feel like all over my body. And he was so close. All I would have to do is tilt my head up a bit and kiss his lips. I wondered if they were as soft as they looked.

Get a grip! We are having a conversation about your crazy sister and the team protecting her from her criminal ex.

I took a step back and licked my lips as I tried to collect myself. What had he just said again? Something about the team being very capable. “I mean they’d have to be, right? You are part of some super-secret organization for the

government.” I grinned, but it was forced, making my cheeks hurt. Nothing about this made sense. It didn’t make me feel better either.

He reached out like he might touch me again, but instead, dropped his hand to his side. “The SPS is made up of teams of highly-trained agents specializing in cases like Candice’s.”

Tyler came running out of his room and grabbed my hand and Myles’s. “I’m ready. Can we go? My belly is making noises.”

I ruffled his hair with my free hand. “Yeah. Let’s go.” I went to the kitchen and grabbed my purse and keys while Myles started ushering Tyler outside.

I passed by a picture on the wall and paused. It was one of me, Mom, and Candice from her senior year of high school. We all had wide smiles on our faces. We were happy. That seemed like a lifetime ago.

It was one of the last pictures the three of us had together. I pursed my lips and blinked back tears.

“Everything is going to be okay,” I whispered. I put my fingers on the picture, not entirely sure if I was reassuring myself or my mom. Maybe both of us. I liked to think that she looked down on us from Heaven.

My other hand went to the locket around my neck. It had belonged to my mother and had been one of her favorites. I let both my hands fall to my side and went outside, locking the door behind me.

Myles and Tyler were waiting by the car. Right, it was locked. I dug through my purse and found my keys, pressing the button.

The car beeped and Tyler yanked his door open and hopped in.

Myles wasn't so fast. "Do you want me to drive?"

I clasped my keys a little tighter. "You don't know where you are going."

"I know, which is why it might be best for me to drive. It will help me get a feel for things around here."

I bit my lip and then let the keys slip through my fingers and handed them to him. His hand grazed mine and another jolt of heat rushed through me.

What was it about him? How could one innocent little touch turn me on so much? It didn't matter. I shook my thoughts away but let my fingers linger over his a moment longer before I pulled my hand back and got in the passenger seat.

Noise from the back made me look over my shoulder. Tyler had a tablet and was playing on it. I didn't even know where that came from.

I opened my mouth to protest, but then stopped. If he was preoccupied with that, I could talk to Myles. I still knew next to nothing about this man that was sleeping on my couch.

Myles got in the car and started it. He turned the stereo down and flipped the car into reverse. Then he looked at me.

It took me a minute to realize that he was waiting for directions from me. “You’ll want to go right and then turn left at the stop sign.”

He looked over his shoulder as he backed the car down the driveway. There was no other car in the driveway. I don’t know why it took me so long to realize that. “How did you get here?”

“Huh?” he asked. He looked at me before putting the car in drive.

I pointed to the driveway. “You said you came straight here. You didn’t drive?”

He was quiet for a moment. “I got an Uber from the airport.”

My brows pinched. “The closest airport is three hours away. How in the world did you get an Uber driver to come this far?”

He tightened his grip on the wheel. “The agency paid the driver for the return trip, too. Plus, a nice tip. There was some sort of issue with the rental car place. I’m not sure. They wanted me to get here as fast as possible.”

I hugged myself and leaned my head against the headrest. “I’m not sure all this urgency makes me feel better.” And I still couldn’t shake the feeling that I was missing something.

“Should I go right or left at the light?”

My mind went blank as I tried to process his question. My gaze flicked to the road ahead. “Um, right. Then get on the

ramp to go west. We'll stay on the freeway until the 122B exit."

Myles looked in the rearview mirror. "You're doing a really good job with him."

I looked down at my lap. "I always did want to have kids." My ex, Mark, and I had talked about starting a family after we got our house fixed up. "Candice and I had it all planned out as kids. You know we are only eighteen months apart?"

"That's not very far apart."

"I have a late summer birthday, so we were only a year apart in school. We were always good friends growing up. We planned to live next door to each other and have kids at the same time." I licked my lips and looked out the window. The trees whooshed by in a blur as Myles sped up to get us on the highway. "I can't believe how far apart we've grown. She went off for school and I...I stayed home."

Like an idiot with my good-for-nothing ex, because he was taking over the family business and didn't need to go to college.

"Did the two of you just lose contact?"

I pursed my lips. "We talked a lot the first year. She came home over the summer and then when she went back the second year...I don't know, she stopped calling back, and she never came home again. I tried her all the time and wrote her letters. We'd get the occasional letter in the mail with a picture

to know she was still alive, but that was about it. She cut us off completely. I don't even know if she ever finished school."

Tears pricked my eyes. Candice was a stranger now. She had a whole life that I knew nothing about. A life she'd intentionally cut me out of. Was this Jason's doing all along?

"Maybe when this is all over, the two of you can get a fresh start," Myles said.

I blew out a breath. "I'd like that." I looked over my shoulder. Tyler was still happily entertained by his tablet. "I just don't understand why she hid all this from us. My mom would have been over the moon to know she had a grandson." I put my hand over my locket and gripped it in my palm.

Myles glanced over at me, his gaze dipping to my chest, then back to the road. "That locket belonged to your mom?"

I squeezed it tighter and then let it go so I could pick it up. "Yeah. She loved this thing. Candice and I got it for her one year for Christmas. We saved up chore money and did yardwork for the neighbors for a year. We wanted to get her something special since she did so much for us."

"That's really sweet."

I opened the locket and looked at the picture inside. It was one from the day we gave it to her. On the other side were two baby pictures, one of me and one of Candice squeezed together. I shut the locket and let it fall loose on my neck. "She didn't even come home for her funeral."

I swallowed, my jaw working. I'd never felt so alone in my whole life as I did laying my mom to rest.

"I'm sure she had her reasons."

I pursed my lips. "Yeah, maybe." But how could she have kept all this from me and Mom? It didn't make sense.

There was something more going on. Something I didn't comprehend, and I was going to find out what it was.

Elena had questions. I couldn't blame her.

Giving her enough information to placate her but keep shifters a secret was going to be a challenge.

I flipped on the car's blinker and turned us into the lot Elena had pointed out.

She beamed at me before twisting to look into the backseat. "I hope you two are hungry. They have the best breakfast around, and there is so much to choose from."

I parked the car and undid my seat belt. "You come here often?"

She shrugged and plopped back in her seat. "At least once a week. Sometimes, it's nice to get out of the house. Plus, they have good Wi-Fi, so I can work here, too."

Tyler shifted, so he was poking his head between our two seats. "Do you have to work today, Aunt Elena?"

She turned, resting her arm on the center console. "I was thinking I'd take the day off. We'll have some breakfast, go to

the store, then maybe see about getting you enrolled in school. What do you think?"

Tyler's eyes widened, and he looked at me like he wanted me to chime in.

I ruffled his hair. "I think that sounds like a good idea."

Jason would be searching for Candice. The mate bond would pull him to her. Not Tyler. Plus, the kid needed some normalcy and Jason would be a fool to try anything at an elementary. And I wouldn't be far away from him.

Exposing shifters to the outside world was a capital offense.

Tyler smiled. "I think that sounds like fun. Would I start school on Monday?"

Elena fiddled with her locket. "I'm not sure, buddy. It will depend on what they tell us. I think it would be good for you to start as soon as you can. My mom, your grandma, always used to say that kids need a schedule and routine. She loved telling your mommy and me that."

Tyler's brows knitted together. "What's a routine?"

Elena laughed out loud. She turned to her door and opened it. "Come on. We can talk all about it over breakfast."

I climbed out of the car and shut my door just as my phone started ringing. I dug my phone out of my pocket and looked at the caller ID. It was my brother Levi. "I'll meet you two inside. I have to take this."

Elena held her hand out to Tyler, who took it. “Come on, let’s go get a booth.”

I waited until they were a few feet away before swiping my finger to answer. “Hey, what’s up?”

Levi huffed into the phone. “I’m freaking out, man.”

I gripped the phone tighter, my gaze darting around the lot. “What’s wrong?”

The phone crackled. “I think I met my fated mate.”

“Oh.” Something must be in the water. Everyone was getting mated. First Conner and Anna. Then Jace and Maisy. I’d just found Elena. “That’s great!”

“It’s not. She’s a murderer, Myles. She killed her family.” He sounded out of breath.

My brows knitted together. “Whoa. Slow down. What do you mean, ‘murderer?’”

“That’s why I was sent here. She posted a bunch of videos on her YouTube channel, showing her family and how they turned human when she murdered them.”

I ran my hand over my head. “She’s a shifter?” I was missing some things. Levi wasn’t giving me all the details in his frazzled state.

“No. She’s human. Raised by a tiger family. They considered her one of them, until she killed them all in cold blood, all for some subscribers on her stupid channel.” There was a thumping sound, like he might have hit something.

“What am I going to do, Myles? I can’t be mated to someone like that.”

I shook my head. “A human killed an entire family of tiger shifters?” I’d heard crazier, but still.

“Yeah, because they trusted her.” He exhaled loudly. “The best part, she claims she didn’t do it. We are the only people on this mountain and she is the only person with access to her channel.”

“What if she didn’t?” I glanced at the restaurant. Elena and Tyler were in a booth by the window. Tyler was coloring and Elena was gazing out, her eyes on me.

I waved and gave her a smile, hoping she wasn’t worried this was about her sister.

“If she didn’t, then who did? We are in the middle of nowhere. I’m surprised I got reception. It’s been spotty.”

I sighed and shook my head. “I’m not sure.” The truth was that there were bad apples. Take Jason and Candice. “But if she says she didn’t, have you considered listening to her side of the story?”

Levi grunted. “I tried. It’s even crazier. I don’t know if I can trust my judgment. Sometimes, I hate working by myself.”

“Well, shit.” Levi was one of the rare exceptions. He didn’t have a team.

“I know. Being able to track people sucks.”

Levi always worked by himself. His job was to track down rogues who were mostly harmless and bring them in. “I’m sure Gavin would send you help if you asked.”

Levi made a noise. “Yeah, but it took me three days to hike up here. And the trek down is going to be worse. When I said middle of nowhere, I wasn’t kidding.”

“I guess not.”

“She’s out of the shower. I got to go and make sure she doesn’t do anything stupid.”

I closed my eyes. “Be careful, Levi.”

“You, too. I heard you got a doozy, too.”

“I did, but it’s under control. I’ll talk to you soon.” We said our goodbyes, and I headed into the restaurant.

Tyler and Elena already had drinks in front of them. Tyler an orange juice and Elena a coffee. There were two coffees.

I went to sit next to Tyler, but he scooted to the edge of the booth and peeked up at me with wide eyes. “Aren’t you going to sit next to Aunt Elena?”

I cleared my throat. Odd request, but who was I to argue with a six-year-old? “Yeah, sure.” I turned to Elena, who shrugged before scooting over to make room for me.

The booth was cozy with both of us in it. We were close enough that I had to sit ramrod straight to keep from touching her.

Elena slid the creamer toward me and a mug. “I got you a coffee. But if you don’t like it, I’ll drink it. Trust me, I live off this stuff some days.”

My fingers brushed against hers as I took the mug. Tiny volts of heat shot through me. She must have felt them, too, because she gasped and jerked her hand back like she’d been burned.

I flexed my fingers. Already missing her touch. “Coffee is fine. Dory always had a pot brewing growing up.”

Elena shifted in her seat. Her gaze darted to Tyler. “Is everything okay? You were on that call for a few minutes.”

I took a few vanilla creamers from the bin and dumped them into my coffee. “Everything is fine. That was my brother. Adoptive brother, Levi.”

“Your foster parents...Sal and Dory, they have a lot of children?” Elena asked.

I chuckled before taking a sip. “Oh, yeah. They have a huge house. They’ve had as many as ten kids at once.”

Elena put her hand over her heart. “I don’t know how they could handle that.”

I fiddled with the handle of my mug. “Dory always tells us ‘the more the merrier.’ I think they enjoy the chaos as much as they enjoy helping kids out with nowhere else to go.”

Elena tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “That sounds crazy. Are all of them raised by them then?”

I shook my head. “No. It’s foster care. Most placements are temporary for one reason or another. There are only a few cases where the kids are adopted. Levi and I are one of them. He lost his parents, too. He arrived about a year after I did. It made it easy for us to become quick friends and we are about the same age, so we were always doing things together.”

Elena picked her coffee up and held it in front of her mouth. “It sounds like the two of you were very lucky to find Sal and Dory.”

“We were.” A dragon and a lion shifter. We were both dying shifter breeds and some of the hardest to raise. Dragons because of their sheer size and lions because they can have a quick temper at times.

Tyler gave me a wide-eyed look. “Will I end up someplace like that?”

Elena sucked in a breath. “No, sweetheart. Your mom is coming back for you. I promise.”

Tears filled his eyes. “But what if she doesn’t?”

Elena looked at me for a moment and then reached across the table, taking his little hand in hers. “Then you can stay with me. But I think your mom is going to be fine.” She gave him a tight-lipped smile.

He used his free hand to wipe at his nose. “I miss her.”

Elena exhaled and squeezed his hand. “I know. But you have me and Myles and we are going to take good care of you.”

I leaned forward, putting my elbows on the table. “That’s right. We are going to be right here with you until your mom comes back.”

Tyler swallowed. He looked between the two of us and nodded before pulling his hand out from under Elena’s. “Okay.” He pulled out his tablet and started playing on it.

Elena covered her face with her hands and groaned. “My mom would have a coronary if one of us had played with our electronics at a restaurant.” She put her hands down on the table and looked at me.

“Dory, too. We had to earn our electronics time.”

She gave me a small smile. “They seem pretty great.”

“They are. I consider them my parents.” I smiled and looked down at my mug.

“That’s nice. And you still talk to...Levi?”

“All the time. He works for the SPS in a different division. He’s kind of like a bounty hunter.”

She lifted her brows and took a sip of coffee. “Wow. This SPS sure does sound interesting.” She pursed her lips. “I’ve still never heard of that branch before.”

I hummed and picked up my mug. I’d opened myself up for that. “Like I said, we are a special division.”

She eyed Tyler before turning in the booth. Her leg brushed against mine, making her gasp. Her lips parted, and she swallowed. Her gaze darted to my mouth and then back up to

my eyes. Then she scooted back so her back was against the window and we weren't touching. "Right. Special division. Top secret. Got it." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "I still don't like that Candice is involved in all of this."

I exhaled through my nose. My fingers twitched as I started to reach out to cover her hand. I stopped midway and dropped my hand back to the table. "If it makes you feel any better, Candice isn't implicated in any of Jason's crimes. We just want to protect her. Once this is all over, she will have her life back."

Elena trailed her finger around the rim of her coffee mug. "Sort of. Though it won't be the same. It's never the same after something like that. Trust me. I know."

My brows dipped into a scowl. "Oh?"

She waved her hand. "Never mind. I shouldn't have brought it up. I don't want to talk about it."

My assessment last night was correct. Someone had hurt her. If I had to guess, it was a man who didn't know how special she was. That was his mistake.

Elena fidgeted in her seat. "I still don't know a lot about you and you are going to be sleeping on my couch for the foreseeable future."

I grabbed another creamer and dumped it in my coffee. "I enjoy the outdoors, camping, and hiking. Bacon and eggs are my favorite breakfast items. I enjoy anything sweet."

Elena's brows lifted. "So, I should hide my stash of candy bars in the fridge."

I laughed out loud. "Definitely. I'll try not to eat them all."

She made a face. "You and me both. I shouldn't eat as many as I do." Her hand went to her midsection as she frowned. Her eyes darted away from me and her cheeks flushed.

Was she self-conscious? She had no reason to be. "I think you look beautiful just the way you are."

Her lips parted, her eyes darted up to mine, and she swallowed. Her hand went to her hair, and she smoothed it down her long strands. "Oh, um, thanks."

It didn't seem like she was used to compliments, either. That was something I was going to fix. My goal was to give her a few a day until she believed them.

I just wished I knew how long we would be here together. Hopefully, I would have not only enough time to get her to trust me, but also to woo her.

My phone dinged again. I dug it out, half expecting it to be Levi again. I could sympathize with his situation.

It wasn't Levi. It was Gavin, and his message made my heart stop.

Eastman has been tailing the team since yesterday. Watch your six in case he has men near you. We lost Gabriel last night in a scuffle. Be careful.

I gritted my teeth and cleared the message, shoving my phone back into my pocket before Elena could see. Wooing her wasn't my biggest problem. It was going to be keeping her and Tyler safe.

Jason Eastman was out of control, and he would do anything to get his son and mate back. And Elena and I were the ones standing in his way.

Crap.

I smacked my hand on the end table, searching for my phone as my alarm rang incessantly. Maggie stirred on the other side of the bed and yawned loudly.

Yeah. I hated getting woken up at this ungodly hour, too. After everything that happened Thursday night and yesterday, I forgot about the fall festival today. I was supposed to bake a few cakes to donate for the cakewalk.

It was my mom's recipe, and I'd been asked if I could replicate it. I hoped I could. Her caramel icing was amazing.

I tossed the covers back and hopped out of bed. I glanced at myself in the bathroom mirror while I was washing my hands. My hair was a mess. It stuck out in weird places.

I shouldn't care. Myles might be the sexiest man I'd ever met, but I was not going there. Nope. Never again. Not going to happen. But that didn't mean I couldn't look.

Gooseflesh spread over my skin as I recalled the deep rumble of his voice. And his shirt had fit just right. Oh my

god. I smacked my hand against my forehead.

Girl. Get that mind out of the gutter.

I wasn't going to entertain a relationship.

It would only end in heartbreak. My heartbreak. He'd already said that he moved from case to case. He could be in California in a week, and I'd be just a distant memory.

Nope. I didn't need that.

I stared at myself in the mirror for another moment and then left the bathroom, my hair still a complete mess. No more relationships for me. I'd given my whole heart once, and that bastard had trampled all over it.

Never again.

Still, it'd be nice to travel. I'd always wanted to get out of this small town but didn't have anywhere that I could go. There was no family to move close to. No friends outside of this place.

Not that I had too many people that I considered friends anymore. Then there was Maggie. She'd been my mom's dog and still had lots of life left in her. I couldn't just put her in a shelter or kennel her all the time. I glanced down at her as she padded through the house beside me.

My eyes drifted to the couch where Myles slept. His arm hung off the couch, touching the floor. His feet stuck off the edge. How could he be comfortable? Poor guy.

It was a two-bedroom house though, and Tyler had taken the other bedroom. He hadn't complained about the accommodations.

Myles moved in his sleep and the blanket draped over him slipped down, exposing his broad shoulders and his chest. My mouth popped open. He was ripped. I'd figured by the way his shirt had hugged him yesterday that he was built but seeing him. Oh boy. Heat pooled in my belly.

I shook my head and forced my gaze away. *Not going there, Elena, remember?* I went to the kitchen and pulled out the mixer and a few cake pans. Then I found my mom's recipe and got to work.

I got so wrapped up in baking that I didn't hear Myles get up. When I saw the cupboard door open out of the corner of my eye, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

I whirled around, scraper in hand. A glob of batter splatted onto the floor. Maggie dove forward, licking it up before I could stop her.

"Good morning," Myles said as he took out a glass. He went to the fridge and filled it with water.

My heart pounded in my chest as I stood there like an idiot with my scraper still raised up like it was some sort of weapon.

I couldn't take my eyes off him. He wore swishy shorts that hung low on his hips and I had a full view of his upper body. An image of him in my bed, making love to me, flashed through my mind.

“You okay?” Myles asked.

I snapped out of my trance and tried to get the image out of my head. It was time to invest in that vibrator I’d been looking at online. Clearly, I was depriving myself. That was the only explanation for my out-of-control thoughts.

“I’m fine.” I turned back toward the bowl and picked it up so I could finish scraping the batter into the pan.

“What are you baking? I assume not breakfast? Although, I’ll admit I have a bit of a sweet tooth,” Myles said.

“A few cakes. The fall festival is today. I just need to drop them off by ten. They’re for the cakewalk. My mom made them every year and they are always a hit and a great moneymaker for the fundraiser. They are kind of legendary around here.”

I hoped I could live up to the town’s expectations. If not, it’d just be another thing for them to talk about. I suppressed a groan.

“Oh, sounds fun.”

My eyes widened. Wait, what? “I wasn’t planning on going,” I blurted.

Sweat beaded my brow and my pulse quickened.

They would be there. My ex and my ex best friend. The happy couple that were madly in love.

Myles leaned against the counter and took a large gulp of water. “I think it might be good to go. I would like to get a feel

for the town. I didn't have much chance to look around it yesterday." He paused and glanced at the hallway that led to the bedrooms. "It might be good for Tyler, too."

I bit my lip, and I had to grip the scraper tighter so it didn't slip out of my clammy hand while I poured the batter into another cake pan.

I didn't want to see them. It didn't hurt like it used to. The problem was, they tried to act like it was no big deal. They wanted to be my friends. Like that could ever happen. It was weird.

Then people talked about me like I was a spinster. Or worse, that I'd driven my husband into the arms of my best friend.

Myles set his cup on the counter. "I mean, we don't have to go. I could step out for a few to take a look around."

And let him get bamboozled by the nosy gossipers. No thanks. Who knows what they would ask him? Or tell him. I shuddered.

"No." I popped the three cake pans in the oven. "It's going to be crazy in town today. Not a good idea to go out. The festival draws everyone out."

"Festival?" Tyler's voice piped up.

I turned around. He stood in the doorway to the second bedroom. Maggie padded over to give him a big kiss on the cheek.

"Can we go?" he asked.

How could I say no to him? He was a kid. Of course, he would want to go.

Myles looked at me. I shifted on my feet before forcing a smile. “Of course. We’ll go after I get these cakes baked and iced.” My eyes drifted to the stove clock. It was barely even seven. The festival didn’t start for several hours. Maybe we could get in and out before it got into full swing.

“Can I help you?” Tyler asked. “Mommy used to let me help her in the kitchen back home. Until we had to run away.” His face fell.

My mouth popped open at his words and my brain fought to come up with something, anything, to say to that.

I swallowed and then shared a look with Myles, who seemed to be just as affected by Tyler’s comment as me.

Elena, pull it together!

“Sure. Wash your hands and come on over.” I grabbed one of the kitchen chairs and pulled it to the counter. He was at the awkward height where the chair made him too tall, but standing on his own too short. “What did you and your mom bake?” I asked, curious. Candice had never been much of a baker.

Tyler crinkled his nose. “Nothing like this. Mostly boxed stuff.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Mom and I had been the cooks. Candice had enjoyed watching and sampling. She was always

stealing little bits of cookie dough or batter when she thought we weren't looking.

“Have you heard from my mom?” Tyler asked as he went to the sink. Myles helped him get the water turned on.

“She is with some of the people that I work with. They are going to take good care of her,” Myles said.

I hoped he was right. I might not have talked to my sister in years, but she was the only family I had.

“Glad we came?” Myles asked as he joined me at the temporary fence by the merry-go-round.

I leaned forward and put my elbows on the rail. “Yeah. It’s not been too bad.” Tyler was having a great time. He’d rode every ride at least three times and had an ungodly amount of junk food. I hoped it didn’t come back to haunt us later.

“Was that your team you were talking to?” I asked. He’d been on the phone a moment ago.

“Yeah. Jason is still on their tail. It’s not great, but that means we are safe here,” he said.

I blew out a breath. “But Candice isn’t.” I bit my lip to keep it from trembling.

I put my hand over my mouth and leaned against the fence.

Please let Candice be all right.

Myles put his hand on my shoulder and pulled me into a hug. I curled into him. His embrace felt like home. I’d never

felt this way with my ex. Ever. Sure, I'd been comfortable, but something about this just felt like it was meant to be.

And I did not need to be thinking like that.

He rubbed his hand up and down my back. "My team will take care of her. They are good at what they do."

I nodded. That's what he kept saying. I didn't like that. I still had only vague details about what was going on. I got that some of it was classified but I was in the middle of the case. Surely, I had the right to know some things.

The merry-go-round slowed and came to a stop, pulling me from my thoughts. Tyler came running up to us, asking for one more ride.

"Go ahead." Myles handed him another ticket.

"How many of those did you get?" I asked. There was still a roll in his hands. We might be here until midnight.

"Enough to last all day," he chuckled.

I rolled my eyes but couldn't fight back my smile. It was sweet. This was his job. He didn't have to be kind to me or Tyler. I watched as Tyler got back up on the same horse he'd been on the last ride.

The back of my neck tickled and the feeling that someone was watching me rolled through me. My eyes scanned the crowd. It didn't take me long to find the source. Belinda and Greta, two of the nosiest people in town, were staring and pointing at Myles and I.

Fantastic. I pulled away from Myles and put some distance between us.

“You all right?” he asked. He followed my line of sight. “Ah. They think we’re together.”

I could only imagine what stories they would spin up now. By the time I finally heard them, they were outrageous.

“Why do you care what they think so much?” he asked.

I opened my mouth, but then closed it. It took me a minute to come up with a good answer. There were so many reasons I hated it. “I hate being the center of attention, and people in this town have been pestering me about my love life for the past year.”

It had been nonstop. Some of them had been sympathetic. Others had even gone almost so far as to blame me. Then there were the random few who wanted to set me up. I just wanted to be left alone.

“If there is one thing I’ve learned, it’s that people will always find fault with anything you do. And it’s impossible to live up to everyone else’s expectations. The only person whose opinion matters is your own,” Myles said.

I drew in a breath and let it out. He had a point. It wasn’t that simple, though. I mean, it could be, but it would require me to let go of a lot of things and I didn’t know if I had it in me.

“Why do you stay here if you don’t like it?” he asked before I could say anything.

“I don’t have anywhere else to go.” The words tumbled out before I could think about them. It was the raw, honest, truth. I bit my lip. “I don’t have any other family aside from Candice. No friends that live someplace else. I’d love to leave. My job doesn’t tie me here. I could work remotely anywhere. I just...” I shrugged my shoulders. “Don’t know where to go. My mom’s house is here. It’s the only home I’ve ever known.”

“I get it,” Myles said. “It’s difficult to walk away from everything you’ve ever known.”

“I almost listed my mom’s house after she passed,” I whispered.

“Why didn’t you?”

I didn’t have a good reason other than I was a coward. This town was all I’d ever known. “How do you do it? Move around and not have roots anywhere?” I asked. It sounded like he bounced from case to case. One town to the next.

“I talk to Sal and Dory all the time. Levi too. We are about the same age and are pretty close. I visit Sal and Dory when I can. I have my team. We are like a family,” he said.

“Except you are the fifth wheel, right?” Hadn’t he said he worked with two couples?

He scrubbed a hand over his jaw and chuckled. “Jace and Maisy just finally got together. Honestly, Conner and I thought they already were. That’s how in tune they were with each other. Shared a room and bed and everything. But they were just close friends until they were something more. I don’t

know how it happened. Not sure I want to. But I'm happy for them. The way they are together. It's something else." He had a goofy, star-struck look on his face. Like he couldn't believe it.

I smiled. I didn't know them, but it must be nice to have someone that just got you.

I'd thought I'd had that once. I'd never been more wrong.

Speak of the devil. There they were across the way. I did not feel like talking to them right now in front of Myles. "I'm going to run to the bathroom. Do you have Tyler?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure."

I hurried off toward the school where they had the bathrooms open. I chanced a glance over my shoulder and caught Myles looking after me. I gave him a wave and then hurried toward the high school, glad that my ex and ex best friend were nowhere to be seen now.

They weren't the only ones I had to watch out for, though. Mrs. Jackson spotted me and came running over.

"Elena, darling, how are you?" she pulled me in for a hug.

Mrs. Jackson was Mark's mom, Alice. My ex-mother-in-law. I supposed I hadn't divorced her, but that didn't mean I wanted to come for Thanksgiving or Christmas when Mark and Amy were going to be there. No thanks.

She pulled away from me but kept her hands on my shoulders. "How have you been? You look beautiful as always."

“Good. Good.” I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear and shifted on my feet. “And you?”

“Oh, you know, always busy this time of year. I saw you’re here with someone. Good for you.” She gave me a wide grin. “You deserve so much happiness. I wish my son would have been the one to do it, but I’m happy to see you moving on.”

Great! Everyone definitely thought Myles and I were together.

“And who’s the little boy? Is he his? Doesn’t look much like him, though,” she said, tilting her head to the side.

She was fishing for information. “He’s Candice’s boy.”

“Oh.” She leaned back, her eyes getting wide. “I didn’t know she was back in town.”

“She’s not. I’m watching him for her until she sorts some things out.” Like her crazy ex trying to kill her. You know, normal stuff.

“Oh, I see.” She reached out and rubbed my arm. “That’s very sweet of you. Your boyfriend must be very kind to help with that.”

And now she was trying to get info on me.

“So, that is your boyfriend,” Amy’s voice rang out in a singsong ‘told you so’ way.

I twisted and huffed when I saw Amy and Mark making their way over to me. Amy pulled me into a hug, squeezing me close.

Mark angled himself so he was embracing both of us. When Amy pulled back, she had a wide smile on her face. “It’s so good to see you. I’ve been wanting to catch up.”

I forced a tight-lipped smile. “I’ve been busy.” Mostly true. I’d been doing a lot of work lately and with working from home, there wasn’t much reason to go out except to get the necessities.

“We should catch up.” She wrapped her arm around Mark’s waist. “I’d love to get together and go Christmas shopping soon.”

“Um...” I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear.

“Oh, and Thanksgiving is just around the corner. Do you have plans, darling?” Alice asked. She made a pouty face. “You and that handsome fellow could come over. Your nephew, too.”

I didn’t have plans. And Myles and Tyler would probably be gone by then. I’d probably eat a sad little meal all by myself. Or there were a few restaurants open a few towns over. Maybe I’d go there.

“You should come,” Alice said.

Amy stood on her tiptoes and pecked Mark on the cheek. “Absolutely. We are hosting. You should see what we’ve done with the place. It looks amazing, right, darling?”

I looked away from them as my jaw worked. “Oh. I’m sure it does.”

The house Mark and I had bought together was supposed to be *our* fixer upper. There had been so many things I'd wanted to do but hadn't gotten to before the split happened.

We'd only been in the house for a few weeks when my mom was diagnosed. The cancer had been aggressive and the treatments just as bad.

"Promise you'll come." Amy grabbed my hand and squeezed it.

"I...uh..." Going there was the last thing I wanted to do.

"There she is," Myles's voice piped up over the rest of the crowd. He had Tyler on his shoulders, a feat I didn't even want to ask how he'd managed. The two made their way to us and he stopped next to me, kneeling so Tyler could wriggle down. "He's finally decided he's done with the merry-go-round."

I laughed out loud at that. "That's good. Watching you go in all those circles was making me dizzy."

He grabbed my hand and pointed. "I want you and Myles to take me on the big slides so we can race."

I followed Tyler's finger. I hadn't ridden on a slide since I was a kid. It sounded fun. "Okay." I turned back to Mark, Amy, and Alice and waved. "It was nice seeing you." I put my arm around Tyler and scooted us toward the slide before anyone could protest.

Myles caught up to me. He put his arm around me from the other side. "You okay? Things seemed awkward."

I sighed. "I'm fine." I was.

“You sure? Things looked...tense. Were they giving you a hard time?” Myles walked up ahead of us and grabbed three potato sacks. He handed one to Tyler, who took off up the stairs after grabbing it from him.

I might as well get everything out in the open. He was going to find out one way or another anyhow. It might as well come from me. “Mark is my ex-husband. Amy used to be my best friend. Until I found them having sex at our house in our bed.”

“I’m sorry.” Myles’s arm tightened around me.

“I got so wrapped up in taking care of my mom that I neglected my marriage.”

“Whoa.” Myles grasped my arm and pulled me to a stop before we hit the stairs. “No part of that is any of your fault. We all get busy, but you don’t run out on someone when they’re going through a rough patch.”

I smiled. “Thanks for that. I know I’m better off now without them. It’s just...they make it weird. Amy calls me and corners me whenever we run into each other. She acts like nothing happened between us and wants to still be my BFF. I trusted her. Her and Mark both. I can’t just pretend that didn’t happen.”

“You shouldn’t.” Myles let go of my arm, and we started climbing up the steps again. “Friends don’t do that to each other.”

“I just don’t get how she can act like nothing happened. You know. It’s weird.” I shrugged.

I put my hand on the rail as my breath got labored. We were halfway up the steps. I didn't remember them being this tall when I was a kid. I needed to get out and exercise more.

"It is weird. She probably feels guilty. Her actions cost her, her best friend. She might just be trying to pretend nothing is wrong because she doesn't want to make it her fault."

"I guess I never thought of it that way. I miss Alice, Mark's mom. She was like a second mom to me growing up. When my mom passed, she was really helpful." Alice had been my rock when I needed a shoulder to cry on.

The two people I should have been able to count on were too busy indulging in each other. That was the biggest betrayal. I guess it's true what they say. You always find out who your true friends are when you are at your worst.

"What about your dad?" Myles asked.

I shrugged and put my head down so my chin was touching my chest as we finished our climb up the steps. "He left when I was eight. I haven't seen him since."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. My mom did a lot for me and Candice. She was the best. Worked two jobs so we wouldn't miss out on anything." She'd never minded once either. And somehow, she'd made it to all our extracurricular activities.

"She sounds like a remarkable woman. I wish I'd have gotten the chance to meet her," Myles said.

“Me, too.” Mom would have liked Myles. She’d supported my decision to marry Mark but had never truly liked him for me. I didn’t realize how right she was until too late.

Myles...I barely knew him, but I had a feeling she would have gotten along with him. I shook my thoughts away and joined Tyler at the top of the slide.

“All right, buddy, are you ready for this?” I asked, watching as Myles helped Tyler lay out his mat.

Then Myles lifted Tyler up and settled him down. “No head starts. That’s cheating,” Myles said with a laugh.

Tyler’s eyes lit up as he turned to look down the hill. I set my mat down next to Tyler, so he was between Myles and me. “On three?” I asked.

The two guys nodded.

I met Myles’s gaze, and we counted together. “One, two, three.”

I shoved off the side and together the three of us sailed down the huge slide. I looked over at Tyler and Myles. They had the biggest grins on their faces. Tyler was easy to fall in love with. I shouldn’t go there with Myles.

This was temporary. A job for him. He’d leave once the danger was gone. I didn’t want to have my heart broken again. Nothing could happen between us, but that didn’t stop me from wondering what it might be like to kiss him.

I played with the shakers on the table, slowly spinning them around as I waited for Myles and Tyler to join me.

After having the house full the past few days, it had been weird to have it to myself again. Tyler had his first day of school today and Myles had stuck around in the background to make sure the transition was smooth. Then they'd gone to the park with promises to meet me here for dinner.

My eyes drifted to my phone that was sitting to my right. I tapped it to see the time. They were five minutes late.

I'm sure everything was fine. There were plenty of reasons to be late.

My mind drifted to all the times Mark had been late. He had an excuse. Worked late. Traffic. The usual. And I'd believed him. Every single time.

I swallowed and bit my lip as angry tears pricked my eyes. God, I'd been an idiot.

And it appeared fate wasn't done with me yet. Amy walked into the pizzeria and put her purse on the counter as she

chatted with the clerk.

I groaned and leaned back in my chair, wishing I could sink into the floor.

Please don't turn around.

Amy slapped her hand on the counter and threw her head back, laughing.

I shifted in my seat.

She put one hand on her hip and looked over her shoulder. As soon as she saw me, her eyes lit up like a kid on Christmas. She said something to the clerk and then hurried over to me.

Amy didn't wait for an invitation to sit down. She slid the chair out and plopped down. "Hey, how's it going?"

Heat scorched its way over my cheeks. I gritted my teeth and pushed the shakers back to the center of the table. I shoved a little too hard. One shaker tipped over, sending a dusting of parmesan across the table.

I grumbled under my breath as I snatched a few napkins from the bin. I still hadn't answered her, and I could feel her eyes boring into me.

"I'm waiting for Myles and Tyler. We've been doing good, thanks." I brushed the dried cheese into the napkin and crumpled it up.

Amy narrowed her eyes. She put her elbow on the table and leaned so her chin was resting on her palm. "He doesn't seem like your type. How did the two of you meet?"

I gave her a tight-lipped smile. “It’s a long story.”

“They are running late on my pizza. I ordered it for 5:30, but of course it isn’t ready.” She rolled her eyes. “You know how much Mark hates it if he doesn’t eat by six.”

“Mmmhmm.” I remembered. That man turned into the biggest whiner. He gave new meaning to the word ‘hangry.’

Amy slapped her hand on the table. “Speaking of food, you never did say if you’d make it for Thanksgiving. Mark and I would love to have you over. I’m dying to show you what we’ve done with the place.”

I splayed my hands across the table and stared at the wood grains. Wow. What the hell was I supposed to say?

Thanks, but I’d rather die.

I’d loved that house and had so many ideas for it. I didn’t want to see how Amy and Mark had destroyed it.

Amy inched forward. “So, what do you say?”

“I don’t think so.” My voice came out more of a squeak.

My eyes darted around the restaurant. A few women in the booth in the next aisle were watching us. They looked away as soon as they saw me looking.

Amy wriggled in her seat. “You could invite your man candy and, of course, that cutie pie, Tyler.”

I cleared my throat. “Thanks, but I don’t think we are going to make it.”

She made a pouty face. “Oh, no. Do you have other plans?”

Something landed on the back of my chair. Before I could turn around, Myles spoke up, “We were planning on going to see my parents for the holidays.”

His hand slid from the back of the chair to my shoulder.

I leaned back, falling into his touch. He was warm, making heat spread through me. My heart pounded in my chest and I leaned back, wanting to feel more of him. “That’s right. I’m looking forward to meeting Sal and Dory.”

I prayed this lie didn’t come back to bite me in the ass later. Knowing my luck, it would. The tips of my ears burned as the two women openly stared at us now.

Amy shook her head and gave Myles a wide grin. “Do they celebrate Thanksgiving where you are from?”

Myles slid the chair out for Tyler, but he didn’t leave my side. “Massachusetts?”

Amy blinked rapidly as she sputtered. “Oh. Well, yeah. You don’t sound like you are from around here.”

Myles let his hand slide across the back of my neck. I inhaled, my pulse roared, and my nipples hardened.

My god, what was he doing to me?

“I’ve lived in the states over half my life. I celebrate. My family is dying to meet Elena.” Myles leaned down and kissed my cheek. His lips lingered against my skin. “I’ve told them so many wonderful things about her.”

Holy crap. I couldn’t breathe.

My hand went to my chest. Gooseflesh pebbled my skin. I wasn't sure if I wanted to push him away or pull him closer and kiss him for real.

I cleared my throat. I had no business thinking like that. "So, anyway, I'm busy. Thanks for the invite." I sounded breathless even to my own ears.

Tyler leaned toward Amy and made a sound, something between a growl and a hiss. Which didn't make sense, but that's what it sounded like.

Amy reeled back; her eyes wide as she stared at Tyler.

I covered my mouth to suppress my laugh.

The clerk at the counter called out Amy's name. She turned in her chair, then gave us one last look before excusing herself.

Myles trailed his hand along the back of my chair as he took the seat next to me. "Are you okay?"

The air whooshed out of my lungs as I leaned forward and covered my face with my hands. "Yeah."

"Are you sure?"

Tyler put his hand on my elbow. "That lady was making you upset."

It wasn't a question. I let my hands drop to the table with a thud as I looked into Tyler's worried eyes. I forced a smile that made my cheeks hurt. "It's okay. I'm fine." I narrowed my eyes. "Did you hiss at her?"

Tyler's eyes widened and his gaze shot to Myles.

Myles laughed out loud. “I guess we could both tell how uncomfortable she was making you.”

I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear and nodded. “Yeah. Running into her twice in a few days’ time is enough to drive anyone mad.”

Myles plucked the menu from the bin in the middle of the table. “Have you already ordered?”

I pulled an extra menu from the holder and set it in front of Tyler. “Not yet. I wasn’t sure what the two of you would want.” I put my hand over my heart. “I could eat pizza every day, but I didn’t want to assume you would want that.” We’d just had it the other night.

Tyler leaned forward and put his menu back. “I love pizza. Mommy used to get us pizza every Friday.”

Myles set his down, too. “Same here. I could live off it.”

Looks like we all had something else in common. I smiled and patted Tyler’s hand. “Friday night pizza night was a tradition we had growing up. I’m glad your mom keeps it alive.”

Myles waved. I turned in the direction he was looking. Jeez, it was the two women again. Gossipers. They were getting all the details tonight.

They had the decency to look away now that Myles had caught them.

He leaned forward and met my gaze. “I hope I didn’t make you uncomfortable earlier. I was trying to help.”

My breath hitched. My eyes darted to his lips. They were full and oh so kissable. My tongue darted out as I inched forward.

What am I doing?

I reeled back like he'd slapped me and stood up so abruptly my chair almost fell over. Well, now the nosy ladies were going to have something to talk about.

"I'm going to go order. Regular pepperoni and three drinks?"

Myles leaned back in his chair, giving me a good view of his solid frame and muscled upper body. I forced my gaze to his.

Myles smiled. "Sounds good."

Tyler pushed up on his knees and reached across the table for the crayons in the center of it. "I like pepperoni."

I clasped my locket in my hand and made for the front of the restaurant. It wasn't until I was halfway there, I realized Amy was still there.

She was standing with her back against the wall, looking at her phone. Maybe I could place my order and retreat to the table without any further interaction.

I got my order in and grabbed the number for the table. Almost free.

Not quite.

"Elena?" Amy said in a singsong voice.

I turned on my heel and clutched the number to my stomach. “Yeah.”

Her gaze darted to the table where Tyler and Myles were. “I’m glad to see you happy again. I hope you can make this one stick.” She fanned herself. “He is hot. And that accent...”

I gripped the plastic number tighter, bending it in at an awkward angle. If I wasn’t careful, it might break. “Thanks. How are things with you and Mark?”

My stomach churned.

She smiled as her eyes lit up. “Fantastic.” She put her hand on her hip. “We are thinking of trying for a baby once the renovations are done.”

“That’s nice. Both of you always wanted big families.”

Amy reached forward and rubbed my arm. “I know you do, too, sweetie. I’m sure you and Myles would have cute kids. If you can make it work with him, that is.”

My brows knitted together. “Why wouldn’t it work?”

Other than the obvious that we weren’t dating, but Amy didn’t know that.

Amy’s bottom lip jutted out like a toddler trying to get their way. “Oh, sweetheart, he just doesn’t look like the settling type. Or your type, really.” She put both hands to her mouth as she sighed. “I’m sure Mr. Right is out there for you somewhere. I just don’t want to see you get hurt again. You’ve been a hermit since your breakup with Mark.”

My mouth popped open as I sputtered.

What a bitch!

The clerk at the counter called out her name, and she pushed off the wall to get her pizza. “Anyway, let me know if you want to talk once Myles leaves. Be careful with him. I know you go all in and I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

Amy waved at me as she grabbed her pizza and sauntered to the door.

My pulse pounded in my ears, and angry tears pricked my eyes. I hated that I cried when I got mad.

I reached one hand up to swipe them away as I exhaled through my nose. How had that woman been my best friend for years?

She was a narcissistic bitch who had broken my heart and betrayed me in the worst possible way. I’d trusted her with everything.

My gaze slid to the table. Myles and Tyler both had their backs to me, oblivious to the little display that had happened. Of course, the two nosy women had seen it. They were staring directly at me.

I plastered a smile on my face and marched back to the table. I wasn’t going to give them any more ammunition against me. Lord knows they already had enough dirt to talk about me for the rest of the month.

Amy had opened my eyes to one thing. She’d been my best friend. Mark, too. I’d never seen their deception coming. If I

was that wrong about two people I'd known my entire life, then I could never trust Myles, a man I'd met only a few days ago.

I had to protect my heart. And Tyler's. At any cost.

It didn't matter how hot he was or what he did to my body, I could never let myself fall for him. Never.

Seven

I set the book I'd been reading on the nightstand next to Tyler's bed. The kid was out like a light.

Elena shifted off the bed, slowly getting to her feet so she didn't wake him.

Then, together, we both tiptoed out of the room. Elena shut the door behind us and let out a sigh. "He went down quick tonight."

I nodded as I moved toward the front room. "He must've been tired. First day of school, the park, and then the pizza parlor, big day for him."

Elena chewed on her fingernail as she sat down on the couch. "Did he seem okay at school?"

I mashed my lips together as I thought about it. I'd kept an eye on him from afar. "I think so. A few kids talked to him and it looked like he was paying attention when the teacher was talking. He made a few friends at recess."

"Hmmm." Elena nodded her head. "Sounds like he's already doing better than his mom."

I took a seat next to her and turned so I was facing her. “And what about you? Were you good at school?”

Elena put a hand over her chest as a wide smile spread over her face. “I carried a 4.0 GPA my entire high-school career. I was also captain of the girl’s swim team and volleyball team.”

“Swimming and volleyball?”

The smile slid from her face and she leaned back into the cushions. “Fat lot of good it does me today, but it meant a lot in high school.” She fiddled with her locket, opening and closing it in her hand before she stood up. “I think I’m going to head off to bed. It has been a long day.”

I pushed to my feet, too. “Hey, are you okay?”

Her eyes darted to mine for a second before she looked at the floor. She nibbled on her bottom lip as her brows pinched together.

When she didn’t say anything, I continued, “It’s just you’ve been really quiet since we got dinner.”

She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “Amy just got me thinking. Once you leave, once this is all over, I’m going to have another breakup for the town to talk about.” Her gaze flitted up to mine, her cheeks flushed, and she cleared her throat. “I know we aren’t actually together, but they don’t know that.”

Ah. Her friend, or ex friend, had gotten something into her head. “Why do you care so much about what they think?”

She opened her mouth and then shut it. She flopped back onto the couch and let her head fall against the pillows. “Curse of a small town. Everyone talks and everyone knows each other’s business.”

She’d said as much the other night. “Yeah, but why does it bother you so much? Let them think and say what they want. You know the truth.”

Elena covered her face with her hands and groaned. “I guess I don’t like being the center of attention. I don’t like it when people look at me like I’m a failure.”

She slid her hands down her face and let them rest on her neck. Her gaze went to a far-off spot that I couldn’t see. “Look at her. She couldn’t keep her marriage together. She couldn’t even get her sister to come home for her mom’s funeral.’ Or ‘now she’s got some guy living with her out of the blue. I wonder how long that will last.’”

I sat back down on the couch. “Everyone has failures in their life. There is no real way around it. It’s what you do after it that defines who you are.”

She let her hands fall to her sides. Her one hand landed next to mine, almost close enough to touch me. “Yeah, but it’s a small town, everyone is watching and they are first-hand witnesses to it. Then there is the sympathy looks and the gossip. I hate it. Everybody knows each other here. And then some people try to set me up, like that is what I need.”

“Set you up?”

Who? Why? When? She was mine, and I didn't want anyone thinking they could move in on my mate.

Elena rolled her eyes. "A few people have tried to set me up with their nephew or son." She stuck her tongue out. "I'm so not interested, and I know those relationships wouldn't work out."

I nodded and grabbed her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Failure is a part of life. It's something we all live with and must accept. It's how we come out of it that defines us. If I may be so bold, I think Amy is jealous that you are, apparently, moving on with your life so soon after everything."

Elena made a pouty face as she turned to me. "I hate that she knows how to get under my skin." She rubbed at her neck with her free hand. "I hate being the center of attention. I'm an introvert. I don't go out of my way to talk to people or make plans. I think that's part of what it is as well."

"I get that. When I first moved in with Sal and Dory, I was not only the new kid, but the new kid with the weird accent from some faraway land. Kids asked so many questions. They wanted to know why and how my parents died. No one else in the grade had lost their parents, so they were extra curious. I just wanted my family back." I raked my free hand through my hair. Sal and Dory had been great, but as one of the few dragon shifters left on this earth, I'd never felt more alone.

Elena curled her fingers through mine. "That must have been awful. It makes my grumbling seem like small potatoes."

“Losing your mom and being betrayed by two people you thought you could trust is a big deal.” It was unforgivable. Just thinking about what they’d done to Elena gave me a bad taste in my mouth. “I don’t think it matters what age we are when we lose our parents. It will always shake us to our core.”

“I think you are probably right about that. Even though I knew it was happening, I wasn’t prepared.” Elena looked down at our hands and then wriggled her fingers out of my grasp. She flexed her hand. “I’ll try not to let them get to me anymore.”

I grinned. “Good.”

She licked her lips and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “I’m not sure how easy it will be.”

I fought the urge to reach out and drag her to me. I wanted nothing more than to press her against me and hug her to ease her worries away. “It won’t be easy at first, but how about we take it one day at a time?”

She closed her eyes and let out a long breath. “Okay. One day at a time.”

“Tomorrow, you should come to the park with us after school. If you have the time, that is. How was work today?” She hadn’t gotten much done the past few days with Tyler and me both in the house.

She blew out a breath as she blinked her eyes open. “I’m working on a big project for a fortune five hundred company. They want a few pages added and lots of changes to their site.

We'll have to see how much work I get done tomorrow. But some sun might be nice. It's been really warm this fall."

"It's supposed to be nice all week. Tyler asked if we could go every day. It would give you some extra time to work, then."

"We'll see how far I get tomorrow. I'll make it at least one or two days this week. Some fresh air and a change of scenery would be good. You know, no matter how busy my mom was working, she always made time for Candice and me. I want to be there for Tyler." Her gaze darted across the room to Maggie, who was getting up from her spot on the floor.

Elena patted the couch in between us as Maggie trotted over. Maggie jumped up on the couch, circled around the center cushion, and then plopped down with her head on Elena's leg.

Elena scratched the dog's ears. "Is Tyler really afraid of her?"

"Huh?" I asked. Oh right. We'd said that the other morning.

Her brows scrunched together. "He doesn't seem to be. I saw him petting her a few times. I would think if he was afraid, he'd be keeping his distance."

I had to recover. And fast.

Think!

"He's only ever been around cats. Dogs are just new to him. I told him that Maggie was friendly and that he didn't have to

worry about her. I think that helped.” I shrugged. My hand went to the dog’s back so I could rub it.

Elena scratched behind Maggie’s ears. “She is a sweetheart. We’ve always had dogs. I didn’t think Candice liked cats. She watched one of her friend’s cats while they were away on vacation, and she complained the whole time about how smelly their litter boxes were, and just how gross they were in general.”

I couldn’t help but laugh out loud at that. She was mated to a cat shifter. Talk about ironic. “I guess she changed her mind.”

Elena rolled her eyes as she chuckled. “I guess so.” She sat up straighter and met my eyes. She stopped petting Maggie and her other hand went to her chest. “Have you heard anything? Is she okay? I just realized I haven’t asked you the past few days.”

“My boss, Gavin, checks in everyday to let me know how things are with her and to see how things are here. So far, they are holed up in a hotel and safe.”

Elena fiddled with her locket. “No sightings of Jason then?”

I shook my head. “He’s close to them. I know they had to move around a few times already. The team is keeping her safe. I promise.” And we’d lost a good agent.

She flattened her hand against her chest. “He sounds like a real creep. I don’t know how Candice could fall for someone so messed up.”

I sighed and closed my eyes. I'd read the file on Jason Eastman. "He was a good guy up until a year or so ago, if that makes you feel any better." I opened my eyes and met her gaze.

She nibbled on her lower lip and stared down at the dog as she continued to rub Maggie's ears. "He just flipped then? Do we know why?"

I exhaled and pinched the bridge of my nose. "No."

I'd done some digging but hadn't come up with anything. His pack was on the straight and narrow, with nothing but praises for Jason and his leadership. Something had happened to flip him over the edge, but most things that happened within the pride were kept private. We might never find out what it was, but whatever it was, had been big enough to convince the whole community to side with him in his quest for power.

Elena groaned and buried her face into the dog's fur. "I don't know if that makes me feel better or worse that my sister and I both fell for guys and were duped by them."

She giggled as the dog licked her face.

I patted Maggie's belly. "Not that it excuses it, but we all make decisions that shape our future based on the things that happen to us."

Elena nodded. "I suppose that makes sense. It also goes to show that you never really know what someone is capable of."

I rubbed at the back of my neck. This conversation was going south fast. "I suppose you don't, but we can't stop

seeing the best in people, Elena. Don't be afraid to live because of a few rotten people in your life. They chose to go that route through no fault of your own."

Her gaze fixated on some far-off spot again. "I still can't help but think that part of it is my fault."

I reached over and tucked my finger under her chin so she had to look up at me. "What they did was rotten and has nothing to do with you. That jerk should have been here helping you with your mom. That's what families do." I dropped my hand back to the dog and rubbed Maggie's other ear.

"My mom never really did like Mark." She laughed out loud and closed her eyes. "She would have gotten a kick out of you. I can guarantee it."

"Oh?"

"She always wanted to visit Europe, Ireland in particular. Candice had a coach for soccer once with an accent. She swooned over him. He was the only guy I ever saw Mom look at." She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear as a rosy pink spread over her cheeks.

"I would have liked the opportunity to meet her. And she would have loved Ireland." I sucked in a breath. "Have you ever considered going?"

Her eyes widened. "To Ireland?"

I shrugged. "Ireland, Europe?" I'd take her anywhere.

“Who hasn’t? The cost is ridiculous. The plane tickets alone are a few thousand dollars.”

I grinned. “I could get you there. No charge.” My dragon could get her there in no time. It ached below the surface, begging to come out, but Elena wasn’t ready to see him yet. She wasn’t even ready to consider a relationship. I needed to tread carefully.

She fumbled for the locket around her neck. “That would be nice. Maybe one day.” She licked her lips as she looked away. “Do you go to Europe often?”

“Sometimes. The job takes me all over the world. I haven’t been back to Ireland since I was a kid. It might be nice to go back to my hometown.”

“Wow! So, you travel the world then for work? Like the CIA?” Her eyes narrowed.

“Something like that.” And we were back to treading in dangerous territory.

“Hmmm.”

She ran her hand through Maggie’s hair as she sighed heavily.

I covered her hand with mine. Her gaze snapped up to meet mine, her breath hitched, and her tongue darted out to wet her lips.

Then, just as quickly, she shot to her feet and stumbled backward so fast she almost fell over. “You know, it’s getting

late and I'm beat. I should head to bed." She moved along the couch toward the hall. "I'll see you in the morning."

I waved dumbly. "Good night."

And just like that, the mood and our conversation were ruined. She felt the attraction between us. I just needed her to realize that what was between us was real, and that I wasn't anything like that loser, Mark. It was a task that wasn't going to be easy, but I would give her as long as I needed.

The problem was that this case would end sooner or later and then, I'd have to be on my way.

Eight

Elena huffed as she sat down next to me on the park bench. She fiddled with her phone as her jaw worked.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“That was Tyler’s teacher. She said that he is not settling and doesn’t seem to be coping well.” She dabbed at the corner of her eye and fixed her gaze on where Tyler was playing with a few other kids on the playground.

The trio looked to be having a good time. It looked like they were playing tag. “Why does she say that? He seems okay here. And around us,” I said.

He was laughing and playing with the two other boys like they’d known each other forever. And he’d done nothing but talk about school all week.

Elena traced her finger around the outline of her phone case. “I guess he’s behind on a lot of things and becomes agitated when he doesn’t know the answer. She started asking about his last school. And I realized I don’t have the answers.” She

tossed her hands in the air. “Was he even in school? I don’t know.”

I didn’t have the answer to that.

I shook my head. “He seems to do okay socially. School is tough for everyone. It’s only been a week. And we told her that he was coming from a rough situation.”

I couldn’t believe that a week ago I’d walked into their lives. We’d become a family unit quickly. Tyler seemed to be doing well with Elena and me. I didn’t know what was happening at school, but I’d be sure to drop in and find out.

“I know. It’s only been a week. I don’t understand why Mrs. Gibson is being so uptight. Actually, I do. She’s always had a thorn up her butt.” She stuck out her tongue. “She was my teacher in fifth grade.”

“And you didn’t like her?” I asked with a smile.

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Nope. She used to read straight out of the textbook. And was never any fun. Maybe the issue is her and not Tyler.”

“I think you might be right.” I pointed to where he was chasing after one of the other kids. “He looks happy. Besides, he’s been through a lot. To expect him to adjust right away is ridiculous. A teacher should know better.”

“Do you know about his schooling situation? Maybe I could try to tutor him a little in the evenings. She said he was really struggling with reading.” Elena shifted on the bench and then crossed one leg over the other.

“I don’t know about his previous schooling,” I said. Some shifter communities relied solely on home school and didn’t believe in leaving the shifter community. From what I learned of his dad, that was a possibility. “He might have been homeschooled.”

“By Candice.” Elena made a sound and covered her face. “I love my sister, but she was doing good if she could maintain all Cs. They’ve made the curriculum harder now. Have you seen that common core math stuff? Talk about overcomplicating something.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know much about the curriculum.” I didn’t get many cases that involved children.

“Have you heard from your team? Any news yet?” Elena asked. She turned, so that she was facing me.

Our eyes met, and I got lost in her gaze for a long moment. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips. I followed its movements. I wanted nothing more than to lean forward and capture those lush lips. I blinked and looked away. “They haven’t checked in today.”

They hadn’t checked in yesterday, either. I’d sent word to Gavin, my boss, to follow up but he hadn’t gotten back to me. It was concerning, something I wouldn’t worry Elena with until I had concrete answers.

“Oh.”

I reached out and put my hand over hers. “I’m sure we will hear something soon.” I prayed it was good news. But silence

was never good.

“Do you think she is okay? That your team is okay?” Elena asked. She dropped her voice to a whisper. Her eyes darted back to mine.

I drew in a breath and let it out. I didn’t want to lie to her. It was worrisome. Our teams knew what we were supposed to do and did it. There was no margin for error. Not in our line of work.

“Something’s wrong then,” she said. Her hand went to her hair, and she twiddled the ends between her fingers. “Do you think they are okay?”

“There are plenty of reasons that they went quiet. They could be lying low or on the run.” It wasn’t good, but it didn’t have to mean the worst had happened. I squeezed her hand and let out a breath.

It hit me. A scent that shouldn’t be here. The smell of a cat shifter. I stiffened and shot to my feet. My eyes narrowed to take in the park. Tyler was still running around with the other kids. I could get to him in a few seconds.

Elena stood, too. “What’s wrong?” she asked. She turned in a slow circle as she, too, looked around.

“The far east corner,” I said as my gaze landed on Jason. He was standing with a few other men. Other shifters, I’d assume. “Get Tyler. Have him stand with you. Stay right here in the middle of the park. He won’t cause a scene.”

“Right. Yeah.” She darted for Tyler, calling his name. Tyler ran toward her and threw his arms around her.

I made sure she had him and then stomped toward Jason and the members of his pride. They didn’t come to me. Instead, they crossed their arms over their chest and waited for me.

“What do you think you are doing here?” I asked. My lip curled up, and I pumped my hands at my side. They wouldn’t risk exposing either of us in a public place. Jason might be crazed, but he wasn’t stupid.

Jason took a step toward me. “I’ve come to collect what is mine. Give me my son. No one has to get hurt.”

I had a few inches on him, but he wasn’t intimidated by me. A mistake he would learn, eventually. Dragon shifters were rare. So rare that most people didn’t know what I was until I shifted. It was an advantage I planned to keep if possible.

I locked gazes with him. “I’m afraid I can’t let you have him. You are doing dangerous things with your pride. The SPS won’t stand for it. Stand down now and I’ll have them give you leniency when issuing punishment.”

The SPS was governed by a higher council made up of various shifters. They were the ones who passed judgement. Our judicial process was swift and quick as we didn’t have the means or holding facilities to care for prisoners. The ones with the most horrid crimes went to an island in the middle of nowhere, where the only inhabitants were other shifter criminals.

Jason's nostrils flared. He growled. "That's not going to happen. Candice is mine. Tyler is mine. My pride is expanding. You, the SPS, can't stop me. Get in my way and there will be casualties."

"What you're saying is all out war," I said, keeping my voice even.

He was further gone than I thought. My stomach knotted. If left unchecked, I doubted Jason would stop at Texas. He'd move on to another state and then another. He needed to be stopped.

Jason tilted his chin up and narrowed his eyes. "I know what's mine and I'm not afraid to make it so. Anyone who gets in my way will learn. Give me my son."

"No." I shook my head. "Where is the SPS team that was with Candice?" I had a bad feeling. If he was here for Tyler, he already had his mate.

Jason took a step closer to me and so did the rest of his pride. "I told you. I will take what is mine. And anyone in my way will pay the price."

I stood my ground. A tick worked in my jaw and I gritted my teeth. The other team was dead, and Candice was his prisoner. He'd all but confirmed it with his threats. This was going sideways fast. "You won't get away with this," I said with a growl.

"I already am," Jason snarled. "You think you and that pretty human can stop us? This is your last chance to walk

away. Candice doesn't want me to harm her sister, but she means nothing to me and she never said anything about you."

"This is *your* last chance to back down." I'd never turn Tyler over to him. I didn't want there to be bloodshed, but he wasn't leaving me much choice. "Leave! You are a causing a scene. It's only a matter of time before someone calls the police."

The police wouldn't stop him but they would hinder his ability to move about the town, especially a small town like this. Neither of us wanted the attention of the police.

Jason curled his lip up in disgust. "You better watch your back. We'll be coming soon. You and that pretty human get in my way..." he trailed off.

In my dragon form, I could take out the pride in a minute. I shook my head and gave him one warning. "I wouldn't."

Jason stepped closer, so he was invading my space. "I'll be seeing you real soon." He huffed and then turned to walk away, motioning for the other cats to follow him.

I watched as they left and got into a large van. It pulled out and back onto the street. Once I was sure they were gone, I hurried back to Elena. Tyler clung to her waist. His face was pale, and he was visibly trembling.

I stooped down to his level. "Hey, buddy, you okay?"

"Is Daddy going to hurt me?" he asked. Tears filled his eyes.

I put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm not going to let him." I peered around the park. The cats were gone, but we were drawing attention. "We should get going."

"To my house? Is that safe?" Elena asked. She clung to the necklace she always wore. Her eyes were wide as her gaze darted around the park like she was waiting for someone to jump out at us.

I stood up and wrapped my arm around her shoulder and led them to her car. "I'll drive." I didn't think Jason would try anything rash with his son in the car, but who knew? He didn't seem to be thinking rationally.

Elena nodded and got into the passenger seat. I'd barely backed out of the space when my phone rang. It was Gavin's tone. I dug my cell out of my pocket and swiped my finger over the screen. "Gavin."

"Are you with Elena and Tyler?" he asked.

"Yes. We ran into Jason just a moment ago. He backed off for now, but..." I didn't finish my thought. Gavin would know what I meant. I didn't want to scare Tyler or Elena any more than they already were.

"The team is dead. He has Candice," Gavin said, his voice full of remorse.

"Shit," I whispered under my breath. Those had been good people. "I can pack a bag and we can be on the road in a few."

"Negative. I've put in a few calls. The council has spread word quickly about what is happening. A local pack has

agreed to help watch over Elena's house. It will be better to stay there, anyway. The town is small. It will make it easier for you if needed. At least better than in a large city."

He had a point. I could easily shift into my dragon. My other half was strong and formidable. My biggest downfall was that I was too large at times.

I couldn't shift in highly populated areas without drawing attention and I couldn't shift in small spaces, at least not without breaking things or potentially hurting myself. "Okay. How long until they get here?" I asked. I peered into the rearview mirror to make sure we weren't being followed.

"They are assembling now. Within the hour," Gavin said. "They will make their presence known to you, but they will stay out of the house. They are only looking after the perimeter and will rotate in and out every eight to twelve hours."

"Understood." I glanced over at Elena. She stared at me. Tears misted her eyes. "Any word on Candice?" I asked. I held my breath.

"So far as we can tell, she is alive."

I nodded, and Elena relaxed back into her seat. "Good." That was a relief.

"I'll follow up with you once I get word the pack is in place," Gavin said. "Myles, be careful."

"I always am." Except it wasn't just me I had to worry about. Tyler was an innocent child, unable to protect himself.

Elena was a human who did not know that shifters existed. I'd protect them both with my life. I hoped it didn't come to that.

I put my hands on Tyler's shoulders and guided him into the house and to the couch. The poor kid was trembling. He wasn't crying, but I could see the tears welling in his eyes.

I made a shushing noise as we sat on the couch together. "Everything's okay, Tyler." I wrapped my arms around him and gave him a hug.

I hoped I wasn't lying to him, because I wasn't so sure. Something was very wrong, but I didn't want to tell him that.

I picked up the TV remote and handed it to him after turning on the TV. "Look, there is a new episode of that show you've been watching." TV as a distraction was not great, but it worked.

Once I was sure Tyler was occupied, I got up and went to Myles, who was waiting for me in the kitchen. "What is going on? Is Candice okay? Was that his dad?" I whisper-shouted at him.

Myles scrubbed a hand over his face. "That was his dad, Jason. He has Candice, and the team assigned to her is

believed to be dead.”

I put a hand on my chest and drew in a shuddering breath. My heart pounded. My palms were clammy. I needed to sit down. I pulled out the kitchen chair and fell into it. “Dead? And he has her?” I’d heard his words, but oh my god. “Are we safe here?”

We needed to leave. Run. Get as far away as possible.

I shot back to my feet.

“Hey,” he said. He put his hands on my shoulders and leveled his gaze at me. “My boss already has people on it. A team will set up surveillance around the house within the hour.”

I shook my head and looked around the room. “This is crazy. If he found us at the park, he probably knows where I live.” My hand went to my necklace, and I twisted the locket between two fingers. My stomach dropped. “He’s probably been watching us.”

My attention snapped to the front door. Was he out there now?

Myles grasped my shoulders a little tighter. “I know instinct is telling you to run. That’s not a good idea.”

“Then what do we do? He killed people. He has my sister.” I tried to keep my voice low, but it was a losing battle. Tyler peered over at us.

Myles shot Tyler a smile before he pulled me all the way into the kitchen and out of Tyler’s line of sight. “I know you’re

scared. Jason has proven that he will do horrible things. I will not let him hurt you or Tyler.”

I closed my eyes. I heard his words but... “The team watching Candice died trying to protect her.” It wasn’t his fault my sister fell in love with a psycho.

He sighed. “I know. But listen to me, Elena. Here we have the advantage of being familiar with the area. You’ve already said people are absurdly nosy. You think they won’t call the police if they see something weird?”

He had a point. But if this Jason guy tried something, could they get here in time? What if they got hurt because of this?

“The road is more dangerous. There are plenty of places they could drive us off into a ditch where we would be miles away from anyone. The closest airport is a few hours away. It’s safer to stay here in a place where Tyler feels safe; an area we have more control over.” Myles pulled me into a hug.

I fell against him and snuggled into his chest. When he held me like this, it was easy to feel safe. It was crazy to feel this way. I barely knew Myles, yet somehow, over the past week, I’d let my guard down. Myles made it so easy to trust. To fall for him.

Oh god. I was falling for him. Now wasn’t the time. My sister was in peril and in the hands of a madman. He was my nephew’s bodyguard. Did he even feel that way about me?

He smoothed a hand over my hair. “Nothing will happen to you or Tyler. You have my word.”

I closed my eyes and breathed him in. Being in his embrace helped to shake away the hysteria that had been building in me. I believed him. “What is our plan, then? We just stay locked up in the house?”

Surely, Tyler couldn’t go to school anymore. It wouldn’t affect me much. I was a hermit already. But Tyler...that didn’t seem fair.

“I think it’s best if we stay close to home for the next few days,” Myles said. “There are too many things that can happen while he’s in school. Here we have control of our surroundings.”

“How many people are going to be out there?” I flung my arm toward the window. The curtains were drawn. Myles must have done that. I hadn’t even noticed.

“Trust me. If they see anything, we will know it.”

I nibbled on my fingernails for a long moment. “Do you think Candice is okay?” I asked. Emotion clogged my throat, and I sniffled before dabbing at my eyes.

Myles was quiet for a long moment. “He took her alive. That’s a good sign.”

I nodded. True. But just because she was alive didn’t mean she was okay.

Myles tucked his finger under my chin and tilted it up. “He doesn’t want to hurt Tyler. If he tries something, it won’t be aggressive to where it might injure him.”

“So, he won’t come in here guns blazing.” I guess that was something. Part of me still wanted to run. But what he’d said made sense.

And the poor kid had already been on the run for months now. He needed some stability.

Myles’s phone chimed. He took a step back and pulled it from his pocket. “The team is in place outside. No sign of Jason or any of his friends.”

I could hear the *yet* even if he didn’t say it. I nodded. A thought occurred to me. “Wait! Why aren’t we trying to apprehend him or go after him?”

“We are working on it. I promise,” Myles said.

“Can’t you just storm in there and get Candice out?” I asked. There was something I was missing. Sure, I wasn’t a special forces officer, but it seemed like they should be more proactive.

“It’s not that simple. We have to make sure we have the right location that she is being held at and we don’t know where Jason is staying. If we go to the wrong place but are close, it will tip him off and we’ll have to search for him all over again.”

“Why didn’t you go after him in the park? You let him walk away.” I shook my head. “You could have taken him in right there and ended all of this.” Why didn’t he arrest him then?

“Elena, he wasn’t alone. There were tons of kids around, and knowing him, there would have been a fight. I know it’s

frustrating, but I couldn't put anyone else in danger. Not to mention, if I'm distracted fighting him, it would make it easier for one of his guys to grab Tyler." Myles went to the fridge and pulled out two bottles of water. He handed one to me before opening his and taking a swig.

Myles had a point. The park had been very busy today. Jason had proven that he wasn't afraid to hurt people. Would he hurt another child to get at Tyler? I didn't want to find out. Myles had made the right call.

I took a sip of my water. I just wanted this all to be over.

"I just hate this." I went to the fridge and nabbed a few of the fun-size candy bars I had in there. I ate both of them. One of these days, stress-eating chocolate bars would catch up to me. Today wasn't the day, though.

"I know. We are doing everything we can as quickly as we can."

"I should probably get dinner started." I'd made it to the store this past week and was cooking for the first time in a while.

It was nice to cook again. With it just being me, I hadn't seen the point. A girl could only eat the same leftovers for so many days before she went crazy.

"Let me help you. You still seem frazzled." Myles went to the fridge and pulled out the baking dish. We'd done meal planning. I hadn't done something like that since my mom did

it when I was a kid. It made things a lot easier. It was lasagna night.

“Thanks.” My eyes drifted to Tyler. He was happily watching the TV.

How was he not fazed by this? I didn’t get it. He was just a kid, and he brushed it off like it was normal. God, for him it was. He’d been on the run with Candice for almost a year.

“He’s a tough kid,” Myles said from behind me.

“I worry about him. He acts like this is normal,” I voiced my concerns aloud.

“Once this is over, he’ll get acclimated and have a new normal. A better normal,” Myles said.

“I hope so.” I ran a hand through my hair. “This is taking its toll on me. I can’t imagine what it must be like for him.”

“Look,” Myles touched my shoulders again. “We are going to get through this together. I promise. It will be over soon.”

I nodded as I pursed my lips. Hopefully, he was right. I couldn’t shake the feeling that we hadn’t seen the last of Jason.

My eyes darted to the window. He was out there somewhere. If he was half as dangerous as I was being led to believe, it was only a matter of time until he struck.

“I can’t believe he fell asleep that fast,” I said as Elena came out of Tyler’s bedroom. She shut the door behind her and joined me at the table.

Elena smiled and took the seat across from me. “He hasn’t been out of the house the past few days. You must have worn him out.”

I’d picked up fast food on the way home from the zoo trip I’d taken with Tyler. He’d needed out and Elena needed to work. Half the wolf detail had come with me. The other half stayed to watch after Elena. Tyler had enjoyed being with other shifters. A few had even invited their families to meet us at the zoo once they were sure it was safe. The kid had worn himself out between the exhibits and playgrounds.

“How did it go? Did you see him? Jason?” Elena asked, her voice low.

I shook my head as I unwrapped my burger. “No. Not at all.” Though the cat was cunning, and I was sure he was watching.

“Do you think it’s possible he decided it’s not worth the trouble?” Elena dumped her fries on her wrapper and then looked up at me.

I could see the hopefulness in her eyes and hated to squish it, but I wasn’t going to lie. The other shoe was going to drop.

“I don’t think so. Tyler is his son. I don’t see him walking away from him.” The silence meant he was probably planning something. He wasn’t at the compound. Neither was Candice. We’d had local shifters check in. I didn’t want to scare Elena, but I wanted to be honest, too. “We haven’t seen the last of him. The men outside are on high alert.”

Elena finished chewing her bite of food. “When do you think he will make his move?”

That was a good question. One I wished I had the answer to. “We are staying vigilant.”

Elena sighed and took a bite of her food. “Any luck finding Candice? I’m so worried about her. He gave her a black eye and has killed others. Who knows what else he might do?”

“No. We are still looking. Wherever he is hiding, I’m sure she is as well. And I don’t think he will hurt her. Not seriously. He might be violent, but he loves her in his own way.” That I knew almost for a fact.

Candice was Jason’s mate. Mates should never harm their mate. I hoped the black eye was an accident when she tried to get away. It had to be. Mates protected each other.

It was almost physically impossible to harm your fated mate. It made me wonder if something else had happened to her. Maybe one of Jason's enforcers had done it. Those were questions for another time. Candice had tried to run once already. He wouldn't let her out of his sight, especially since she'd escaped. They were together. "We are doing everything we can to find her."

"I feel like I'm constantly on edge." She looked around the room. Her gaze lingered on the closed blinds for a long moment.

"We all do." I could relate. This wasn't ideal. We were playing the waiting game.

"I worried about the two of you all day." She flipped her hair over her shoulder and played with the ends. "I didn't get any work done after all."

I reached forward and put my hand on her knee. Her warmth seeped into me, and I inhaled her scent. "What can I do to help you?"

She put her hand over mine and gave it a squeeze. "I'm not sure there is anything you can do, honestly."

"Why don't we start with enjoying dinner and then maybe we can watch a movie," I suggested. Maybe if she relaxed, it would help. "Tomorrow, Tyler and I will stay here all day. One of the guys was able to grab one of the new PS5s. He's bringing it by tomorrow. I'll get it hooked up. I'm sure he and I can play all day so you can get some work done."

Elena closed her eyes. “I hope so. I just can’t stop worrying about Candice and today...if something happened to either of you.” She put her hand over her eyes. “I have deadlines coming up and I need to meet them. It’s really hard to concentrate when my sister is missing and with a psychopath breathing down our necks and...” she trailed off and shook her head.

I leaned closer, so that she was only a few inches away. Her lips called to me. I wanted to close the distance and taste them, but resisted. “Let’s finish dinner and you can find a movie to watch. We’ll unwind together. No one is getting into the house. I promise.” There were too many wolves outside for that to happen. We’d be alerted long before there was a problem.

“Okay. I’m probably going to pick a chick flick, just so you know.” She laughed nervously. Her gaze jumped to meet mine.

I shrugged. “I happen to like those.”

She rolled her eyes. “I doubt that. I’ve never met a guy who enjoys them.”

I put my hand over my chest. “Maybe you just haven’t met the right guy yet.” We were flirting. It was a dangerous game. I couldn’t help it. She was my mate. Every part of me wanted to claim her.

If she were a shifter, we’d already have completed the mating bond. She was human. She didn’t know what I was. Unless she became a permanent guardian to Tyler, she wasn’t

supposed to find out. Or until I thought she was ready to learn the truth about me.

With everything going on, now wasn't the time to spill the beans about shifters. It would overwhelm and frighten her.

Elena picked at her fries. "My ex, Mark, used to always complain when I asked to watch them. Somehow, we always ended up watching blood and gore." She crinkled her nose. "I hate horror movies. I'd always end up looking at my phone or reading during them instead."

"I'm not a fan of those either. There is enough scary shit on the job. I'd prefer to watch happy movies." That was the truth. Some of our cases did not end well.

"I'm sure you do." She picked up a fry and ate it. "What made you decide to become a special agent?" she asked.

"I told you about how Sal and Dory took me in," I started. When she nodded, I continued, "I wanted to help people like they helped me. At the time, I wasn't in the position to be taking in youngsters and the SPS was brand new. I put in an application and got an interview almost immediately. They placed me on a team within a few days."

"That fast?" Elena asked. "I thought the FBI had special training, and it took forever."

I opened my mouth but couldn't think of what to say. I'd said too much as it was. "They do. The SPS is different."

She narrowed her eyes. "I'm still not sure I understand. What exactly is it that your team specializes in?"

I cleared my throat. “All sorts of things. Typically, our cases are a bit more unique than the average investigation. The people we are after have something that makes them different.” I hoped I was giving enough details while being evasive at the same time. It wasn’t easy.

“Aren’t all criminals different in their own way?” Elena dunked a fry in ketchup and then popped it into her mouth. She studied me with her head cocked to the side.

“Yes. To a degree. But take Jason, for example, he thinks Candice belongs to him. That they are soulmates.”

Elena snorted at that. “That just goes to prove that true love isn’t real. What kind of soulmate abuses and kidnaps their beloved?”

“Who says true love isn’t real?” I asked. My heart pattered faster in my chest. She was my mate. I hoped she would come to see that soon. I wanted to tell her what I was. What we were to each other. The timing had to be right.

She scoffed and took a giant bite of her burger. “Trust me, I’ve seen enough marriages fall apart to know that true love isn’t real.”

“I know your ex did you wrong, but surely, you know someone who has a happy relationship?” I lifted my brows expectantly.

“You mean like my parents?” She huffed as she took another bite of her burger. “My dad walked out when I was a kid. Haven’t seen him since. The neighbors to the right are

always fighting. Loudly. It's embarrassing. The neighbor to the left is a single mom. Even the couples in town don't always seem happy."

"Every couple fights." I'd seen Sal and Dory fight multiple times, but it was the way they made up that made me see what it could be like to be with a true mate. "It doesn't mean love isn't real."

"Have you ever been in love?" Elena asked.

I opened and then closed my mouth. "No." I dated every now and again, but I didn't pursue a relationship because I knew my other half was out there. And I'd found her. I met Elena's eyes. How was I going to convince her we could have something real? Something special and beyond her wildest dreams.

"Never?" she asked as a frown marred her face.

"Never. I've liked women, but never loved one. I believe in fate. The woman for me is out there. My heart will recognize her once I see her." I held her gaze.

Elena's tongue darted out to wet her lips, and she sucked in a deep breath. She looked away after a long moment. "I hope you find her. She's going to be lucky." Elena balled up her trash and went to the trash can to throw it away.

I wanted to scream that she was my mate. *Not yet*, I told myself. Elena wasn't ready to hear that yet.

I rolled up my trash and went to the coffee table and picked up the TV remote. "What did you want to watch? Any

particular chick flick, or should we start scrolling?”

She put one hand on her hip and narrowed her eyes. “You’re really going to watch one with me?”

“Of course. I said I would.” This was how I could win her. By showing her that I was someone who didn’t lie and that I kept my word.

“Okay.” She crossed her arms over her chest and nibbled on her lower lip. “How about *Love Actually*? I’m feeling in the holiday spirit a little early this year.”

“Good choice.” I went to her streaming account and started searching.

“You’ve seen it?” she asked as she took a seat on the opposite end of the couch. She tucked her legs up underneath herself.

“I have. It’s one of Maisy’s favorites.”

“Maisy, she’s your teammate?” Elena asked.

“She is. Her mate, Jace, says he’ll watch with us, but he’s always asleep in the first few minutes or fiddling with his phone,” I said. Jace didn’t care for the movies, but he was one of the biggest softies at heart. Especially where Maisy was concerned.

“I’ve never heard anyone refer to a couple as mates before,” Elena said as she laughed a little. “Interesting choice of words. Is that a cultural expression?”

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “I guess some things, like my accent, never go away,” I said as I pointed to myself. ‘Mates’ was a shifter thing. I was getting too comfortable around Elena. I needed to be careful.

We sat back in silence after I hit play on the movie. Until we got to the part where Karen’s character got the CD instead of the necklace. Elena started sniffing and wiping at her eyes with the back of her hands.

I paused the movie. “You okay?” I asked.

She waved her hands as she dabbed at her eyes. “Yeah. Just this part gets me every time. Even before the whole Mark and Amy debacle. But now, I can relate to her so much. I’m just thankful I never had kids with my ex. The way she pulls herself together, fictional or not, is astounding.”

“I’m sorry. We can watch something else,” I said, getting ready to exit out of the movie.

“No.” She shook her head so hard that her hair fluttered. “I picked this one. And it’s not my first time watching. I knew what I was getting into. This movie is one of my favorites.” She pulled out a tissue and blew her nose. “Let’s keep watching.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. I didn’t want to continue if it was going to cause her distress.

She smiled, and it lit up her eyes. “I bawled my eyes out the first time I watched this with my ex. As a woman, I feel this on a deep level is all.”

“Some men, fictional and real, don’t realize what they have. They are idiots.” I hoped she knew that.

“I keep telling myself that. I am so much better off without Mark. And that’s not just a line. I know that in my soul. The timing was horrible. My mom was at her worst when I found them together. She was struggling and in her final weeks, but I don’t think I was as broken up as I should have been.” Elena wiped at her face again and then dropped the tissues into the trash can next to the couch. “You should know that movies like this wreck me. I blubber like a fool at the end of *The Family Stone*. Gah! And there are so many others.”

“We can watch them every night.” Every night wasn’t forever, though. It would only be until Candice was safe and Jason was dead or shipped off to the deserted island in the middle of nowhere.

“I’d like that.” She pulled one knee into her chest. “You know, I thought it’d be weird having some stranger staying in my house with me, but this has been kind of nice.”

I grinned. My heart pattered faster in my chest. “I think so, too.”

“Do you get to do many assignments like this?” she asked.

“Not exactly like this.” This case was a little unique, in that she didn’t know about shifters. We’d helped parents who had lost their mate get their children through the first few shifts. They had all known about our existence, so there was no hiding. “Each case is different. I’m afraid I can’t divulge too many details.”

“Right, that whole ‘if I told you, I’d have to kill you’ thing.” Elena laughed out loud and leaned back into the couch pillows.

“Something along those lines.” I leaned forward a little. “Maybe when this is over, you and I could go out?”

Elena’s eyes widened. Her breath hitched. “Out? Like on a date?” she asked. Her eyes darted away from me and then back to meet mine.

“Yeah. If you’d like.” I shouldn’t have been so forward. It was a mistake. I was moving too fast.

“I, um.” She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and looked at her lap. “How would that work? Don’t you travel all over the place for work? And how long until your next assignment?”

“I do travel from city to city, and I don’t know when my next case will be, but I will always make time for you, Elena.”

She pursed her lips. “You barely know me.”

I shrugged. “Sometimes, when you meet the right person, you want to get to know them better.” If I flew in my dragon form, I could be here from anywhere in the world within a few hours. The distance wouldn’t really be a problem.

“I don’t know, Myles. I couldn’t make a relationship work with someone I knew forever and who I shared a house with. I don’t know if it would work for us, and I don’t want to get hurt again,” she said. She clasped her hands together in her lap and stared at them.

“I get it.” She’d been betrayed by the man she should’ve been able to trust more than anyone else. “We don’t have to go out. I just thought I could show you how a good guy treats his woman.”

“You are a good guy,” she said with a smile.

“Thanks.” I grinned.

“One date when this is all over. But I’m not promising you anything.” She reached across me to grab the remote. The movie started playing again, but she didn’t move. She was practically in my lap. Her head turned so that our mouths were mere inches apart.

I lifted my hand and carded my fingers through her hair until they found the nape of her neck and I pulled her close so I could press my lips to hers.

Eleven

I hadn't meant to kiss him. Or for him to kiss me. I wasn't sure who instigated it. But now that he was, I didn't want him to stop.

He smelled good. Like musk and leather. His lips were molten against mine and heat blazed through me.

My hands went to his chest, and I moved my legs so that I was straddling him. He pulled me into him, deepening the kiss. Our tongues glided together and he nipped at my lip. His cock hardened and I whimpered at the feel. I'd bet money that he was big. Especially if his height was anything to go by.

Part of me wanted to find out. I wriggled my hips against him, causing a beautiful friction. I hadn't had sex in months, and now, I was acting like a horny teenager. This was madness. Myles was here temporarily. On a job. I would get hurt.

I tried to come up with every reason I shouldn't let this continue, but the fact was, I didn't care. I wanted this to happen.

One of my hands went to his chest. The firm planes of his muscles worked beneath his shirt as he continued to let his hands travel along my back. I'd known he was ripped, but oh my. I could feel his pec muscles. But I wanted to see them, too.

My fingers drifted lower until I found the hem of his shirt. I yanked on the edge and pulled it up.

We broke our kiss long enough for me to pull it up and over his head. I dropped the garment on the edge of the couch and stared at him. He was sporting a six pack. I'd seen it before when he'd been sleeping, but had done my best to not ogle him.

Well, at least not get caught. Now, though, I wanted to thoroughly enjoy it. My fingers trembled as I reached out to touch him.

"Elena," Myles said, his voice barely audible. "I don't want you to do something you don't want to. I really did just want to take you to dinner."

I leaned forward and kissed him on the lips. "I know."

I pressed my forehead against his and let out a long breath. I hadn't let myself date or have any kind of romance since my split with Mark. Maybe I needed to live a little. And I wanted Myles like I needed my next breath.

I pressed my mouth to his temple and worked my way down to his ears, where I nibbled on his lobes. "I want you to take

me to bed. Show me what it feels like to be with a man who will worship me.”

Myles growled. His hands drifted down my back to my ass, and he cupped it tightly. “Elena.”

This was crazy. I didn’t blame him for being hesitant. But I was done being scared. He was right. Forget what anyone else thought. It was time to do something for me. “I’ve been trying so hard to fight the connection between us. I’m done being afraid. Show me what it’s like to be with you, Myles. Show me what I’ve been missing.”

His lips found mine again. He shifted me and then shuffled on the couch and stood up. I locked my legs around the small of his back as he maneuvered through the house to the bedroom.

He lay me on the bed and stared down at me. His gaze was heated. No one had ever looked at me like that before. Like I was the most precious, gorgeous woman in the world. I loved it.

He skimmed his hand down my thigh. “Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?” Myles asked.

I bit my lip. I’d always thought I was pretty ordinary, to be honest. But the way he was looking at me. My belly fluttered. “Why don’t you show me?”

He growled and closed the distance between us. His weight pressed me into the mattress. His length pressed against my center.

I ground against him, needing to feel the friction. Did I mention it had been a while since I'd had sex. My body was starved.

Myles would take care of me. I already felt like I might combust and we hadn't taken many clothes off yet.

That was about to change.

Myles peppered kisses down my neck while his hands drifted to my shirt. He rolled the fabric up my torso and pulled away long enough to pull it over my head. His mouth went to my breasts, that were still covered with my lacy, black bra.

He nipped at my nipples through the fabric before rolling the straps down so he could suckle one into his mouth.

My hands went to his hair, holding him close. But he pulled away, placing open-mouthed kisses down my body, stopping at my navel while his hands worked at the button on my jeans. He got it loose and then tugged them down and my panties with them.

"You are gorgeous. The most mesmerizing woman I've ever seen," Myles said. Then he buried his face between my legs.

I opened my mouth to protest. No one had ever gone down on me before. I didn't know what to expect.

Before I could get a word out, he licked my center and then hummed with contentment.

Holy shit! That felt good. I stifled a scream when he did it again. I'd been missing out. I didn't want him to stop.

One of his hands went to my hips. The other came back up to my breast. He sucked and nipped at my clit until I saw stars. My hips bucked up, and I ground against his mouth. “Myles,” I whispered.

I was so close. He seemed to sense this because he grasped me tighter, pulled me closer, if that was even possible.

My orgasm crashed through me like a tidal wave. I slapped one hand over my mouth to muffle my screams. Myles didn't stop. He kept licking and kissing, taking in every drop. My limbs went boneless, and I opened my eyes, coming down from my high.

That's when I realized he hadn't come yet.

Head was something I'd given plenty of times. It was kind of funny how many times I'd been left wanting more. Well, it wasn't really funny. My ex had always made sure he got off. Too many times, I'd been left wanting more.

Not tonight.

Myles had made sure I was taken care of. I didn't know if I could take another orgasm from him. Though I might like to try.

Myles blinked up at me, a goofy grin on his face. I smiled back. “Get up here. I want to taste you now.” I wiggled so that I could get in a position to put my mouth on him.

Myles shook his head. “No.”

“No?” I asked. Was he refusing a blow job? Seriously?

He leaned forward and captured my lips. His cock pressed against me from the confines of his jeans. He peppered kisses to my ear and then whispered, “I want to make you come again. This time, on my cock.”

I trembled at his words. My body heated all over again, and I bobbed my head up and down in agreement.

Myles moved enough so that he could remove his own jeans. I reached behind me and tossed my bra off the bed. Then moved so that my head was against the pillows. The mattress dipped beneath Myles’s weight as he climbed on and nestled between my legs.

I watched as he grasped his cock and positioned it at my entrance. He looked big. And thick. I sucked in a breath, met his eyes, and nodded. He pushed in.

I took him in one inch at a time. He slid in slowly, stretching me like I’d never been stretched before. My hands went to his ass, and I pulled him tighter until he bottomed out.

We met each other’s gaze.

“Are you okay?” he asked. He pressed a light kiss to my lips.

I wiggled my hips, making him growl. “Oh, I am so much better than okay,” I managed to get out.

I was so full of him. He stretched me, fitting inside like we were tailor-made for each other.

Myles slid out and then pressed back in. I lifted my legs and dug my heels into his butt, pulling him even deeper.

Oh my god.

He was so deep, touching places that lit me on fire. His lips found mine again and he kissed me.

I rolled my hips in time with his thrusts. It didn't take long for an orgasm to build in me again. I chased the sensation because damn, it felt so good. Together, we climbed higher and higher until I reached the peak and came crashing down.

My release tore through me, sending pleasure racing through my body. Myles captured my scream with a kiss.

He pumped into me faster, harder, drawing my orgasm out and sending more tremors through me. He roared when he came, stiffening above me as he released. I gasped and met his gaze. He pressed his forehead to me.

“You are amazing, Elena.” He cupped my cheek and then kissed my forehead. He rolled off me and then pulled me to him so we were cuddling. I rested my head on his chest and closed my eyes.

Tonight had been perfect. And I was in trouble. I was falling for Myles. Hard. He was going to break my heart. I knew it. But I wanted to enjoy our time together. For however long that would be.

Twelve

The sheets were cold where Elena should be. I blinked my eyes open. She wasn't in the bedroom.

I sat up. The door was slightly ajar and the smell of bacon and eggs wafted in.

I sighed. That should have been my job to make her breakfast in bed.

I threw the covers back and found my clothes from the previous night, dressing quickly. I came out to the front room just as the back screen door clanged shut.

The trash can was open and no bag in it. I went to the door and peered outside, watching as Elena threw the garbage out. She put the lid back on and turned back to the house.

She smiled when she saw me. Then all hell broke loose.

A gun shot crackled through the air. Elena jumped. A car came careening down the street and drove through the fence and onto the lawn.

Elena shuffled backwards to get out of its way and tripped over a garden rock before falling on the ground.

I darted out toward her at the same time someone got out of the car.

Now would be a great time to shift. I could handle these assholes in a matter of seconds.

But they were in their human form. And I couldn't shift unless they did first, or I risked being the one getting in trouble for exposing us to humans.

Damn cats were pushing every boundary they could. I was so intent on getting to her I didn't see the motorcycle until it was too late. It hopped up into the grass. The rider jumped off, and the bike barreled into me.

I ducked, but not fast enough. The motorcycle clipped my leg. Pain exploded in my limb. I hit the ground with a crunch. I ignored the searing pain and pushed back to my feet in enough time to see one of the car's passengers forcing Elena into the vehicle.

I lunged toward the car. They couldn't take her.

Her screams pierced the air, and she was punching and slapping the man in the back seat as they tried to subdue her. She was just no match for their inhuman strength.

The car revved and reversed, nearly colliding with me. I jumped to the left to avoid being hit. The car sped off as I tried to get the handle. I sprinted after the car until I heard Tyler's cries.

As much as I wanted to go after Elena, it was Tyler that Jason really wanted. If he got them both, I may never see

either of them again. I ran back inside. There were three men in here. One of them was a wolf fighting off two cats.

I jumped into the fight. We were inside now, where prying neighbors couldn't see. I snarled and called upon my dragon's breath. I blew it out, hitting one cat and then the other. The fire caught their clothes, and they screamed as they fell to the floor.

The wolf, the pack's beta, Luca, looked at me and backed away from the two cats. I rushed to Tyler's room. The door was shut and locked. Maggie was inside barking and growling. I shoved it open, breaking the lock.

Maggie whimpered and barked before running to the bed, her tail tucked between her legs.

"Tyler?" I called. Had he been taken? My heart pounded in my chest. "Tyler, it's Myles. You can come out now!" Tyler made a noise and then crawled out from under the bed. When he saw me, he came running, wrapping his tiny arms around my waist as he hugged me.

"It's okay, buddy, I got you. You're safe." I lifted him up, so that I was holding him.

"Where's Elena?" Tyler asked between sobs.

"She's going to be fine." If Jason and his pride harmed one hair on her head, they'd meet the same fate as the cats in the front room. I was done playing games.

"They took her?" Tyler asked.

I set Tyler down and got to his level. “I’m going to get her back. And your mom, too. I promise.” I never made a promise I couldn’t keep. “Come on.” I took Tyler’s hand and took him to the front room.

I did my best to block his view of the charred cats as I led him to the kitchen and had him sit down. I turned off the burners and went back to the wolf in the front room. “Are they dead?” I asked. I shouldn’t have killed them. We needed to get information about where Jason took Elena.

Luca nodded. “Yeah, man.”

“What happened?” I asked. “Where were you? Why didn’t we have a warning that they were coming?” I’d trusted the pack to watch our backs. It was a mistake I wouldn’t make again.

The wolf ran a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry. They got the jump on a few of our guys. Killed them. We went to go investigate and before we knew it, it was a full-blown attack. Then we got word that the pack was under attack.” He shook his head. “It turned into a shit-show real fast. We scrambled.”

I ground my teeth and let out a breath. They’d gone to protect their home. Their families. I couldn’t blame them for that. “How many did you lose?” I asked.

He sighed and closed his eyes. “Six so far. There are eleven others who were critically injured. One of them we don’t think will pull through.”

“I’m sorry.” I was. They’d been trying to help and now they were pulled into this.

“This is war, Myles. That pride has attacked their last pack. You find them. We are going in with you,” Luca said.

“Trust me. I’ll take all the backup I can get.” It was time I called in my backup. I dug my cell phone from my pants pocket and called Gavin.

He answered on the second ring. “I just heard on the police scanners there was an incident at the Sorrero house. What happened?”

“They took her.” My hands shook. I ground my teeth.

I’d failed to protect her. This was on me. If anything happened to Elena, I would never forgive myself.

At least Jason and the pride hadn’t fully succeeded with their plan. My eyes went to Tyler, who was sitting in the same chair I’d directed him to. His eyes were trained on the wall. He was in shock. I didn’t blame him. Poor kid had been through so much trauma in his young life. “Tyler is safe.”

“I’ve recalled your team. They should get there this evening,” Gavin said.

I hated my teammates would not get to enjoy their well-deserved vacation, but I was glad they would be here to help. With the way things were going in the shifter community, it might be years before they got another chance. These past few cases had been nuts.

“What about the other SPS teams? What about Levi?” I asked.

“The other teams are wrapping up some cases and will come as soon as they can. Levi is working on tracking down a woman in the California mountains. She killed a bunch of tiger shifters and posted it all over social media. He hasn’t made contact for two days.”

I ran a hand over my head. “Two days? Jesus. He told me what he was doing but, that’s a long time.”

“Yeah, it is. His cell reception is spotty at best. I’m hoping that’s all this is, but if I don’t hear from him soon, I’ll need to send in a team.”

I tugged at my short hair and then let my hand fall to my side. “You talk to Levi before I do, tell him to be careful. And if you don’t, I want to be a part of that team.”

This was insane.

Maybe something was in the water, as Dory would put it. That was always how my adoptive mother explained odd behavior. Speaking of her, I needed some place safe for Tyler. The other side of the country seemed like a good idea.

“Sir, I know we didn’t plan to move the boy, but given the circumstances, I was hoping to take him to Sal and Dory. It will take Jason and the pride a while to figure out where he’s been taken, especially if I fly.” I could be there and back before my team arrived.

“I agree. The situation has changed. Contact them and see if they are up for the task,” Gavin said. “Are the wolves still helping?”

“Yeah. They’ve offered to go in as backup when we find them. The cats attacked their pack. There were casualties and at least one more is expected to pass.” I inhaled and looked at where Luca had been.

The beta had moved to the door and was standing guard. The pack had been helpful. It wasn’t their fault that the pride was insane.

“Good. My sources suggest the pride is close to five hundred strong. We’ve never seen a pride that size before. But it explains why they keep getting the jump on people. I have word out to other shifter communities in the area to see if they can assist. This is bigger than the SPS can handle, unfortunately. And the way they’ve been attacking other shifter groups, I’m sure several will be ready to jump in to help us.” I heard Gavin sigh over the line.

“Five hundred,” I said, more to myself than to him. That was like an army. You didn’t build those types of numbers unless you had plans. Plans that others might not want to go along with.

“Get the boy out of there, Myles. I’m sorry I didn’t have you move them earlier. I didn’t want Elena to know about us, but I fear she’ll learn sooner or later anyway now.”

I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes. Damn, he was right. I’d wanted to be the one to tell her, but on my terms.

“I’ll get him a bag packed and get him moved now,” I said.

“Be careful, Myles. Let me know when it is done,” Gavin said and then hung up.

I put my phone back in my pocket and went to Tyler. I squatted, so I was at eye level. “Have you ever flown before?” I asked.

Tyler shook his head. “You are sending me away?”

“I’m taking you to my parents’ house. They live across the country. Someplace where you’ll be very safe until we can get Elena and your mom back.” I put my hand on his shoulder and met his gaze.

“Are they going to be okay? Daddy gets so mad when he is angry,” Tyler said. His bottom lip trembled and big, fat tears trickled down his cheeks. “I don’t want to be far away when you get them back. I want to be able to see them.”

“The way I’m going to get you there is the way I’m going to bring you back. We are going to fly. And it’s going to be super-fast. So fast that you’ll be ruined for all other transportation for the rest of your life.” At least that’s how it was for me. I hated traditional flying. It was so slow. He still didn’t look convinced. “And Sal and Dory are the best. I bet they’ll make you pancakes for breakfast and let you put all the syrup you want on them.”

His eyes brightened a little. “Are we going on an airplane?”

I shook my head and grinned. “No. Do you know what kind of shifter I am?”

He shook his head and ran the back of his hand under his nose. That didn't surprise me. Dragon shifters were so rare that even though we smelled like shifters, most people couldn't tell what type we were.

"I'm a dragon shifter. You can ride on my back, but you'll have to hold on, okay?" I'd never actually carried anyone before. Not like that. Jace didn't count. That was more carrying him with my claws and to save his life than for a joy ride. He'd hated it.

Hopefully, Tyler would think it was cool. It would get him across the country quickly and there was no way that Jason or the pride could track us.

"Cool," Tyler said, his eyes growing wide.

"I want you to pack a bag. We are going to leave as soon as you are ready." I stood up.

Tyler scooted off the chair and went to the bedroom. I joined Luca at the door.

"Any sign of the pride?" I asked.

"No. But I think we are about to have other problems," Luca said as he turned to me.

I opened my mouth to ask him what he was talking about. Then I heard it. Police sirens. A lot of them.

Shit. The neighbors must have seen what had happened in the front yard. I needed to figure out how to get them off our trail. I was sure they would attempt to help, but this was

deadly enough for shifters. Humans wouldn't know what they were getting into.

My time to come up with a plan was up. The first of six police cruisers rolled into the drive with the rest right on its tail.

Thirteen

I ground my teeth as the car I was in came to a stop. We were outside a warehouse. An abandoned warehouse. Some windows were broken and the rust on the outside was bad enough you could get tetanus just looking at it.

I gasped as my eyes darted around the outside. There were cats out here. Not your everyday house cats, but giant... jaguars or some sort of large-breed cat.

We weren't close to any zoos that I knew of, and they were just sitting. Way too well-behaved to be escaped. But what were they doing here? Were they trained guards or something?

It was overly strange.

The back of my neck tingled, and the hairs on my arms stood on end. Something wasn't right.

I didn't have too long to ponder it.

My door was jerked open and someone reached in, grabbing my arm. I slid away from them, but the person in the back seat with me shoved me toward them.

They yanked me out of the car so hard I almost fell. They took mercy on me at the last second and caught me before I hit the pavement.

Their grip tightened, and they tugged me toward them. “Let’s go.”

“Get off me,” I said as I struggled against the man who was holding me.

I dug my nails into his skin and balled my free hand up and hit him repeatedly.

His grip was iron clad and his nails bit into my skin so hard he drew blood. “Knock it off, bitch.”

I stopped fighting. My gaze darting to where he gripped my arm. Something was wrong with his hand. There was an unnatural amount of hair on it and his nails looked more like claws.

I needed to figure out how to get out of here. Wherever ‘here’ was. We’d left the city some time ago and had been driving down back country roads for about thirty minutes. I’d been in the car for at most an hour, if even that long. We weren’t far. I just didn’t know where ‘here’ was.

A clanking sound drew my attention to the warehouse’s door. A man...Jason, he was the same guy from the park, came stomping out.

“Where is Tyler?” he asked, barely looking at me before turning to his goons.

“I’m sorry,” the man holding me said. “We couldn’t get to him before the wolves showed up. We were outnumbered, and the police were called. We had to get out of there. But we have her.”

Someone came up behind me, shoving me forward.

I stumbled over my feet and tumbled to my knees. The pavement bit into my skin. I pushed back to my feet in time for Jason to jerk me to him. He clasped my arm with one hand and my chin with the other.

“She smells like the SPS agent. Perhaps he’d be willing to make a trade,” Jason said as he turned my head from side to side. “What kind of shifter is he?”

“Huh?” I asked, trying to wiggle my face free from his grip. His breath smelled like ass and his touch was making my skin crawl.

“What kind of shifter is he? I want to know what we are up against,” Jason said.

He squeezed my jaw, making me whimper.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. You are hurting me,” I said, but with the way he held my face, I wasn’t sure if he could understand me. My words sounded inaudible to my ears.

“Don’t play dumb,” Jason said with a hiss as he pushed my face away.

I opened and closed my mouth. The coppery taste of blood was there, and I realized that I’d bitten my tongue.

“Your mate! What kind of shifter is he?” Jason asked again. He jerked me closer and put his face in mine. Any closer and our foreheads would be touching.

I reeled back. “Myles?” I asked. Is that who he was talking about? Why was he being so weird about it?

And what the fuck did he mean by ‘shifter?’ What was that? The only ‘shifter’ I could think of was a manual-transmission car...which made zero sense.

“Yes, Myles. The shifter you have been shacking up and sleeping with. The man who has my son. What kind of shifter is he?”

How did he know Myles and I had slept together? Were they somehow watching in my room? I wanted to vomit at the thought of someone invading my privacy like that.

I didn’t have time to formulate a question. Jason’s hand whipped up and connected with the side of my face. Pain exploded in my cheek, and I screamed. My vision whited out for a moment. Jason yanked me closer.

Spittle flew from his mouth as he yelled at me. “I want my son back. I need to know what I am dealing with. Tell me or this is going to get a whole lot worse for you.”

I shoved against him, trying to get out of his grip. My arm throbbed and blood was trickling down it from where he held it with his paw. Wait. What? I did a double take. It wasn’t a hand that held me. It was a black-cat’s paw. Similar to the paws on the cats just across the way by the warehouse. My

eyes widened as I looked between him and the paw. What the hell was going on?

“You don’t know about shifters, do you?” Jason shoved me to the ground.

I landed on my elbow and cried out. He’d let me go. I had to get away now. Somehow.

I flopped to my belly and then pushed up to my hands and knees before jumping to my feet. The second I was upright, I took off sprinting for the road like my life depended on it.

It probably did.

I didn’t get far before three cats leaped in front of me, forming a semicircle around me and blocking my path. They hunkered down like a predator does when they are getting ready to attack their prey. I backpedaled, only to collide with something solid. A hand snatched me by the elbow and tugged hard enough that I spun around.

Jason glared at me. “You have fight in you like your sister. Maybe you’ll make one of my pride members a happy man.” He grasped my hair with his other hand and wrenched my head to the side. “You are pretty.”

My heart skipped a beat. Horror filled me. Sweat beaded my brow. What was he insinuating? Was it what I thought he was?

God, I hoped not. Nausea churned in my belly.

“Get off me,” I snarled as I tried to wriggle free.

Jason laughed. “You have spirit. But you can be broken. Just like your sister.” His grip on my hair loosened. “Take her to the cells. It’s time for a family reunion.” He pushed me toward the guy who had been in the back seat with me. Then he nodded at the three cats. “Escort them. Make sure our guest doesn’t try anything stupid again. She still needs to learn her place.”

His hold was tight but nowhere near as bad as Jason’s had been. I shuddered at his words and was pulled toward the warehouse before I comprehended what was happening. I did not want to go in there. Even if Candice might be in there.

I slapped at the guy holding me and dug my heels into the concrete. He pulled me forward, making me stumble to keep from falling.

I balled my fist and punched. My knuckles hit his jaw, causing his head to snap back. He hissed and grabbed my other hand before I could deck him again. “Try that again and you’ll have a broken arm, bitch.”

To prove his point, he squeezed my wrist. I cried out. Tears pricked my eyes as white-hot pain rushed through my hand. Break it, it felt like he was trying to pulverize the bone. My knees gave out. A tear trickled down my cheek.

“Are you going to behave?” he asked, his voice a low growl.

I couldn’t form words yet, so I nodded instead.

“Good.” He pushed me so that I had to walk.

I had to figure something out. But I knew this asshole would not hesitate to break me, maybe more than just my hand, if I tried anything again. If I was going to escape, I would need to be physically able to do so. It sounded like they were taking me to Candice. Maybe she would have some ideas.

The cats trotted beside us as we made our way to the warehouse. The door opened from the inside and another man ushered us in. The inside was dark, making it impossible for me to see. I squinted, but that didn't help. The inside reminded me of how a litter box smelled. It wasn't quite as bad, but a close second.

We walked down a hall and into a large room. The lights were off, but there were windows, making it light enough for me to see. There were men in various states of dress standing around a ring where two cats were fighting. More cats lined the wall. All seemed to be enjoying the fight. I didn't have long to look before we reached the other side of the room and entered another hall.

This hallway was long. The lights were on but flickered above.

It was just me and the guy holding me captive now. I looked up the hallway. There were no doors or windows this way. Even if I could get away, where would I go? There had to be at least fifty people here and about just as many cats. Where had all the cats come from?

Was this some sort of wildlife reserve or something? My thoughts died when I was shoved through another door. This

room had a cell in it with bars lining three walls of the room and a concrete wall at the back. A small basement-sized window was in the wall with bars also over it. There was a mattress with sheets thrown on it in the middle of the cell. On it was a familiar form.

“Candice,” I gasped.

My captor let go of me to unlock the door. Once it was open, I went in willingly and hurried to my sister. I fell to my knees and put my hands on her shoulder, giving her a gentle shake. “Candice!”

She murmured but barely acknowledged me. She turned, and I gasped, seeing a bruise down the side of her face. Dried blood covered her shirt and the sheets.

“What did you do to her?” I asked, turning to see the guy as he locked me in the cell.

He nodded at Candice. “That’s what happens when you disobey our pride alpha. I’d think long and hard before you try anything stupid like running away,” he said before turning on his heel and leaving.

I drew in a shaky breath and leaned back over my sister. I smoothed the hair from her face. “Candice, sweetie, wake up.”

Her skin was warm to the touch, like she had a fever. She murmured and cracked one eye open and then the other. “Elena,” she whispered, her voice a warbled croak.

“Hey, it’s me.” I gripped her hand with one hand and put my palm on her uninjured cheek. “Are you okay?” It was a stupid

question. Of course, she wasn't. She'd been beaten and God knew what else.

"Tyler? Where's Tyler?" Her eyes widened, and she twisted like she was trying to search for him.

"He's safe. Myles has him." Thank goodness.

Tyler was already going to be scarred for life. He didn't need to see his mom like this, or be a part of whatever was going on here.

Candice let out a heavy sigh and closed her eyes. "I'm so sorry I dragged you into all this. I thought the SPS could help. But Jason...his pride is out of control. It's grown so big. They're afraid to challenge him."

"What is going on?" This was insane. I'd tried so hard to brush this all off, but I was missing something. Something big. I wanted to know what it was.

Candice opened her eyes and then closed them while pursing her lips. "You are going to find out anyway, I'm sure."

I nodded, hoping she'd continue without prompting.

She did. "Jason is the leader of the Eastman Pride. They're cat shifters. That's why the cats are lurking around everywhere and why SPS is involved and not the regular police."

"Shifters?" Jason had asked me what kind of shifter Myles was. Did that mean he was one, too? What exactly was a shifter?

“They are humans that can shift into animals. Jason...all the people here turn into jaguars,” Candice said. She coughed and curled in on herself, which made her yelp.

“Candice, that sounds crazy,” I said, my voice a low whisper. “People turning into animals.”

Candice made a sound, something between a groan and a laugh. “I’m not crazy. Promise. There are people that can turn into animals. Jaguars, wolves, leopards, I even saw one turn into a bear once.”

She coughed again. This cough was worse and left her gasping for breath.

I did my best to cradle her and soothe her, but I wasn’t sure what I could do to help with the injuries. She needed a doctor. The sooner the better.

I carded my hands through her hair and considered what she said. A sane person would think she was delusional, but the more I thought about it, it did kind of make sense.

Why else would there be so many jaguars here? And the police should have been involved from the beginning, but Myles and the SPS, I still didn’t know what that stood for, had stepped in. It explained the paw that had grabbed me earlier. And the other guy’s weird hand.

My eyes drifted to my bicep. Blood wept from tiny puncture wounds where the claws had cut into my skin. Holy shit. Werewolves were real. Well, maybe not werewolves, but...

shifters were. So, werewolves were, too, right? She did say wolves.

I was spiraling. I panted. Sweat beaded my brow and my palms. Oh god. What had we gotten into? How were we going to get out of this?

“Myles, the SPS will come for us,” Candice said quietly. “It’s what they do.”

“Myles is a shifter?” I asked. Tears formed in my eyes. It all made sense now. Jason had asked what kind of shifter he was.

Oh my god. How could this be real? People that could turn into animals. It sounded like something from a movie.

Did I actually believe all this? My mind reeled as my heart quickened. I tried to come up with all reasonable explanations for what had just happened but I drew a blank.

“Yeah. All SPS agents are. They work cases like this. They’ll find us.” She patted my hand. “I’m sorry I brought you into this. I didn’t want Jason to get ahold of Tyler...I’m so sorry, Elena.” Her voice broke on a sob, and she shook.

I drew in a deep breath and let it out. I needed to pull myself together. “We are going to figure this out. We’ll get out of here.” We just needed to figure out how. There were dozens of angry cat shifters all over the place.

Cat shifters. Men that could change into cats. Did that mean they were as fast and agile as a normal jaguar? Probably.

Crap. We wouldn’t stand a chance against them.

Myles would come for me. I was certain of it, but did he know what he was up against? What if they hurt him in the process? My heart constricted at the thought. I'd need to do everything I could to help him. I glanced around at my confines. I needed a plan.

Fourteen

I flapped my wings faster as Sal and Dory's homestead came into view. It was situated on five hundred acres. The perfect place for young shifters who needed to stretch their wings or run. The couple was waiting for us. As much as I wanted to barrel inside and save my mate, I knew I needed my team and a plan. She was down there. Alive! "I'm coming for you," I thought, hoping that somehow, she could hear me. "I'll be there soon. Stay alive. I love you."

They couldn't see me yet. I could become invisible when in my dragon form.

It was a safety precaution. My dragon was huge at well over twenty feet long. Tyler clung to my back. The wolves had helped to come up with a contraption that held him to my back securely. It had still taken longer than usual to get here.

The best part about flying in this form was there was no way for Jason or his men to track us. Tyler would be safe with Sal and Dory for as long as he needed to be.

I landed on the ground with a thud and ran a few feet to slow my speed while making myself visible.

Sal and Dory hurried off the steps and to me.

“It’s so good to see you, sweetheart,” Dory said, giving my head a rub before joining Sal at the saddle where Tyler was. I stayed still as the two worked to get him out and untie it from my back. Once they had, I started my shift back to my human form. My bones crackled as they reformed. The reptilian skin slid back underneath and was replaced with flesh.

“Here you go, son,” Sal said, handing me a pair of swishy shorts. “It’s good to have you here. Come inside. Let’s get this young man something to eat and then we’ll talk.” He put his arm around Tyler and led him toward the house.

Dory put her hand on my shoulder and gave me a sympathetic look. “Are you hurt at all?” she asked. Her wide eyes assessed me before meeting mine again.

“No. Just angry. They took her. I should have done a better job protecting her. I should have changed into my dragon. I could have ended it right then and she would be safe,” I said.

I gritted my teeth. If anything happened to Elena it would be my fault.

Dory cupped my cheeks even though she had to look up at me to do so. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, Myles. You know the rules, as we all do. Changing in front of humans is not allowed. The neighbor had a camera and recorded the whole thing. It’s gone viral. If you’d changed to your dragon, there would be no putting that back. You did the right thing, even if it doesn’t feel like it.” Her face softened. “You care about this woman?”

“She’s my mate,” I said with a sigh. It was my job to protect my mate. I’d failed.

Dory’s brows crinkled with worry. “This isn’t your fault, sweetheart.” She put a hand on my chest. “You can feel her in here. Is she alive?”

My brows dipped down into a scowl.

Dory patted my chest. “Close your eyes. You’ll find her. Trust me.”

I hadn’t realized how deep the mate bond would be. Elena had only been in my life for a short time. Sal and Dory had been together for years.

I closed my eyes. Dory was right. I could feel Elena. She was alive. I let out a sigh.

“If you focus on her hard enough, you should be able to track her to her location. How else do you think that cat could keep finding your mate’s sister?” Dory said.

“I can find her,” I whispered. Of course, I could find her. I knew that. “I need to get back.” I took a step back and prepared to change.

“Hey,” Dory said, grabbing my hand. “Come in. Get the boy settled. Don’t go rushing into anything without backup. You might be a fierce dragon, but you are not invincible. You need to have your wits about you. Anger makes you blind. I know it’s hard, but settle yourself and focus.”

That was easier said than done. I closed my eyes and let Dory lead me to the house.

Inside, Sal was already getting Tyler a warm cup of cocoa and he had a pile of cookies in front of him. One of the other youngsters was talking to Tyler at the table and offering him some of their toys.

Tyler was so engrossed that he barely noticed me until I put my hands on the chair at the opposite end of the table.

I knew Dory wanted me to stay and make sure I didn't go in after Elena half-cocked, but I couldn't stay here knowing she might be hurt.

"Hey, buddy," I said to Tyler. "It looks like you are fitting right in. Do you think you'll be okay until I find your mom and aunt?"

Tyler got up from the table and ran around to my side and gave me a hug. "You'll come get me once you find my mom and Aunt Elena?" he looked up at me with wide eyes.

I crouched, getting to his level. "I promise. I'll keep Sal and Dory updated, too. You be good for them, okay?"

Tyler nodded and hugged me. "I will."

"Good boy." I stood up and ruffled the hair on the top of his head, then turned to Sal and Dory.

They stood with one arm wrapped around each other. I went and gave them both a hug.

"Be careful, son," Sal said with a worried look. "This cat has hurt a lot of people."

Dory nodded and grasped my hand again. “Remember, think things through. Go in with a plan. And do not go in there alone. You have a team and friends for a reason.” She narrowed her eyes at me.

“I promise. I’ll come up with a plan with my team.” We were only going to get one shot at this. I would not blow it.

“Take care of yourself.” Sal clapped me on the back.

“And be careful,” Dory said again, pulling me into a tight hug. “Let us know once you find her and you are both safe.”

“I will.” I gave them one last hug and then went for the front door.

“I swear, between him and Levi, they are going to keep me up all night,” Dory whispered when she thought I was far enough away not to hear.

“It will be all right, my love. They are both strong and smart,” Sal said back.

I blew out a breath and closed the door behind me. The sooner I found Elena, the better everyone would feel.

If luck were on my side, it would be tonight. Now that I knew I might find Elena through our bond, it might be sooner than later. I needed to get back so I could look for her. I jogged down the front porch steps and then sprinted through the lawn, gaining speed. Then I triggered my shift.

My wings jutted out and I took flight, turning myself invisible.

The flight back seemed to stretch endlessly. In reality it was less than thirty minutes. I flew much faster since I didn't have a passenger that I had to keep safe. I landed on the outskirts of town in pack territory. The clothes I'd left were still laying out. I dressed and then jogged into town.

The police were being super vigilant in watching Elena's neighborhood and house. The wolves had smoothed things over for me since they were well-known in the town, but we couldn't go back there without drawing more attention to ourselves. The wolves had been gracious enough to let us stay on their lands.

"Myles!" Conner called from my right.

I turned and let out a relieved breath to see my friend and team leader. He jogged up to me, his mate Anna right behind him.

Conner pulled me into a quick man-hug before leveling his gaze on me. "This is quite the mess."

"Yeah. Tell me about it." I knew he'd been fully briefed.

"We lost some good people. We were waiting for more details from you to come up with a plan to strike," Conner said.

"You know where they are?" I asked.

"We think they are south of here," Anna said. "Logically, somewhere between here and their pride's land makes the most sense for a base camp. We've narrowed down the search

to about a hundred miles. Give or take.” She bit her lip as she looked at me.

“I think I know how to find them,” I said.

“Go on,” Anna said.

“Elena is my mate,” I said. The admission made my heart clench.

“Leave it to Myles,” my teammate Jace said from behind me. I turned as he and Maisy, his mate, came strolling up, their luggage being towed behind them. “We leave you alone for what, like a week and you get mated and everything goes completely nuts.”

“Jace!” Maisy gave him a playful shove. But with the baggage he was holding, it was hard enough to knock him off balance and make him stumble.

“I’m sorry I had to cut your guys’ vacations short,” I said.

Both couples had taken some time to get to be with each other. Both of them were newly mated. As Dory would say, maybe there was something in the water. All of us mated within a month or two of each other was crazy. But it was nice everyone would get their happily ever after. Well, I still had to rescue Elena.

“Don’t worry about it,” Maisy said as she pulled me into a hug. “We are going to find her. You think you know where she is?”

I nodded. “Dory told me that mates should be able to sense each other. I was thinking I might be able to do that.”

“That’s a good idea,” Conner said with a nod. “We’ll give you some space so you can focus. Let us know once you think you know where she is.”

“I will, thanks!” I should’ve asked Dory how I was supposed to sense her. I closed my eyes and exhaled.

My dragon. I could cover a lot of space in a short period. I hurried away from the group and went back to the field, undressing quickly.

I shut my eyes and pictured my dragon. My wings sprouted and then my tail was next. Scales erupted over my skin and within moments, my dragon had taken over. I trotted forward a few feet before leaping into the air and making myself invisible.

My wings pumped as I started moving south. I slowed my pace. Taking my time. Feeling for Elena’s presence. The more I focused on her, the stronger her essence became. I was close. I slowed my speed even more until I was hovering over an abandoned factory.

Jaguars covered the perimeter. So did just as many guards in human form. There were at least fifty of them. And that was just on the outside of the complex. I’d bet there were just as many inside. Elena was in there. Somewhere. So close, but so far.

Rage bubbled beneath the surface. My dragon and I wanted to nosedive to the ground and take out the cats in a blazing ball of fire. But it was too dangerous. If Jason got desperate, there

was no telling what he could do. Elena meant nothing to him. He would hurt her if he thought he needed to.

As much as I wanted to barrel inside and save my mate, I knew I needed my team and a plan. She was down there. Alive! “I’m coming for you,” I thought, hoping that somehow, she could hear me. “I’ll be there soon. Stay alive. I love you.”

Fifteen

“I’m coming for you,” Myles’s voice echoed in my mind as I stared up at the concrete ceiling. I wanted to believe it. I closed my eyes and let out a long breath.

His voice filled my mind again. “I’ll be there soon. Stay alive. I love you.”

Goosebumps pimped my skin. My eyes shot open. His voice was in my head. Was this real? A figment of my imagination? I didn’t know anymore.

My world had been turned upside down. Shifters. Myles was one. I had no idea what kind.

Why hadn’t he told me? I knew the answer. I would have thought him nuts. He would have been right. A day ago. Today, well, my views had changed. It was kind of hard to deny what was right in front of your face.

I was curious what type of shifter he was. My mind went wild, conjuring up many different things until it stopped on a dark, bluish-black dragon. A dragon! Of all things. Now I was losing my mind. Dragons were a thing of myths and legends.

Then again, so had shifters been a few hours ago. But a dragon. Really?

It seemed to fit him. I lifted my arm and draped it over my face. I needed to get a grip. Myles a dragon. Come on. He was probably a wolf or a cat. Maybe even a bear. Or some other zoo-type animal. As long as he wasn't a snake. I shuddered at the thought. I hated snakes.

Candice groaned next to me, drawing me from my thoughts. She whimpered in her sleep and rolled so her thigh was touching mine. Jeez, she was burning up.

I sat up and put the back of my hand on her forehead. She had a fever. A high one. She needed medical help. Medicine. I pushed up off the mattress and went to the cell door, peaking my head out as best I could between the bars.

The hallway was empty. Not a person in sight. I'd lost track of time, but it felt like it should be the middle of the night. Maybe everyone was sleeping. No. A guy like Jason would have guards on duty. Myles would come for me. He had to know that.

"Hello?" I called out. "Anyone there? Candice needs help. She has a fever," I said.

My pleas were met with silence. Did they not hear me, or worse, did they just not care?

"Hello?" I called out again.

"Elena," Candice whispered, her voice hoarse.

I turned and hurried back to the mattress. Candice whimpered as she rolled to her belly and turned her head to the side. A wet cough escaped her lips, and she groaned.

“Hey, sweetie, I’m right here.” I smoothed the hair out of her face.

Goodness, she was hot. Her cheeks were red and her eyes looked dull.

“He is punishing me. He won’t come,” Candice said as she wheezed.

“Punishing you?” I asked. This wasn’t punishment, this was cruelty.

“I ran away. Took Tyler. He thinks I deserve this pain,” Candice said.

“Nobody deserves this,” I said with a growl. “And if this is how he treats you, then you had good reason to run.” Any sane person would.

“He wasn’t always like this,” Candice sighed. Her eyes fluttered close. I thought she might have gone back to sleep until she spoke up again, “He was sweet once. Loving. And he’s not the one who hurt me. He just hasn’t done anything to help me either.”

I huffed and rolled my eyes. That I found hard to believe. You didn’t go from a sweet, loving person to a man who locks your lover up when they are injured. And if he didn’t beat her, who did?

“Then he changed,” she whispered. “After Evie died, everything changed.”

“Who is Evie?” I asked, wanting to keep her talking. Her lungs rattled with each breath and her body felt so hot. If I let her go to sleep, would she wake back up?

“Our daughter.”

My heart froze. My fingers stopped halfway through her hair. “You have a daughter?” My sister had a whole life that I knew nothing about. I didn’t even know about Tyler until she’d dumped him on me.

“Had,” Candice said, her voice breaking on a sob. “A rogue wolf killed her. A shifter that shouldn’t have been on our lands. Jason lost it after that. He thought it was his responsibility to protect her, protect us all.”

“Tyler didn’t say anything about a sister,” I said.

“I’m not sure he remembers much of her. She was older. He was just a baby when it happened. Things have been getting progressively worse ever since. Then over the summer...” Candice trailed off as a coughing fit took over.

I patted her back, but the coughing seemed to intensify. Her breath came in shallow wheezes. Her eyes flew open and one hand went to her throat.

“Here sit up.” I helped pull her into an upright position. “Breathe, Candice. In through your nose and out your mouth.”

The new position helped a little, but not nearly enough. Candice was fighting to catch her breath. I got up to call for

help again when the fit ended. Candice drew a deep, strained breath in and then let it out. She laid back down and put a hand on her rattling chest. Once again, no one came. Even though I'd yelled for at least a minute. I sat back down next to Candice.

"You need a doctor," I said, pushing the hair from her face.

"Jason won't let me die," Candice said.

"Are you sure?" I wasn't a doctor, but she seemed in distress.

"He loves me," Candice whispered.

He had a funny way of showing it.

"I know it's sick and twisted, but he does. In his own way."

I shook my head. I had nothing to say to that. Jason was a sick man. He needed help. Serious help. And this was far from love.

The door at the end of the hall squeaked as it opened. Footsteps thumped down the hall toward us. I shot to my feet and went back to the bars. "Hello? Candice needs help. Please!"

Jason came into view with a few goons following along behind him. I moved away from the door to stand protectively in front of Candice. What did they want?

The door opened and Jason stepped inside and the two men came in, too, taking up a post on both sides of the door. "Move!" he said, his voice coming out a low growl.

I stood my ground, even though everything in me said it was a bad idea.

Jason grabbed me by the arm, his movements so fast I didn't see them. He shoved me. I tripped over my feet and stumbled forward, colliding with the far wall. The concrete bit into my elbows and I narrowly missed hitting my head on the blocks.

I spun around. Jason had Candice in his arms. She'd lost consciousness again. "What are you doing with her?" I asked, as he made his way to the door. He didn't answer me.

I couldn't just let him take her to god only knew where. He was the one responsible for her current condition, as it was. I charged him from behind. One of his men sprung out and blocked me. They grasped me around the middle and hoisted me up. I screamed as he threw me to the floor.

I landed with a thump, half on the mattress and the rest on the concrete floor. The air whooshed out of my lungs. Pain exploded in the arm I'd landed on and my hip. I cried out. The men went to the door and shut it.

I leaped to my feet and put my hands on the bars. "What are you doing? Where are you taking her?" I screamed. They didn't answer me. I pulled the bars, but they didn't move. "Candice! Please. Where are you taking her?" I was met with the click of a door shutting at the end of the hall, and now, I was all alone.

Tears pricked my eyes, and I spun so my back was against the door. I had to figure a way out of here. Candice and I

needed to run. Run where? There were a bajillion cat shifters I needed to get through.

My eyes darted around the room. I would not be deterred. There was a way out and I was going to find it.

There. In the ceiling was a vent. I bet it led to the ductwork. It should be big enough for me to fit in. Could I get in there and move about undetected? There was only one way to find out. I moved so I was standing underneath it. This would work. Now to figure out how to get up and into it. The opening was a few feet above my head.

If I jumped, could I knock the grate loose and then somehow grab on and pull myself up? I leaped into the air. My fingers just barely grazed it. I would need to get higher somehow. I shoved the mattress to the spot underneath it and tried again. Still not tall enough.

The door down the hall slammed open. I froze as footsteps thundered toward me. Was it Myles? I ran to the bars to peer out.

No. Not Myles. It was the same two goons from earlier.

“What do you think you are doing?” one of them asked.

I shrugged and tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. “What are you talking about?”

“There’s a camera in here, bitch,” the other sneered at me. “Don’t do anything stupid. We’ll see it.” He scrunched his nose up as he growled at me.

I turned to the corner of the room. Shit. He wasn't lying. In the back corner was a small, circular object with a black lens in the middle of it. That's probably why they'd come for Candice. They'd seen how dire her situation was getting. Those bastards had been watching us the whole time. Were they listening, too? Probably.

"Don't do something you are going to regret. It will only get worse for you," the first goon said, pointing at me.

I glared at them. They hissed at me, yes hissed, and then walked away.

A scream bubbled up my throat as I, once again, tried to shake the bars. They didn't budge. I balled my fists at my side and tried to force calm, even breaths in through my nose and out my mouth. I needed to keep it together. Losing it wouldn't help me. *Focus.*

Think. Come up with a plan.

The more level-headed I stayed, the better off I'd be.

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. How was I going to get out of here without them seeing what I was doing. I went back to the mattress and sat down.

Think, Elena. Think!

My eyes darted around the small cell again. How did one break out of a cell made of concrete and steel bars when they were being watched?

Sixteen

“I found them,” I said as soon as I finished my shift. I grabbed a pair of shorts that were lying along the top of the fence posts and tossed them on as I walked to where my team and the wolves were conversing.

“That was fast,” Anna said.

Conner kissed Anna’s temple. “Mates are connected. He was able to feel her in his heart and search for her.”

It was easy to forget that Anna was human and didn’t fully understand shifters yet. She fit in with our team so well.

“Where are they?” Maisy asked.

“Abandoned factory to the south of here,” I said.

The wolf alpha nodded his head. “I think I know where you are talking about. Come. One of our pack members works for the city. He might be able to pull up more information with his credentials online.”

I didn’t want to look at schematics and make a plan. I wanted to get back to Elena and get her out of there. But if we were going to save her, we needed a plan. I couldn’t risk her

getting hurt. As many jaguars as there were at the facility, any of them could get to her before I could.

Maisy wrapped her arm around my shoulder. Not an easy feat since I was well over a foot taller than her. “Hey, I know you feel like you want to run in there right now and get her out, but you know we need a plan. We are going to get her out of there. I promise.” She reached down and grasped my hand, giving it a squeeze.

I looked at Jace. He eyed Maisy’s and my joined hands but said nothing. “It’s not so easy knowing your mate is out there in trouble. But Maisy is right. You were right when you told me to be patient when you extracted me and not Maisy.”

“I’m sorry about that. I didn’t know.” I’d had no idea what it felt like to have your mate in danger then. I’d taken Jace out of a dangerous situation but left Maisy because she had the problem handled. Jace had nearly gone out of his mind with worry.

“It’s okay.” He smacked me on the shoulder. “But this is the same thing. We can’t go in without a plan. There are just too many of them and we don’t want her to get hurt. Or her sister.”

“Come on. As soon as we have a plan, we’ll go. I want to meet this girl and I don’t want her in there a moment longer than she has to be.” Maisy pulled me toward the pack’s housing.

I drew in a deep breath and let it out.

Keep a level head. Stay calm.

Those were two things I'd always prided myself on. I let Maisy lead me to the main pack house. We walked up the steps and inside.

Wolves filled the front room, most of them men. They looked like they were getting ready. Ready to go to war with the jaguars. Ready to save Elena.

Good.

It didn't take the pack long to pull up the schematics for the warehouse. They had a projector that they used so everyone could see.

I eyed it. There was nothing else around it for a few miles. We should be able to transition and still go undetected by humans. That was likely the reason that Jason had chosen it. It was also a disadvantage for him.

Connor looked at his phone and nodded. Gavin must have sent him something.

The alpha pointed at the schematics. "They will have guards around the perimeter. It's okay. We are doing a full-blown attack so it won't matter if we trip them off," he said. "We will have groups that attack from all sides. Myles, since you have an overhead view, you can decide what makes the most sense for you and help where needed."

I inclined my head. I could do the most damage in my dragon form. "I can lead the first attack." They wouldn't see me until too late, and I wouldn't have to worry about friendlies during the initial strike.

Connor stepped forward. “And we can triple our numbers. I just got a text from Gavin. Packs from Abilene and Ft Worth are already on their way here. Panther shifters and leopard shifters are also coming. We should be close to two hundred strong.”

“Good,” the alpha said. “We don’t have an exact number of how many are at the warehouse. This group is Eastman’s strike team. They are all skilled fighters and loyal to him.”

Which made them even more dangerous. “What about his hostages?” I asked. “He might hurt them if he thinks he is going to lose.”

“We will need a way to extract them,” Connor agreed.

“Getting into the building right away could be difficult,” the alpha said as he looked at the schematics. “We could guess where they are being held, but it would be just a guess.”

“It looks like there is a lot of duct work. Is there any way to access it from the outside?” Maisy asked.

She gave me a small smile and a wink. I already knew what she was thinking.

Maisy was petite by werewolf standards, human, too. She was just barely five feet. It was something that had come in handy several times. People always underestimated her because of her size. It was their mistake. She was fierce. And she could fit into small, tight spaces. Like duct work.

“Yeah. There is an access point here,” a wolf said, pointing to a spot on the blueprint.

“Perfect. I’ll go in there and find them. Get them out if I can or make sure no one hurts them,” Maisy said.

“I’ll go, too, in case you need backup,” Anna said.

It was a good idea. All four women should be able to move around the duct work. It might not be comfortable, but it would give them a way out. I just hoped Elena and Candice weren’t injured.

The cats had taken Elena alive. She was important to Candice. I prayed that meant Jason didn’t intend to hurt her.

“Good.” The alpha took one last look at the schematics. “Get prepped and ready to go. We’ll leave as soon as reinforcements arrive.”

I soared above the clouds. I’d be over the complex any minute now.

Thank goodness!

It had taken three hours for everyone to assemble. Too long. I was going out of my mind.

There it was. I let out the breath I’d been holding and started circling.

My gaze drifted to the ground, and I watched as the other shifters got into their positions.

I flapped my wings and circled over the complex for the millionth time. At least that is what it felt like. Everyone was

getting into position. I knew I had to be patient. But Elena was in there. Right beneath me. Scared and alone.

I couldn't wait to hold her again. See that she was okay for myself. *Soon*, I promised myself. Just as soon as we took care of Eastman's pride.

Shouts drew my attention to the ground. Someone had been discovered. The men in the compound triggered their shifts, changing into Jaguars. Some went to investigate while others stayed by the warehouse.

More cats came outside. They were on alert but were investigating. We hadn't been found out yet.

My eyes darted over the ground. We were still moving into position from every direction except the one that the cats had decided to investigate. That group was holding where they were. I scanned the area. The cats were closing in on their location. Everyone else needed to get to where they were supposed to before the group was discovered.

I circled around again. There had to be at least a hundred total shifters on the ground from what I could tell. More were inside. This was going to get nasty. Lives would be lost. I didn't relish the killing, but the Eastman pride needed to be stopped. They were killing innocent shifters. Women and children. And they had no intention of stopping.

The lights at the warehouse flickered and then went out. That was my signal. I swooped down and drew in a deep breath. Fire burned my throat as I held it until the right moment. Once close enough, I let a spray of fire out.

It hit several cats and burned a hole large enough for my friends to get through. I moved down a little bit, sending another spray of fire. Then I drew in another breath, huffing hard enough to put out any lingering flames.

The cats backpedaled away from me. Men shouted in the distance. My team descended, attacking the cats on the ground. I couldn't use my fire anymore without risking hurting them. I landed on the ground and stomped toward a group of cats that were exiting the warehouse.

I puffed out a small ball of fire, hitting two of them. The third evaded me. I surged forward, catching the third with my nose. I hit him, sending him flying into the air.

He landed on the ground with a crack. The cat made a pained noise but didn't make any signs it intended to get up so I left it there.

I stomped toward the fighting. I used my long nose to throw another cat away from one of the wolves. Four cats launched themselves at me. They landed on my back. Their claws dug into my scales but were unable to pierce my skin.

I flapped my wings and lunged forward, taking flight. I twisted a few times in the air, spiraling around until they fell off me. My scales kept me protected and were impenetrable. I hit the ground again.

We had underestimated the numbers Eastman had. More cats flooded out of the warehouse. My group was being overrun. I couldn't let that happen. If Eastman won today, there might be no stopping him.

I didn't want to know what that would mean for Elena or Candice. My mind drifted to Tyler. That poor kid. He would never know peace if his dad gained more power.

I drew in a deep breath and looked for a group of cats I could single out. Six were darting toward Connor. He was the only bear shifter here. I darted forward and sent a breath of fire at them. It hit all six. They caught fire, their mewls piercing my ears. I did my best to ignore it and focused on my next target.

A group of cats zeroed in on me. They lunged at the same time. I lifted my leg and swatted two of them away. Two landed on my neck. They tried to bite down, but my scales were too thick for them to get a grip. I shook my head, flinging them off. I puffed out my chest and blew a plume of fire at them.

Fire. Something was burning. It smelled like burning rubber. I turned my head. The warehouse was on fire. Flames billowed out from the windows. They had started the fire inside. My heart seized. Elena was still in there. Maisy, Anna, and Candice, too. I had to get them out.

I sprinted toward the building, but before I could get there, a group of cats attacked me from both the left and the right. No. I didn't have time for this. I had to save Elena.

Seventeen

I moved around my cell while keeping my eye on the camera. There had to be a blind spot somewhere in here. I just had to find it. And then...I'd already inspected the walls. There were no weak points from what I could tell.

My eyes drifted to the vent in the ceiling again. That was my only way out. But how? They were watching. They'd made that very clear.

I needed a distraction. But there was nothing I could do without drawing their attention to me. Which was the exact opposite of what I wanted.

Think. Think. Think.

Candice needed help. Was Jason getting her medical care? Every second that was wasted put her more in danger.

Myles was coming. But when? I couldn't wait for him. He didn't know where I was.

The lights in the cell flickered and then went out. I drew in a shaky breath and let it out. I put my hand on the block wall and blinked, waiting for my eyes to adjust. I'd wanted a

distraction. Now I had one. If the lights were out, I'd bet money the camera was off, too.

I narrowed my eyes and then made my way to the middle of the room. Shouts and hollers made me pause, but no one was coming in my direction.

Good.

I needed to get out of here. My eyes went to the vent above me. I needed something to stand on. The mattress wasn't thick enough.

I scanned the room. Thumping above me drew my gaze back to the vent. I frowned. Someone was already in there.

What? How?

It couldn't be Candice. She'd been barely coherent a little bit ago. Unless she'd been faking. I doubted that.

"Elena?" a feminine voice asked.

That was not Candice. "Who's there?" I whisper-yelled.

"My name's Anna. I'm here with Myles. We are going to get you out of here."

Thank God.

Anna moved the vent and slid it across the ductwork on the other side.

"I don't think there is anything to stand on for me to get up there." I bit my lip and peered up at her. I could jump and hopefully pull myself up into the ductwork.

“Can you jump? I think together we can get you up here,” Anna said.

“Yeah.” I nodded. Anything was better than staying here. I didn’t know if anyone would come to check on me, but wasn’t going to wait around to find out.

I huffed and looked up at the opening, moving so that I was in a spot that should give me a good angle to get pulled up. “Ready?” I asked.

“Ready when you are,” Anna said. She extended both arms down toward me.

I grasped both her hands. “On three. One. Two. Three.” I jumped at the same time Anna tugged me up. I reached one hand out and grabbed the edge of the vent. Together, we got me up into the duct. Sweat beaded on my brow and my breath came in quick pants. A gym membership was in my future.

“Are you okay?” Anna asked.

“I’m okay. Candice is hurt. They took her somewhere. I’m not sure where,” I said.

Oh no. We still had to find her.

“It’s okay,” Anna said. “My partner Maisy is on it. We passed by the room she was being held in while looking for you. She’s working on it. We have to go back that way to get out. We’ll see if she needs any help.”

“She will. Candice is barely awake and seemed to be sick and hurt.” We needed to get her out of here and to an actual

doctor. Or would they insist on a shifter doctor? Wait! Was Anna a shifter, too? And Maisy? Could I trust them?

Myles had mentioned both of them. But...

“Come on this way,” Anna said. She grunted as she worked to turn around in the vent and then made her way back the way she’d come.

I shook my thoughts away. Those were questions for another time. Right now, I needed to get out of here.

Myles might be some type of shifter, but I trusted him. It was a feeling I couldn’t explain. The way I felt about him was beyond words. In the short time I’d known him, he’d wormed his way into my heart. The heart I never want to give to another man again.

A scream jarred me from my thoughts.

Candice!

Anna sensed the urgency, too. She sped up. I followed right at her feet. “Oh no,” Anna said as we came over another vent.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Anna moved forward over the vent and then rolled around so she was facing me while I closed the distance. I peered down. What I saw made me do a double take. A jaguar and a wolf were fighting. Candice sat on her bed. She was awake but didn’t look good. Her face was pale. Her breathing labored. Tears streamed down her face as she mumbled something.

“I can’t get a shot off without possibly hitting Maisy. They are moving too fast,” Anna said.

I looked up and gasped, realizing she was holding a gun and had it pointed at the fight below. The two animals were in the throes of a fight to the death it looked like. I couldn’t tell who was winning. One moment, the cat had the upper hand, the next the wolf did. They were moving fast. It was hard to keep up with them.

“Maisy is the wolf?” I asked. It was the only logical thing that made sense, but nothing about this situation was logical. If I wasn’t seeing this for myself, I wouldn’t believe it. People that could turn into animals. Crazy! Wait! Was this like folklore? Could I be turned into one of them, too?

Oh my god! I’d been scratched earlier. Was I going to turn into one of them, too? What about Candice?

“Yeah. That’s her,” Anna said jarring me from my thoughts. “She’s holding her own against the jaguar.” Anna continued to point her gun at them. “I wish I could get a shot. I don’t want to hit her, though.”

I nodded. “So, you’re not one of them?” I asked. I glanced at her for half a second and then back to the fight.

“No. I’m human. Like you. We can’t be turned, either, in case no one has told you. I know that freaked me out for a minute.”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding. “Is this normal?” I asked as I fought to keep up with the fight.

“I haven’t been with the SPS for that long. They have their own rules and law enforcement. So, I’ve only seen the crazier things. But not all shifters are crazy like him. I promise you. Conner, Myles, Jace, and Maisy are wonderful,” Anna said.

“Myles is a shifter, too, then?” I asked. I already knew the answer.

“A dragon,” Anna whispered.

My eyes darted away from the fight to Anna. “Dragon?” I asked, not sure I’d heard her correctly. Weren’t those mythical creatures? A dragon. Oh my god! This was crazy, but if I took a minute to think about it, a dragon suited Myles, and it’s what had popped into my mind earlier. This whole situation was like a fairy tale gone wrong. Well, some of it hadn’t been so bad.

“Do you smell that?” Anna asked. She crinkled her nose and sniffled.

I inhaled deeply and then coughed. “Is that something burning?” I asked.

Anna and I shared a look. “I’ll get you out of here and come back for Maisy and Candice.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I’m not leaving my sister here. Besides, depending on how that goes.” I inclined my head to the fight. Jason had Maisy backed into a corner. “You might need my help.”

But then Maisy looked like she was holding her own. She leaped at Jason with her teeth bared. A vicious snarl echoed up through the ductwork.

Her movements were so fast I could barely keep up. She got Jason rolled onto his back and then buried her face into his neck. Maisy shook her head. The cat hissed and mewed, and then his fighting slowed. Crimson dribbled onto the floor.

“Jason?” Candice asked. “No!” she cried out and tried to get out of the bed but ended up falling onto the floor instead.

Anna slid forward and moved so she could lower herself into the room. She landed on her feet in a crouch and went to Candice. I followed Anna’s lead and landed on the floor initially on my feet but fell over onto my butt. My ankles screamed in protest. I ignored it, got to my feet, and went to Candice.

Tears fell from her eyes and she mumbled. “Is he dead?” Candice blubbered.

I turned and looked over my shoulder. My eyes met Jason’s. They were vacant, and his chest didn’t look like it was moving. “I think so.”

That only made Candice cry harder. I couldn’t tell if it was relief or grief. Maybe both.

“We can’t stay here,” Anna said. She put her arm underneath Candice.

I did the same thing and together we got Candice to her feet. She was dead weight. I wasn’t sure if her legs weren’t strong enough to hold her or if it was her emotion keeping her from standing. Anna and I dragged her through the room and to the door.

Maisy was already at the door, sniffing the ground. She whined and looked at Anna.

The smell of burning rubber was growing stronger by the minute. It made me gag. How close was the fire?

I put my free hand out and touched the door. It wasn't hot, but that didn't mean it wasn't close. I shared a look with Anna and then the wolf before sliding my hand down to the doorknob and opening it.

I was greeted by a plume of black smoke.

I coughed. My nose burned. I slammed the door shut and took a step back from the door. The fire wasn't at the door, but there was no way we could go out there. The smell and smoke were enough to debilitate all of us.

Maisy whined in between sneezes. She used one paw to itch her nose. Anna blinked rapidly and together we moved back to the bed. We got Candice back in it. She curled in on herself and cried.

Loud snaps drew my attention to my left. I stared in horror and fascination as the wolf morphed into a small woman. The bones snapped and jutted out beneath her skin. The fur receded until a naked woman kneeled on the floor. I blinked and then looked away.

"Here," Anna said as she handed a pair of plaid pants and tank top to Maisy.

"We can't go out that way," Maisy said.

I chanced a glance over at her. She was dressed now.

“We’ll have to go back up there,” Anna said, pointing to the vent we’d dropped out of.

“What about Candice?” I asked. My gaze went to my sister. She was still curled in a ball, bawling. “Do you think we can push or drag her through there?” We couldn’t stay in this room. I covered my mouth as I coughed. The fire was getting closer.

“We will have to try,” Maisy said. Her lip curled in disgust as she looked at Jason. “It’s not safe to stay here.” She coughed and then cleared her throat. “I’ll go up first. You two hand her up to me and I’ll pull her into the ductwork.”

Maisy pulled a desk away from the wall and stuck it beneath the vent. She stepped up onto it and then jumped up into the vent and pulled herself inside. Anna and I went to Candice. She blubbered as we tugged her back to her feet.

“Wait!” Maisy croaked. She covered her mouth with her arm and started coughing. She slid forward and dropped back down out of the vent. “It’s getting bad up there.” She bent over and fell into a coughing fit. Her face was red and a sheen of sweat shone on her forehead. “The smoke is worse and so is the heat.”

“What do we do?” Anna asked. “We are trapped.”

Oh God. The building was on fire and we were trapped inside.

I sucked in a breath I instantly regretted. My eyes burned. Tears streamed down my face and my lungs protested.

My heart pounded. I didn't want to die. I hadn't gotten to tell Myles how I felt yet. We hadn't gone on our date. I really wanted him to show me how I was supposed to be treated.

And what about Tyler? What would happen to him if Candice and I both passed? He'd be all alone.

That was unacceptable. We had to get out of here. I pulled my shirt up so the collar was over my nose and mouth. It helped a little.

I scanned the room. We needed something to cover our faces and our bodies. We had to get out before the flames grew so large we couldn't escape.

I shouldn't have worried. "Get back from the wall." Maisy grabbed my arm and pulled me toward her.

I turned just in time to see the wall light up. It glowed for a long moment and then it fell away. On the other side was a dragon. His eyes met mine.

"Myles," I whispered. It was him. He'd come for me. For all of us.

The dragon pushed forward into the room. Concrete blocks fell around him to accommodate his gigantic form as he made his way inside. He dropped to his belly. I took a step forward, reaching out to touch his long nose. His blue-black scales were softer than I expected. His eyes stayed on me as I touched him.

"Myles, can you carry all four of us at once?" Maisy asked.

Myles made a sound.

“Good,” Maisy said.

Right, we needed to get out of here. The building was burning down around us. I could ogle my dragon man later when it was safe. I went back to where Candice was and helped Maisy and Anna get her out of the bed. She swatted them away and mumbled something incoherent.

“Candice! We have to go. Tyler keeps asking about you. I need you to come on.” I clutched her arm and met her eyes.

Tears shimmered in her eyes and she swallowed. “Okay.”

“Come on.” I didn’t give her a chance to respond. I yanked her after me to where Myles was sitting.

Flames billowed not too far from him. Could he be burned? I didn’t want to find out.

“Here,” Maisy said as she climbed up on top of Myles like she’d done it a million times. Maybe riding dragons was normal for her. She reached down. “Give me her arms. I’ll pull her up.”

I pushed Candice in Maisy’s direction. Anna and I lifted her up from the ground just enough for Maisy to grasp hold and tug her the rest of the way up.

“Go ahead.” Anna pointed at Myles’s leg, which Maisy had used to climb up.

I drew in a breath and then coughed.

Short, shallow breaths, girl, I reminded myself.

The smoke was making it hard to breathe. I put one hand on Myles's neck and then stepped onto his leg. Maisy reached her hand down. I took it and somehow, we got me up onto Myles's back. Anna came up next. Myles flapped his wings and took a few steps forward.

I leaned forward and grasped hold of Myles tightly. Not that there was really anywhere for me to hang on. We flew up and into the sky. Part of me wanted to shut my eyes. The other part couldn't close them. It was chaos on the ground. I'd never seen so many animals in my life. They were fighting each other.

It was a war zone. The burning warehouse only added to the effect. Fire billowed high into the sky. It would attract attention. Someone would be calling the fire department.

By the look of it, we'd gotten lucky. Parts of the ceiling were caving in. The fire was raging out of control. Myles had stepped in to save us just in time. I gasped as Myles changed angles. My hands grasped him around the neck in a hug. The ground was rising at us.

Oh. Wait. We were landing.

Myles hit the ground and came to a stop.

I climbed down first and went to stand in front of Myles. I put my hand on his nose again and he leaned into it, closing his eyes.

Anna came up to me and put her hand on my shoulder. "Elena, we have to go. We need to get Candice to a doctor."

Right. “Come back to me. I’ll be waiting.” I didn’t know where I would be waiting, but I knew he had to come back from the battle.

Myles nuzzled my hand and then took a few steps back. He held my gaze for a long moment and then took off. I watched for a few seconds as he flew and then he disappeared.

“He turns invisible to keep from being spotted,” Maisy said as she came up next to me. “Are you hurt?”

I shook my head. “No. Just Candice.”

Anna patted my shoulder. “Come on. The fighting will be over soon. We need to get Candice to a doctor. She’s in rough shape.”

I turned around to ask how we could get Candice help but stopped. A line of cars was along the side of the road. Maisy already had Candice in the back seat of one of them. I hurried ahead and climbed into the passenger seat.

“Where are we going?” I asked as Anna pulled us onto the road and away from the warehouse.

“Back to the pack grounds. Those guys who have been watching over your house, they are wolf shifters.”

“Of course, they are.” I combed my fingers through my hair.

“We can answer any questions you might have once we get back and it’s safe.” Anna turned the corner hard and fast enough to make the tires squeal.

“How long is the fighting there going to take?” I asked. I didn’t know if I could sit around for hours while Myles went to war for me and Candice.

Maisy cleared her throat. “I don’t think much longer. With Jason dead, it should help encourage the other cats to surrender,”

“He’s gone,” Candice whispered.

I turned back to look at her. She closed her eyes and slid down her seat until her head hit the window. Her eyes didn’t reopen.

“Candice?” I whispered.

Maisy reached over and put her hand on Candice’s throat. “Her pulse is thready. Hurry, Anna.”

I gulped. Hold on Candice.

Eighteen

I might lose my mind. It had only been twenty minutes, maybe less, since the doctor had shooed me out of the room. We weren't at a hospital. But the room at the pack's house might as well have been one. It had all the fancy equipment. Supposedly, there was an operating room just down the hall.

I guess it made sense since they couldn't go to the hospital.

How was this even happening right now?

I paced outside, waiting for word on Candice. Waiting for word on Myles.

Maisy and Anna seemed just as antsy. Maisy moved between sitting and standing. Anna sighed heavily and bounced her foot up and down from where she was seated.

What was I supposed to do with myself while I waited? This was insane. The only solace I had was that Tyler was okay. He was with Myles's adoptive parents. One of them was flying him out now. The poor kid had to be terrified.

“It’s not always like this,” Maisy said. She looked at Anna and then at me. “I promise.”

“I hope not. This is crazy.” I raked my hand through my hair and blew out a breath. “What is it exactly that you do? Can you tell me now that I know you guys are animals...or, um, shifters?” I looked between the two women.

Anna glanced at Maisy and shrugged. Maisy pushed off the wall and came to stand next to me. “The SPS, Shifter Protective Services, we are an elite group within the government that handles cases such as this. We work cases specifically that deal with shifter issues. Not all cases are like this. I promise. We get boring ones, too.”

I lifted my brow and met her eyes. She offered me a small smile. “Define boring.” If I had to guess, our definitions would be very different.

Maisy shrugged. “Missing kids and such. Property disputes. That sort of thing.”

“Oh.” Yeah. We defined boring differently.

“I know it’s a lot to take in. My understanding is that you didn’t know about shifters,” Maisy said.

I shook my head.

“They are just like us,” Anna spoke up. “Myles cares a great deal for you. You’re his mate. I’m sure you feel the connection to him.”

I nodded my head slowly as I considered her words. “Mate?”

“You are the only woman in the world for him,” Anna said.

I snorted and did my best to hold back laughter. It didn't work. I covered my mouth. Both women looked at me like I was crazy. “I'm sorry. I don't buy it. Sure, I feel a connection to Myles, but that doesn't mean anything.”

It didn't. People thought they were in love all the time. It ended in heartbreak half the time.

“You've been hurt?” Maisy asked quietly.

She put her hand on my shoulder. “I know what it's like to have your heart ripped out. To not be able to breathe. You think you can never find someone again.” She put her hand on her chest and let out a heavy sigh. “But then you find that special someone and everything is better. Your heart seems to heal overnight. The weight lifts and you find your true happiness.”

I licked my lips. Wow! I'd never had my heart ripped out. I'd cried over my ex, but I'd done okay without him. I might be better off, actually.

But Myles...the way he made me feel. It was indescribable. The past weeks had been the happiest I'd been in a long while. Since ever if I thought about it. And I'd been under constant surveillance because Jason was stalking us.

“Promise me you'll give Myles a chance to talk to you when he gets back,” Maisy said.

“I promised him a date,” I whispered. My fingers went to my lips. If I closed my eyes, I could almost feel his lips

pressed against mine. I wanted to feel that again.

“Good,” Anna said.

“Do you think he’s okay?” I asked. My heart lurched in my chest. He’d dropped us off and then gone back into the war zone. “How long until he and everyone else get back?”

“I’d hope soon,” Maisy said. She pulled out her phone and looked at the time and then made a face. “As for Myles, he is probably the one person you don’t have to worry about. Not only does he have thick skin, but he can go invisible when he wants. It’s perfect for sneaking up on people.”

“I bet.” That would be handy to have that ability. I could hide from all my nosy neighbors.

No! I was done hiding. I didn’t care what they or anyone else thought. It was time for me to step out of the shadows and accept myself for who I was. Their thoughts didn’t matter. Let them talk. All that mattered was my happiness. “Are there lots of dragons?”

“No.” Maisy shook her head. “Myles is one of a handful. Humans hunted dragons heavily in the Middle Ages and some shifters went out of their way to kill them a few centuries ago because they feared them. It is very unfortunate.”

“Can shifters have kids with non-shifters?” I smacked my hand to my forehead. I already knew the answer to that. Duh. Candice had Tyler and a little girl. “I mean, does the shifter gene pass on if one parent isn’t a shifter?” I wouldn’t mind

having a kid or two one day. Having a few with Myles would be even better.

“Yeah. It can. Tyler will be a jaguar, like his father. The shifter gene is the most dominant,” Maisy said.

“He won’t lose his mind like his father, will he?” I asked. My eyes widened as I met Maisy’s eyes. Goodness, I hoped that didn’t happen. Tyler was a sweet, innocent person. That couldn’t happen to him, right? Surely, Jason had been the same way once, too.

She put her hand on mine and patted it. “No. That’s unlikely. He’ll have lots of support to help him on his journey. We won’t let that happen.” Maisy stiffened. Her head tilted to the side and then she moved away from me and went down the hall to the window. She waved Anna and me over. “Come on, they’re back.”

I peered out the window, watching as car after car made their way up the drive. I held my breath. One by one, the shifters got out and made their way into the house.

“There they are,” Anna said. She pointed at a green SUV from over my shoulder.

I squinted and let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. Myles was in the passenger seat. I had to see him. Right now. I pushed past them and ran out of the house and down the steps.

I flung myself into his arms. He squeezed me against him and mumbled something into my ear. I clasped my hands

around his neck and closed my eyes. Myles was safe. We both were.

He nuzzled against me. "I'm so glad you are okay."

"Me, too. I was worried about you." I pressed a kiss to his lips and then leaned my forehead against his. We were both okay. Everything was perfect. Except, I had no idea what tomorrow would bring. Where did we go from here?

One thing at a time, Elena. One thing at a time.

Nineteen

I pulled the chair out for Elena and then pushed it toward the table after she had a seat. After, I took the seat opposite her. The restaurant was a little noisy. Soft music played from the overhead speakers and the other diners had their own conversations.

“How did today go?” I asked.

She smiled and met my eyes. “Candice is still healing, but she seems to be doing better. It helps that she has Tyler. I’m not sure what she would do if she didn’t have him.” She shuddered.

“Losing your mate is never easy. Even someone like Jason.” I couldn’t imagine what I would go through if anything happened to Elena.

“I still don’t understand it. But at least it wasn’t him that hurt her. It was one of his men. He killed them when he saw what had happened.” She blew out a breath and picked up her menu. “The black eye was an accident, too, I guess. I don’t see what reason she would have to lie at this point. And I’m just glad that we can move on.”

“I wanted to talk to you about that,” I said. I grabbed the edge of her menu and pulled it back down to the table so she had to look at me.

She gulped and met my eyes. “You’re not breaking up with me on our first date, are you?” Her bottom lip trembled, and she drew in a shaky breath.

“Never.” I grasped her hand with mine. “Elena, you are my future. My soulmate. I never want to be parted from you again.”

She swallowed and nodded.

I took that as a good sign. “I love you.”

“Love?” she whispered. Her eyes widened.

“Love’ isn’t even a strong enough word to describe what my heart feels for you.” There weren’t any words to accurately tell her what I felt.

“I love you, too.” She reached across the table and grinned as she took my other hand. The smile fell almost as fast. “But how does this work? You travel for your job. My home is here.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. We have a few options. I could quit and stay here with you. I have one last case I need to work right now and then I’ll resign.”

“No.” She shook her head adamantly. “Absolutely not. You enjoy your job. What you do matters. I can’t let you do that. You would come to resent me.”

“I would never. And I love my job. But I love you more.” I grasped her hand before she could pull it away. “There is another option. You still want to get away from here, right?”

“Oh god. Yes.” She laughed out loud. “But with Tyler and Candice...” she trailed off.

“The pack has offered to help keep an eye on them. And you could come with me. From case to case and stay at the motel or go into town while I work. I know your job is remote, so you could work from anywhere.”

“Yeah. I could.” Her eyes lit up and I could tell she was thinking about it. “I can leave town. Make a new life for myself. With you.” She wiggled in her seat, the excitement clear.

“If that’s what you want,” I said, wanting to be sure.

“It’s all I’ve wanted.”

“We can come back and visit Candice and Tyler anytime. I can get us here quickly.” My voice fell to a whisper.

“I might want to go for a ride again. You know, when my life isn’t in danger.” She bit her lip and met my eyes.

“I can arrange that.”

“We are doing this then?” she asked.

“Yeah. We are.”

She blew out a long breath and grinned. “So, tell me about this case. When do we leave?” Her brows dipped into a frown. “Or do I still not get to know everything?”

I lifted her hand to my lips and kissed the back of it. “I can tell you. This case is personal.” I cleared my throat. “It’s, uh, it’s Levi. He’s missing. My team and I are going to Washington near Mount Rainier. It’s the last place we know he was.”

Elena put one hand over her heart. “Oh no.”

I exhaled through my nose. “I’m worried about him.”

She put her other hand on top of mine. “Why didn’t you go?”

I picked up both her hands and kissed the inside of her palm this time. “I wanted you to know that you mean the world to me, Elena. I couldn’t leave and let you think that I’d abandoned you.”

A small smile slid over her face. “That’s why I love you. You take my feelings into consideration.”

“I always will.”

She picked up her water glass and took a sip. “When do we leave to help your brother?”

“First thing in the morning. We’ll meet the rest of the team out there. Maybe even beat them, too. I’m faster than an airplane. And with everything going sideways, Gavin won’t let me go in alone.”

She licked her lips. “So, we can enjoy each other this evening?”

“We have all night, sweetheart.”

She got up from her seat and came over to me, bending down and capturing my lips. I pulled her into my lap and deepened the kiss before nuzzling her face with my nose. “You aren’t worried about everyone staring?”

“Pfft. Let them stare. I don’t care anymore. I’m happy and I want everyone to know it.” She kissed me again. Our future was just beginning and I couldn’t wait to see where we would go.

Thanks for reading Undercover Dragon. If you thought this book was hot, it’s nothing compared to the heat between Scarlett and Levi in Undercover Lion. You’ll also get more of Elena and Myles’s story as they make a pretty epic cameo in the next Shifter Protective Services book. Flip to the next page for a peek of Undercover Lion.

Sneak Peek

I f they catch me, they will kill me.

Poachers murdered my family in cold blood and I'm the only witness. Now they are hunting me like I'm their prey. I know the wilderness like the back of my hand, but it's a long trek back to civilization.

I was raised by tiger shifters so I'm used to moving through the trees undetected. But when I run into Agent Levi Daughtry from Shifter Protective Services, I think he's here to help me. I couldn't be more wrong. He's here to arrest me and bring me to justice.

Everyone thinks I killed my family. It gets worse. The moment Levi touches me, it triggers something in him. I'm his fated mate. It'd be great if he didn't look at me like I was the worse scum on the earth. I need him to believe we are on the same side before it's too late. The poachers are closing in on us and we are running out of time. I'd love a chance at a happily ever after, but I'd settle for escaping these woods with my life.

Preorder Undercover Lion now.

About Bethany Shaw

Bethany Shaw writes paranormal, science fiction and contemporary romance. Vampires, shapeshifters, and good old-fashioned romances are her favorites, and she promises to always give a happily ever after. Writing has always been a passion of hers and she enjoys creating fun and imaginative characters and worlds.

She lives in a small town near Columbus, Ohio with her husband and two kids. Rescuing animals and giving them forever homes has always been important to her. She has 3 dogs and 3 cats. Bethany also enjoys baking. Her favorite thing to bake is chocolate chip cookies or oatmeal scotchies. Her late evenings are often spent reading until she falls asleep. Some of her favorite authors include Sherilyn Kenyon, Rachel Vincent and Cassandra Clare.

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