



WILD

MAGICAL
LOVERS

LOVER

MICHELLE
HOWARD

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR

Wild Lover

Magical Lovers

By Michelle Howard

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Chapter 1

“Can you believe you’re marrying Drake *freaking* Winston!”

Chrissy had to yell to be heard above the blaring music in the nightclub. The dance floor overflowed with gyrating bodies. Lights blinked in a myriad of rainbow colors over the ceiling, giving the club its legendary name, The Rainbow Room.

Her best friend rolled her amethyst eyes but didn’t stop shaking her hips to the beat. “You don’t have to add *freaking* every time you say his name.”

Chrissy couldn’t stop the grin stretching her lips. “It’s not the same without it. I mean, he’s the CEO of Winston Enterprises. A millionaire several times over. Hello! That requires more than a casual saying of his name.”

Laughter burst from Toni, threatening to spill her abundant curves from the tight black top with the plunging neckline Chrissy had bribed her into wearing. It went well with the wide-legged white cropped pants and vibrant red heels.

“You’re my best friend. You know that, right?” Toni leaned forward, the whiff of alcohol on her breath light and fruity.

Chrissy bumped their hips together in time to the music. “You’re my best friend too.”

“I love you,” Toni added as she continued dancing and wrapped both arms around Chrissy’s shoulders. They swayed to the music together as the beat slowed to one more fitting for lovers.

Confirmation of best friend status followed by avows of love meant her job as sole bridesmaid was complete and Toni was officially drunk. Chrissy was done two shots ago but it was her duty to make sure tonight was a blast since it was their last night partying together as singles.

Well, for Toni anyway. Tomorrow her bestie was marrying the man of her dreams, someone she’d met in an online game forum. And a millionaire to boot. That couldn’t be expressed enough.

They danced without a care about what anyone looking in their direction might think.

Perfect. Chrissy's night was complete. Almost.

Against her will, her gaze drifted beyond Toni's shoulders toward the man leaning against the mahogany bar in a casual stance. One hand rested in the pocket of his black slacks and the other held a half-filled glass of amber liquid.

Dark hair tumbled over his forehead and his piecing blue-gray stare burned a hole through the white halter top and high-waisted yellow shorts Chrissy wore. His features were hard cut and not even the slash masquerading as a dimple in his right cheek could soften his appeal.

Not an ounce of pretty boy in him. Just six plus feet of towering masculinity. Arrogance without a hint of remorse to show for it. When he caught her stare, he tipped his drink in her direction in a partial salute.

Chrissy flushed and ducked her head. She knew who he was. Ben Griffith. He worked for Toni's fiancé as a personal assistant and all around everything else from what she could tell.

They'd spoken briefly today since Drake's bachelor party was also being held in a private room here where Chrissy chose to have Toni's bridal shower slash last hoorah.

At the time, Ben had made her feel jittery and awkward. The unrelenting stare, the smirk and the low hum of sexual *come do me* vibe had made standing by him damn near difficult.

It wasn't the first time their paths had crossed. Impossible, considering his boss and Toni had dated long distance for a while. But there hadn't been much cause or need for any one on one between them the few times they were in the same space.

Unable to break her gaze away, Chrissy watched as woman after woman walked up to him only to be turned down with a few words. Some stormed off in a huff while others walked away, eyes lingering in a daze of befuddlement.

She didn't blame them. Ben's appeal lay in the carnal energy he emitted without effort and even Chrissy found herself aroused in his presence.

Except she'd be a fool to contemplate playing with someone of his caliber. She loved a good time as much as the next but Toni shared a few details about her husband-to-be and those he surrounded himself with. Otherworld beings. Wolves, shifters, vampires.

"So if Drake's a warlock, what does that make his buddy with the tempting stare?" Chrissy found herself asking.

Toni jerked slightly and stumbled. Chrissy caught her about the hips as Toni peered around in confusion. "What buddy? What tempting stare?"

The last came out in a slur and Chrissy started leading them off of the dance floor. Tonight was a wrap. "Drake's assistant. Ben doesn't talk much."

Or at least not to her. After their greeting upon arrival, he hadn't said more than two words to Chrissy despite her bubbly welcome. Men generally called her friendly. Okay, maybe not.

Invasive was more apt. Toni warned Chrissy that her habit of searching out every man's credentials on social media might be responsible for the recent decline in her dating life as well as her current lack of a boyfriend.

"Ben!" Toni squealed, drawing attention in their direction.

Chrissy hushed her, laughing at the same time. She led Toni toward the private room. Drake would probably want to take his fiancée in hand. Toni wasn't much for drinking and partying but she'd wanted to celebrate in a small way thus the bridal shower consisting of only the two of them.

"Yes, Ben."

"Ben's one of *them*," Toni admitted in an exaggerated whisper as if sharing state secrets.

One of them. Otherworld. Paranorm. Chrissy wondered what he could be. Maybe a wolf shifter. She risked a glance toward the bar but his back was now to them as he chatted

with the bartender. A broad back, stretching the material of his black shirt from shoulder to shoulder.

Something sexy, she decided as her eyes took in the curve of his tight butt and his long legs. Thicker and broader than Drake, Ben's body appeared to get a lot of time in the gym.

Definitely a shifter.

One who could probably lift her with one arm and not strain a bit. She could hang on him like a vine wrapped around a trellis.

Without pausing, Chrissy played out the fantasy of riding Drake's friend until they both exploded in a fantastic orgasm.

Orgasm. Just saying the word gave her shivers. How long since she'd had one not self induced? The thought depressed her. Even when she had a boyfriend, the experience left her disappointed and slightly dissatisfied.

They reached the other side of the room, bypassing the bar and Ben in all his lusciousness. A slight wedge kept the door to the corner private room partially open. From inside, conversation flowed in a deep baritone.

Toni shoved forward in a drunken stride, leaving Chrissy behind, to race toward her future husband. "Drake! We're getting married!"

Not by a blink did the blond in the tailored grey suit appear disturbed by the abrupt interruption. Turning in their direction, he murmured a few words in his cell phone then slid the device into his interior jacket pocket. His arms opened in time to catch Toni, who fell against his chest and curved her own arms about his waist.

Envy left a bitter taste on her tongue but Chrissy managed a weak smile when Drake's head lifted from Toni's dark waves and met her stare. This man ruled a business empire. Every morning he probably lost thousands of dollars while making more in the afternoon.

Initially, the suave millionaire intimidated Chrissy but then she'd noticed the way he looked at Toni whenever he visited

her in Florida. As if he'd found something too precious and special to be parted from.

Thus the couple's plan to make their life together in New York much to Chrissy's dismay.

"Hey, Drake." She offered a finger wave.

His lips curved up and his odd violet colored eyes brightened. "Hello, Chrissy. I take it the shower is over?"

Even his voice sounded rich. Lush notes which spoke of generations of money.

Toni's hands patted Drake's chest as she started undoing the buttons of his white shirt while loosening his dark red tie at the same time. Chrissy had to bite her inner cheek to control her snicker. "I'm pretty sure its lights out for her."

Drake glanced down, the humor in his eyes fading to one of utmost tenderness. "Then I believe we can all call it a night."

No man ever looked at Chrissy the way Drake currently looked at Toni. Her friend hit the jackpot with him and all because she liked to chat and role play online. Drake, having a similar interest in gaming, belonged to one of Toni's groups and played under a user name which didn't reveal his identity. It enabled him to enjoy one of his favorite past times without concern.

Looking at him, no one would guess he apparently kicked ass online as a mage of some sort. Toni found his character choice amusing and appropriate since her soon to be husband was a real life warlock.

To keep the mood light and not wanting to burden him with her own downward thoughts at losing her friend, Chrissy said, "I guess your bachelor party was a wild ride too, huh?"

He smirked and lifted Toni off her feet, cradling her in his arms. Not by a single wince did he show signs of strain from lifting her curvy friend. The move was straight out of a movie scene, sparking another bite of envy.

Drake hadn't wanted much of a party either as long as he got to stay close to keep an eye on them. Apparently, a business rival made threats after his wedding announcement and he worried they would be targeted.

Toni whooped, looping her hands around Drake's neck and resting her head in the crook of his shoulder. "I'm getting married."

"Yes, we are, sweetheart." Drake placed a gentle kiss on her temple then turned to Chrissy. "Do you have a ride home?"

He knew she'd been drinking and no way would Chrissy risk getting behind the wheel tonight. "I booked a room at the hotel next door."

A huge splurge considering the price tag attached to the one night but the church was a fifteen minute ride away and it meant even with a hangover, Chrissy wouldn't be late for the wedding.

"Send me the bill." Drake's attention shifted, looking over her shoulder. "I'm taking Toni home, Ben. See that Chrissy gets safely to her hotel."

Ben. Another shiver raced down her spine and her heart picked up its beat to pound like a drum against her chest. Chrissy turned around as casually as she could and met his strangely glowing eyes.

"Kent's waiting outside in front of the club with the car." The low, gravelly texture of Ben's words added an unwanted tingle straight to her loins.

Drake nodded. As he walked past Chrissy, he leaned down to whisper, "Thanks for being her friend."

Shit, damn. Sex appeal on steroids. These men had it in spades. Chrissy barely stuttered out a response. She followed behind Drake or attempted to. Ben grasped her upper arm at the door. "Not so fast. Drake asked me to escort you to your hotel."

"I'm only staying next door." She added an eye roll for good measure though the heat from his touch was doing very, very bad things to her. "I think I'll be fine on my own."

“You don’t mind if I accompany you anyway, do you?”

His actions clearly implied he didn’t care if she did mind. Without waiting for her answer, he used his hold to lead her from the private area Drake had rented and through The Rainbow Room.

Cool night air hit her face the moment they walked outside but it did nothing for the low level fire brewing beneath her skin. Her nipples became tight buds and she was pretty sure the devastating man at her side was the cause of the increase to her heart rate.

This wasn’t like her. Chrissy’s dating record held disastrous results which was why she relied on the internet to prescreen any man she agreed to go out with. Thinking of the fact she knew nothing about Drake’s friend, she rattled off her insane question. “Are you a dragon shifter?”

“No. Where are you staying?” he countered without looking down at her.

Chrissy dug her heels in, her lovely alcohol induced buzz fading slightly. She pointed across the street. “The hotel right there.”

He adjusted his hold to cup her elbow and headed across the street, ignoring the traffic. Her skin sizzled and popped. Luckily for them the roads were deserted this time of night.

Chrissy skipped to keep up with his brisk pace. “Are you going to admit that you’re a magical creature who shifts in the dark?”

Those sensuous lips curved up but he still didn’t face her. “No.”

No? The answer was short and with no follow up response. Toni wouldn’t lie and although Chrissy hadn’t witnessed Drake doing anything warlock-y, it didn’t stop her from waiting to see him pull a rabbit from somewhere interesting.

It wasn’t like paranorms lived in secret. They were everywhere but tended to live in their own communities. A few worked at the University but Chrissy didn’t really know

them thus she had no experience interacting with them beyond the basics.

Her brows crinkled at that. Maybe she should make more of an effort.

Ben blindly led her into the glittery main entrance of the hotel. He turned toward her with casual animal grace and nonchalance. Guests walking through the brightly lit lobby stared at them.

No, Chrissy corrected. They stared at the tall man beside her who didn't seem to pay them the least bit of attention.

“Do you have a room reserved or do you need to check in?”

Chrissy shook her head. “I have a room and my key already.”

Perhaps she was more interested in taking a risk with him than she'd suspected. Why else would she continue to walk by his side as he headed toward the brass elevators, not relinquishing his touch?

Chapter 2

Ben stepped into the elegant elevator, fighting the part of him that wanted to lap every bit of honey he could scent spilling from the woman beside him.

Christine Jones, best friend to Antonia Hendricks, his boss' fiancée. And human. Reason enough to not get involved with the blonde beauty but Ben's resistance lowered the moment her eyes met his at the club.

He'd been around her before. Hard not to when Drake insisted on spending his time flying back and forth from New York to Florida for a long distance relationship. Ben had been too busy to give much attention to anything other than keeping his friend and boss on track with work since he cut back on his hours to give Toni more of his time during their courtship.

Seeing her again today with nothing to distract him changed things. Desire burst forth and he'd fought the urge to throw her over his shoulder and claim her as his own. An unprecedented reaction for him. Ever.

For her part, brown orbs had widened in surprise then darkened with interest and desire when their gazes locked. He'd made it a point to stay away from her all night while unobtrusively keeping an eye on her and Drake in his role as personal body guard.

At no time had Ben been unaware of the blonde bombshell dancing in abandon on the floor, her body flowing seamlessly with each song from one to the next. She swayed to the slow beats and swiveled in a hectic frenzy to the fast ones, never once losing the rhythm.

Greedy men approached her continuously much to his annoyance but she sent them a careless grin and kept close to Toni.

The gesture confused him initially until he realized how committed she was to spending this time with her friend. She seemed to consume alcohol freely but Ben noted the moment she reached her limit.

Her steps grew a bit wobbled and her hips took on a more sensual rock and twist. At that point, he expected her to accept one of the many overtures from the guys eyeing her from the side of the dance floor.

Instead, she became more guarded, almost as if she possessed an innate awareness of potential danger and an increased determination to keep an eye on Toni.

While he regarded the friendship between the two with a wariness and suspicion that came with his role as a guard to Drake, Ben accepted the knowledge that both women would now be around permanently. After all, Drake deserved this happiness.

Thinking of the tall, full-figured Toni caused him to smile. He'd grown to know her from her occasional visits to New York and couldn't think of a more perfect match for Drake.

To be honest, Ben accepted Toni quicker than her sexy friend. Toni presented a soothing, calm reserve which impacted Drake and actually slowed down the CEO's hectic pace in running his business empire.

Chrissy on the other hand came across as wilder, out of control and perhaps a slight bit ditzy. Or at least she portrayed herself that way.

People like her often proved a bad call for those in Ben's world. Humans rarely contained themselves when confronted by those different or objectified his kind to score points on a hidden system.

Now after watching her, Ben reevaluated his initial thoughts. Despite warning himself to stay away, something tugged him in her direction. An unrelenting beat that pressed against his skin.

"Floor?" His free hand hovered over the buttons.

"Eleven." She tugged her arm slightly then with more force.

Holding in his smug grin, Ben released her, folded his arms over his chest and leaned back against the wall of the elevator. Deliberately, he let his gaze stray over the cute as

fuck shorts she wore, baring a long length of leg. The fitted shirt pushed her breasts up, creating cleavage no man in his right mind could ignore.

So Ben didn't.

During the entire all too brief sixty second ride, he kept his eyes focused on those lush mounds, chuckling when she blushed. It was good to know the attraction was mutual.

The elevator dinged on the designated floor and the doors slid open on a silent glide.

"Well." She walked backward through the widening gap, eyes on him and licked her lips. "Thanks for making sure I got here safe."

This time his grin escaped and Ben caught the doors as he stepped out of the elevator behind her. "My pleasure."

"Um...you don't have to walk me to my door." Chrissy's voice quivered as she stumbled backward.

The pulse in her neck beat with frantic thumps, drawing his gaze. Ben pursued her until her back hit the wall in the outer hallway. No where to go. She was all his.

He slid his hands through the cascade of blonde waves tumbling about her shoulders before gripping the sides of her face and tipping it up. Her eyes flared wide sending a spike of arousal straight to dick. "I should have said *our* pleasure."

Then he kissed her, not leaving any room for protest. After a moment's hesitation, her lips parted. She tasted as sweet as he'd imagined all night as he watched her body shake and twist on the dance floor.

Hell! Her tongue was greedy and lacked the tentative exploration he'd expected.

She gave as good as she got, her fingers spearing roughly through his hair, dragging a rough groan forth. One leg curved around his upper thigh and Ben slid between her widening legs.

Nips, bites and plunging tongues dueled. Passion and need met in a resounding crash. He ran his hands along the fine

bones of her shoulders, along the surprisingly toned arms and caught her hands. With a slight shift, he pinned them by her head on the wall they leaned against. She moaned and Ben had to fight the temptation to take her right here.

It took a concerted effort but he managed to pull back, breath unsteady. He placed his mouth next to her ear so there was no missing what he said. “Let’s take this to your room, pretty girl.”

Her lashes fluttered, those brown eyes watching him with undisguised hunger. Another swallow, the unconscious gesture, drawing his eyes to the delicate column of her throat. “Alright. Yes.”

Walking to her room when he wanted to pick her up and storm through the carpeted hall required more restraint than Ben usually employed. The fierce side of his nature demanded he push forward, take, steal—whatever it took to get what he wanted tonight. And what he wanted was Christine.

Fortunately, his rational side held him in check. His gaze tracked her bottom cheeks covered in the thin yellow cotton as she wobbled in her heels and came to a stop in front of the last door at a recessed alcove. He expected her to dig around her purse for the card key only to realize she didn’t have a purse.

She braced a palm on the door and reached down the front of the skimpy top and pulled the card from between the plump breasts he’d been admiring all night.

Fuuuck!

As soon as she had the door open, Ben slammed it shut and spun her to face him inside. She gasped but he tugged the shirt from the band at her waist and ran his hands up her torso until he hit the jackpot. Her breasts were an exact handful, ripe nipples stabbing his palms beneath the lace.

“Ben!”

Perfect. His name on her lips. It wouldn’t be the last time tonight. He nuzzled the sensitive curve of her neck. She smelled sweet, the light tones in line with a store bought fragrance. “That’s right. Say my name, pretty girl.”

Her shiver pulled at the reins he held on his other half but Ben shoved that part of him deep down. Not with Christine. Not with a human.

Chrissy raked her hands up and down Ben's back, enjoying the feel of coiled muscles and power beneath her fingertips. His tongue licked and teased the line of her neck only to stop at her ear and nip. She moaned, clenching tight on the fine material of his shirt in case he tried to pull away and rob her of the building ecstasy.

Rough hands fondled her breasts then pinched. Fondle, pinch. Fondle pinch. The rhythm he created left her weak in the knees and growing wetter by the second. She sagged in his arms.

Chrissy sent a hope filled wish to the powers that be for this firm man handling her with ease to live up to expectation. Desire and arousal came easy but release tended to leave her waiting.

"I've got you." Ben chuckled, catching her before she could hit the floor and scooped her up in his arms.

The move reminded her of Drake lifting Toni earlier and Chrissy blocked the comparison with determination. This wasn't the same. Ben wasn't her ever after but he sure as hell felt like her today and tonight.

When he laid her on the bed with its silky comforter and stepped back, Chrissy pushed up onto her elbows. She didn't want to miss a thing. He stood next to the bed and unbuttoned his shirt, gaze never straying from hers. The reality of the moment and what was about to happen smacked her in the face.

Was she really doing this? Was she going to sleep with a man she barely knew? Fear killed some of her arousal. "Do you have twitter?"

He froze, brows lowering. There was a distinct sneer to his lips. "Twitter?"

Undaunted, Chrissy cleared her throat. “Yeah, you know, like for social media to tweet your thoughts and stuff.”

Ben snorted, the shirt falling to the floor, baring a chest to rival all chests. His pants clung to his waist, the belt doing its job admirably but nothing could detract from the single line of dark hair leading from his torso and disappearing below.

“I don’t twitter.”

Right. She didn’t bother correcting him. Why would tall, dark and deadly want to share his thoughts with the world? Although...

“What about instagrizzle, snapchat, google?” In a desperate bid to find some way she could look him up, she weakly added, “Pinterest?”

Ben’s hands dropped to his waist, the belt loosened with a clink, followed by the rasp of his zipper. When he stepped outside of his pants, Chrissy learned something she wasn’t sure anyone would declare on social media. Aside from the robust erection aimed in her direction, she now knew that he didn’t believe in briefs. Or boxers. Nada.

“Oh, God.” Her heels kicked at the bed as she crawled backward until the headboard stopped her retreat.

Slow and taunting, his grin led the way, among other things, as he stalked toward her. Everything appealed to her and Chrissy didn’t know where to focus her gaze. Washboard abs twitched above neatly trimmed groin hair. His thighs were twice the size of her arms.

He climbed on the bed and tugged at the bottom of her shorts. “Take ‘em off.”

Doubt pushed a little harder. Her pulse kicked up a notch. “Maybe we should talk. Get to know one another. I think.”

What was she saying? The hottest man to ever join her in a bed sat inches away. She could lick the muscles within reach if she wanted.

Ben stroked his hands up her thighs and asked in a serious tone, “Do you want me to rip them off?”

Hell no, they were thirty dollars on sale. Plus, she looked a-maz-ing in them. Chrissy lifted her hips and frantically yanked at the shorts. When they caught on her ankles, she kicked them off. Ben plucked at her shirt but didn't say anything. He didn't need to. Chrissy tossed the shirt over her head, assuming it made it to the floor.

Ben immediately loomed over her, blocking out everything except his large hovering frame. His thumb roughly caressed her right hip. "I would have done it. Ripped them off if that's your thing. Nothing we do in this bed is off limits."

Chrissy swallowed. Without taking his eyes off of hers, he lowered his head and his teeth undid the front clasp on her bra. The pink lace cups flipped open.

"Shit," she mumbled as she tumbled backward to lay flat on the bed.

"Nothing," he repeated, the dark look saying things she wanted to lap up.

His fingers flicked at her hips and the strings of her matching tiny thongs popped. At least they hadn't cost as much as the shorts. The grin on his face turned wolfish. Had to be a shifter.

"I hope you weren't planning to get a lot of sleep tonight."

Chrissy would have given a sassy retort if his mouth hadn't latched on to her nipple, soft lips tonguing at the hard tip. She cried out and grabbed his head as she undulated beneath him. Slivers of sensation eased down her spine to center right between her legs. Now if only he would touch her *there* and ease the ache building.

As if reading her mind, Ben palmed the heart of her, fingers easily slipping through her wet folds. Chrissy arched up, eagerly spreading her thighs, giving him access to more.

Yes, yes, yes.

He released her nipple with a last lick though his hand continued to play between her legs as he stared down at her. "Lovely. I'm enjoying your pleasure."

“R-right,” Chrissy gasped.

Was he going to talk the whole time? If he did, Chrissy knew she’d climax on the spot.

“Is there anything off limits?”

The husky question gave her pause. Thoughts flew through her mind. Once, just once, she wanted to let her fear and worry go. Ben nudged at her chin with his face, tipping her head up. “Speak now. I don’t want to do anything to scare you.”

Dear God, what was he planning? “N-noo.”

He must have sensed her nerves because he leaned up and placed a soft kiss on her forehead. Innocent and lacking the sensuality of his earlier touches. “Don’t worry. I plan to take very good care of you tonight.”

Their naked bodies slipped and slid against one another. A sheen of sweat built on Chrissy’s skin but it was nothing like the heat emanating from the man on top of her. He burned like a furnace and the intent gleam in his eyes left her unsteady, aroused beyond belief and a tiny bit afraid.

“Do you like for a man to kiss you here?” His large middle finger penetrated her with a twist as he asked.

Curses flew from her mouth and Chrissy tangled her hands in the sheets as her hips punched up. She tried to focus on his question but she bordered on the verge of climax.

What had he asked? Oh, yeah. Kisses. Down there. Ugh. She wasn’t a fan of oral sex, finding it messy and less pleasing than expectations. The first time an ex touched her wet center with his mouth, she’d shoved him away. Every time after hadn’t fared any better.

But now? Ben had her questioning all of her prior lovers’ expertise or lack.

“Christine?” Another dip of his finger as he pushed deeper and his other knuckles brushed against her clit. The tiny bud swelled in response, delicate nerves lighting up.

Christine. That’s how Drake introduced her and Chrissy didn’t correct him. She wanted to be Christine tonight.

Christine didn't need social proof that it was okay to be in bed with this man.

"I guess I'll have to find out for myself," Ben murmured at her lack of answer and left a trail of moist kisses down her stomach. He withdrew his finger and grasped her thighs, slowly lifting and spreading them wide. Then his mouth replaced his fingers.

"Jesus! Mercy!" Chrissy thought to stop him but when her hands landed on his head, they didn't push. They pulled.

Ben feasted on her. His tongue lashed from one side to the other, he sucked the bundle of nerves and growled into her splayed groin. He devoured her in bite sized pieces, loud in his enjoyment and detonated her release from within.

Chrissy hoped they didn't draw hotel employees with her screams because Ben didn't stop there. He continued to move his mouth in ways she'd never experienced.

Hours. Days. She wasn't sure how much time passed. Chrissy lay limp after the number of orgasms she'd lost count of. Her hand weakly patted at his head. "No more. Please."

She wanted to hide in shame at the noises she'd made and her constant begging but she felt too exhausted to form a coherent thought. Ben lowered her trembling legs, his lips caressing her knees before he pulled up over her again. She didn't even have the strength to be embarrassed by his shiny lips. "My turn, pretty girl."

The head of his erection probed her entrance. He braced himself on bent elbows and thrust. Slick from multiple releases, it should have been a smooth fit. Instead, his cock burned as he filled her to the hilt. Chrissy screamed again, a mix of pain and pleasure.

So much pleasure. How could something hurt and feel so good at the same time?

Breaths coming in pants, Ben paused. "Are you alright?"

His cock pulsed inside, sending cascades of renewed pleasure through her. After his meticulous care, her body

reacted to the slightest stimuli. She was pretty sure she could keep coming all night with a flick of his fingers or tongue.

Chrissy tossed her head on the pillow lost to the sensations, her lower body arched from the bed in an attempt to take him deeper. To her dismay, Ben refused to move.

“Christine.” He gripped her chin and her eyes fluttered open to see his lust filled features. “Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

Focus. Focus. She needed to focus on what he said. Chrissy licked her lips and ran her hands down his sweat slickened back, willing him to continue. “N-no. I’m fine. Don’t stop.”

Relief glimmered in his gaze and the corner of his mouth curved up. “I won’t be stopping for a long time.”

She shivered at the darkly whispered promise. He pressed his thumb down on the tip of her chin before releasing her face and planting his hands at the sides of her head again. His hips swiveled and his shaft slid deeper until she felt the wisp of the hairs at his groin. The move left her feeling full. Stuffed. No other lover or boyfriend had ever filled her to this extent.

“Ben!” The ragged moan tore from her throat as his hips slapped against hers.

“That’s right. Say my name. Say my name.” He voiced the guttural demand and pounded into her at the same time.

Chrissy locked her hands on his shoulders and braced to take every inch sliding in and out. “Ben! Yes, Ben!”

Every hungry surge was accompanied by his low rasped groan, causing Chrissy to clench tight below. Tiny explosions detonated in a series of mini releases. She cried and whimpered, unable to regain her loss of control.

Ben didn’t make it any easier. He didn’t bother to hide his desire for her and how much pleasure he received with each stroke. Grunting and groaning above her, the strain on his features was evident. She reveled in the sounds of his passion.

“Fuck! You’re so hot and tight, pretty girl. Feels like I’m stretching you just to fit me. Only me.” He adjusted on his forearms and stared into her eyes.

The irreverent demeanor Chrissy used with others fell to the side. She wanted to look away, to deny the strange connection between them. He drew things from her she didn’t want to face.

Her heart raced in a panic. *No*. She couldn’t let him pull back her layers and leave her bare with no defense. Bringing her legs up, Chrissy locked her ankles around his waist and clenched her muscles tight in a rhythmic pulsing. Anything to push him toward release and break free of the emotions he brought out.

Ben growled, his head going back, the muscles in his throat straining as he grit his teeth. “Christ, how are you doing this to me?”

Chrissy rocked against him, continuing the contract and release maneuver. His hips hammered faster, sliding her across the sheet covered mattress. When her head hit the headboard, his palm cupped it softly, protecting her. The instinctive gentle action did her in. Another orgasm slammed into her and Chrissy buried her face in his damp chest as she shouted.

“Fuck!” Ben came a moment later, the wet of his release sending further panic coursing through her. His weight slumped against her as he collapsed in a trembling heap.

Fear and worry ruined her post orgasmic high and gave Chrissy a burst of energy. She smacked at Ben’s shoulders in a panic and struggled beneath him. “Condoms! You didn’t use condoms and I’m not on anything because I have stupid allergies to everything.”

“Sleep,” Ben muttered. He rolled to the side and curved his arms about her waist, pulling her close despite her efforts to jump from the bed. “Go to sleep. Can’t have children with you.”

Chrissy froze. His drowsy words stunned her enough that he had time to position her the way he wanted and curled

behind her.

Spooning. This large, kinda scary man spooned?

She shook away the thought. Not important. Chrissy settled in his embrace and tried to stay on track. “What does that mean exactly?”

“Only my fated mate can conceive from my seed,” he murmured, arm tightening around her.

Chrissy didn’t know what to make of that. Unexpected sadness tugged at her chest. *Fated mate?* Was that how they determined their wives in his world?

If so, apparently she wasn’t good enough. The urge to question him further fizzled away like ashes. How could a one night stand have such a devastating impact on her?

Low, rumbly snores interrupted her vacillating thoughts. She tipped her head up. He’d fallen asleep. Between one instance and the next.

Chrissy curled to the side of the bed in misery. Ben’s arm fell away as he shifted to his back, the separation between them glaring.

Chapter 3

“Be happy, Toni. You deserve to enjoy yourself without reservation.” Chrissy said the words in her sincerest tone. She really was thrilled by her friend’s marriage.

Toni hugged Chrissy tight. Layers of lace and the smell of Toni’s peach body lotion engulfed her. “Thank you for being so supportive throughout the madness.”

She blinked back tears when they parted, hands grasping Toni’s bare shoulders. “Well, I don’t think we can hide in the bathroom forever. Pretty soon someone’s going to ask what happened to the bride.”

They both snickered before touching up their make up in the mirror. Chrissy wore a violet colored sleeveless gown that stopped right above her knees. Bridesmaids’ dresses tended to be hideous but not the selection Toni had gone with.

Instead of Chrissy’s preferred style in straight lines, tiny pleating gathered on one hip and gave the illusion of the curvaceous figure she’d always longed for.

She wore her hair in a spray of curls that took time to create but came out fabulous. Along with the discrete jewelry, she looked better than nice. She looked stunning.

Toni, on the other hand, blew it away in her custom designer wedding dress in egg shell white with a sweetheart neckline. Lace and beading in an intricate but subtle pattern decorated the belt cinched at her waist. Toni had curves for days.

At just under six feet, her best friend had a killer body and the dress made the most of it. Not surprising since her new husband, Drake, planned the entire wedding and nothing the CEO of Winston Enterprises did was half measure.

“My mom will be the only one hunting me down,” Toni joked, her blue eyes lit with laughter. “You’d think I was leaving the country with the way she cried during the ceremony.”

Pretty close. Toni planned to move and join Drake in his fancy home in New York. She'd already given notice at the University where they worked and after today, Chrissy would lose her best friend and neighbor. But that was a depressing thought to save for later.

A forced smile curved Chrissy's lips. Nothing but smiles and laughter on her bestie's special day. She linked arms with the bride. "Well, we wouldn't want her looking for you. Let's party."

They rejoined the small crowd in the hall Drake had reserved for an intimate reception. Elegant floral displays decorated each table, faux vines in ivy and lavender graced the back of chairs and instrumental music from the trio up front played softly in the background.

The couple chose to limit the number of guests but there were still at least two hundred people here. Most of them had to have hundreds of zeros in their bank account balance. Chrissy inhaled and could almost smell the money.

She recognized a lot of the movers and shakers from her social media feed. Business moguls, underwear models, a country singer and a least a dozen other elite citizens from the rich and famous.

As to which ones were paranorm or otherworld—she wasn't quite sure. Before the wedding, Toni had pointed out a beautiful slim gentleman impeccably dressed. "He's a Fae. Dr. Brodie Curran."

Nothing about the man, who could only be classified as gorgeous, hinted that he was anything but human. His blond hair fell to his shoulders, standing out against the black of his suit jacket. The eyes, which continually scanned the milling crowd, were an unusually dark color.

When he moved up the walkway, an outpouring of arousal flowed from him and combined with a wave of urgency she couldn't explain. Chrissy had to fight the overwhelming urge to either run toward him and rip his clothes off or haul ass in the other direction far, far, away.

After he disappeared from view, she and Toni had peered through the dark curtains as more guests arrived in limos and fancy sports cars.

“Wolf shifter, witch, not sure. Oh wow, Kale. He’s a djinn. That’s his wife, Carolyn, who’s human. Hmm, another Fae,” Toni muttered, pointing to each person. “I’m not sure of the rest since I’ve only managed to meet a few of Drake’s friends.”

Because theirs was a whirlwind courtship. While Drake and Toni had known one another online for a while, they’d only recently decided to meet in person. According to her bestie, they’d fallen in love instantly and were destined for happy ever after.

The long distance thing lasted less than three months and Drake had arrived at their job at the University to propose and beg Toni to move to New York with him. She agreed.

Obviously.

“I’m going to join Drake. Will you be okay?” Toni asked, interrupting her thoughts.

Chrissy took a deep breath and let it out. She needed to get this off her chest. Toni was leaving for her honeymoon tonight and they wouldn’t have another chance to talk for the next seven days. “I slept with Ben after the bachelorette-bridal-shower party.”

Toni waved at Drake when he inclined his head to the circle of men around him, then faced Chrissy. Shock dispelled the new bride glow. “What?!”

“I know. I know.” Chrissy started to twist her hands together as visions of her night came back in full color. “See, I can’t blame it on the drinks because I wasn’t as bad as you and I’m pretty sure I was sober when we got back to the hotel. The only problem now is he totally blew me off at the ceremony and hasn’t left Drake’s side long enough all evening for me to at least punch him in the dick as a big fat F-you.”

Wow, she hadn’t meant to blurt it all out but boy did she feel better. Toni’s mouth flapped but no sound came out. She

pressed a hand to her temple and massaged. “Chrissy, Ben’s not here. Drake sent him to handle a huge issue in London this morning. His flight’s not due to return for another three or four days.”

Chrissy’s stomach lurched. A sense of failure filled her which she ruthlessly crushed. She didn’t fail. No promises crossed their lips. But that wasn’t the point.

She gripped Toni’s arm and force walked her toward Drake, the two men she didn’t know and the man who’d given her numerous powerful orgasms to rival all orgasms last night.

“Look, I know it’s a lot to take in. It’s your big day and all but I know who I slept with and it was the man standing right there.”

The subject of her ire happened to glance up and catch her jabbing a finger in his direction. No confusion, no embarrassment just a bland stare. Anger took hold and Chrissy sped up.

“Chrissy! Chrissy, I really think you should let me explain.”

Chrissy ignored Toni and came to an abrupt stop beside Drake and his friends. She glared at one man in particular. A man she had wanted more than any other, even if only for the night.

“Chrissy, I hope you’re enjoying yourself.” That was Drake. Ever so polite.

“I’m fine.” She shot dark looks at Ben but he turned toward the man next to him and proceeded to ignore her.

Unimaginable hurt set in. Seriously? While they hadn’t exchanged vows of eternal love she’d at least expected a respectful hug or a rueful grin. Not...dismissal.

“Chrissy?”

She blocked Toni’s hesitant tone. How could he stand there in all his glorious wonder and act as if last night hadn’t happened?

The longer she stared, the more the truth of what happened hit her. She'd been a hookup. An easy pre-wedding lay and one he didn't plan to acknowledge. Of course. She should have known that. It wasn't as if they'd had some mystical connection or that she planned to marry him and run away together.

Which didn't help. His abandonment still hurt. Her lower lip wobbled but she curled her hands into fists, letting the sting of pain from her manicured nails keep the tears at bay.

“Chrissy, this is James Kennar. I believe you mentioned enjoying one of the movies he directed.” Drake again.

Chrissy couldn't find it in her to laugh at the fact Drake remembered that tiny bit of trivia from the movie nights Toni made him attend with them curled on her sofa.

“This is my former ...”

Blah, blah. She didn't hear the rest of the introductions as she planted herself in front of the man who'd licked her breasts with such reverence. His expression remained neutral, revealing none of his thoughts.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?” She kept her voice low but conversation in their group dwindled.

Toni's hand pressed to the middle of her back but Chrissy shrugged it off.

“Should I have something to say?”

His voice remained gravelly. Layers of arrogance mixed with chocolate sin brought back the dirty words he'd whispered in her ear, the way he'd called her his pretty girl.

Her throat tightened but she pushed through it. “I get that this is the norm for you but didn't I at least warrant a goodbye. Or better yet—thanks for the good time?”

He'd been gone before she awakened, alone and tender all over. Her voice rose as anger took the place of pain. Drake drew Toni close as his eyes narrowed. “Chrissy, what's wrong?”

“He’s what’s wrong!” she snapped, sparing Drake a brief glance and noting his confusion. “We slept together last night and he’s avoided me all day instead of having the decency to say something to me. Anything!”

More stares aimed their way. The sound of clinking glassware tapered off. Her cheeks flamed.

Mr. Hot for one night lost the glimmer of amusement in his blue gray eyes. His head cocked to the side. “I assure you if we slept together I’d remember it.”

“Oh, God,” Toni moaned. “Chrissy, I think—”

Chrissy grabbed a full glass of red wine from a roaming waiter and threw it at him. “You’re a liar, Ben Griffith. We had sex. S-E-X. Fantastic, toe curling, monkey sex. And I don’t regret it but you suck!”

To her horror, a red stain bloomed on his pristine white shirt beneath his black tuxedo jacket. He calmly withdrew a handkerchief and wiped at the few sprinkles on his chin and jaw. The stern expression vanished to be replaced with comprehension. Much to Chrissy’s surprise, he smiled, revealing the lone slash in his cheek.

Damned dimple.

“While I’m glad to hear it was fantastic, I believe you have me confused with my brother who couldn’t make it today. I’m Kent.” The man, who claimed *not* to be Ben, extended his hand to shake.

Cameras flashed from the media present to record Toni and Drake’s big day. People held up cell phones to record her glorious moment. Chrissy gulped as the truth of what he said reflected in Toni’s wince.

Had she known Ben had a brother? She couldn’t remember. Swallowing, she said, “Let me guess, *twin* brother?”

He nodded, letting his hand fall to the side when she didn’t shake it. Same rich black hair, same deep blue gray eyes, and same rocking body. Nothing stood out to help differentiate him from the man she’d actually slept with.

Mortified didn't come close. Dozens of gazes turned in her direction. Out of habit when the spotlight was on her, Chrissy resorted to her role as funny girl on the sidelines. Her chin notched up and she quipped, "Hell, this is what I get for not looking a guy up on the internet first."

Truthfully, if she'd done her research like usual before sleeping with a guy it would have revealed that her one time lover had a twin. Identical, no less. She turned to escape her living nightmare only to stumble and trip on her way out.

A stranger caught her elbow, preventing a face plant and whispered, "If you like the Griffith twins, I'm sure I can be of interest."

Appalled, she tugged on her arm but he didn't release his hold. Brown eyes held a knowing look and winked when she glanced up. Shame crashed into her and a lone tear quivered on her eyelid. "Get off of me!"

Her voice rose in volume, increasing her mortification. She jerked her arm again but he refused to let go.

"Let go of her, Morigan."

Coming up behind them with ground eating strides, Kent glared at the man. After a painful squeeze, he released her. Conversation picked up along with titters of laughter. Chrissy's back burned with the heat of a hundred stares. She refused to turn and face any of them.

"I'd offer to share the young lady like you and your brother must have but I guess that's out," Morigan said in a smug tone.

Others clearly heard what he said and cast aghast looks at her. Chrissy couldn't control her flinch.

Kent lowered his voice to a whisper but because of her vicinity, she heard everything. "Say another fucking word about her and I'll crush you. Do you understand me?"

Morigan snorted and swiped a hand through the professionally styled waves about his head. "Ben might but you've always responded well to Drake's leash, haven't you?"

A snarl of rage escaped Kent's mouth and he lunged for the dark-haired man. Dimly, she recognized Toni screaming in the background.

Drowning in remorse, Chrissy wrapped her arms about her waist, ducked her head and tried again for the door.

“Kent, not here!”

Drake's command caused more confusion as the crowd drew closer, trapping Chrissy along one wall and blocking her escape. Camera flashes popped left and right, an argument broke out while Morigan and Kent got louder.

Adding to the confusion came Drake's voice filled with power and strength. Scuffling occurred at some point and the sound of a fist hitting flesh.

Chrissy did her best to squeeze against the back wall, every avenue to get out stymied by the guests pushing for a closer look at the fight.

Chaos reined, a glass shattered somewhere followed by grunts and growls. Then Drake snapped out a command in a booming voice. Everyone froze. No more jostling to watch the spectacle she'd created. Magic. Thank goodness for the power of magic. And Drake.

Clearly, he was behind mass freeze.

Chrissy shoved past the unmoving bodies poised mid-action, too upset to be amazed at Drake's power and control.

“Are you alright?” Kent's gentle voice as he wrapped the jacket of his tux about her shoulders broke the dam and tears flooded.

“I need to leave. Please.” She hunched over in an effort to hold off the humiliation.

With a tenderness that only brought to mind his brother, Kent curled about her and steered her toward the exit. She ignored Toni's questioning looks and frown, all the while cursing Ben to the bottom of a well with a cement block chained to his ankle.

Chapter 4

“Just one comment, Ms. Jones.”

Chrissy slammed her door in the man’s face and hid away in her bedroom located at the far end of her apartment to minimize the shouted questions through the thin walls.

“Chrissy, you can’t hide forever. I promise you’re old news,” Toni cajoled over the phone.

Ha! That’s what she thought. Chrissy clamped the phone between her shoulder and ear then hit up her favorite sites on her laptop to check. Nope, the video clip of the mayhem caused by her actions at the wedding still played for the whole world to see, netting over a million views so far.

Combined with her uninvited guest at the door she was far from old news.

“Toni, you must think I’m an idiot. Despite my actions at your wedding, I’m not.”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

Bless loyal friends. They were worth their weight in gold. Chrissy buried her face in her palm and groaned. Two weeks. Two weeks of hiding out in her apartment because pictures had appeared within the hour on every social media outlet. Snapshots of her hurling wine on Kent Griffith, shots of her storming off. Lastly, larger than life images of Kent and the man named Morigan fighting.

She’d even made one of those most embarrassing wedding highlight reels. Just the reminder tempted her to crawl back in bed and pretend she could go back in time and erase those last few minutes.

“Look, if you hide, they’ll continue to hound you. If you go about your business, they’ll get tired and leave you alone.”

They. The photographers whose life mission seemed to be tracking her misery. Right after the event Chrissy had ventured out to the store dressed in yoga pants, a hoodie hiding her face

and large shades, only to have an intrepid reporter snap her picture. Within minutes it made the rounds.

'Heartbroken ex-girlfriend homeless.'

'Jilted fiancée resorts to wearing hand me downs.'

One day she'd laugh about those headlines. Maybe.

All sorts of stories popped up about her alleged affair with Ben and how he'd dumped her. Rumors flew that he left after discovering she slept with his twin. Others said they both abandoned her after a raunchy three way over the weekend.

She'd unfriended a ton of people and blocked hundreds more from following her. Random offers from strange men wanting to heal her broken heart filled her inbox daily.

Drake did what he could to mitigate the shit storm she had created but nothing worked. Kent had helped by escorting her to a limo despite the blood on his chin and the swelling under one eye.

The photographers who thought to chase after them came to an abrupt halt when he glared. After a brief peck on her cheek and still smiling, he gave the driver directions to take her to her hotel. It was a nice gesture...from someone she'd assaulted.

The only one who hadn't called or checked on her since the incident was the man she blamed. Ben Griffith.

Chrissy sat up and swiped at her unwashed hair. "I need ice cream."

"You know I'd be there if I could but Drake's busy catching up on work. Taking time off for our honeymoon has everyone demanding his time now that we're back. If I don't keep an eye on him, he'll go non-stop."

Drake was a workaholic but Toni was good for him. The only time he slowed down or took time off was if his new wife scolded. It was amusing to watch him sheepishly put away his phone when they went out to dinner.

"Don't worry about it, Toni."

“Alright. But maybe we can video chat and have ice cream later. It will be like I’m right there with you.”

Chrissy heaved a sigh and opened a new window to check her MessageMe account. It was pure fun and a place where people posted hot photos, brief info about celebrity gossip or occasional decorating tips. It was a mishmash of all the other social sites but without the trolls and she loved it. This was the only place where no one bombarded her with images and videos of her epic fail moment.

“Sounds great.” Not really.

They exchanged a few more words then ended the call. Chrissy sat cross-ways on her bed and contemplated the sun beaming through her blinds. It was early yet. If she ran out for a grocery fill up she could avoid running into the next group of reporters who took shifts camping out on her street.

Her laptop beeped with a new message. Or she could spend an hour right here, dodging her shame and video downfall.

She chose the latter option.

Ben never thought he’d finish wrapping up the issues he covered for Drake due to his wedding and honeymoon. An emergency three day trip to London extended to include an unplanned trip to Munich followed by a week back in London. One month of non-stop meetings, flying around and fighting for the concessions Drake wanted and putting out fires at the same time.

Ben let himself into his suite with a weary groan, tossing his luggage to the side. He’d unpack later. Much later.

“Never thought I’d say this but I missed seeing your ugly mug.”

Ben’s head jerked up to face the man standing on the other end of his tiled foyer. Exhausted as he was, a grin still found its way to his lips. “Any time that happens to me, I stare in the mirror and I’m cured.”

Kent and he were identical twins. Not even their parents could tell them apart which they'd used to their advantage as youths. His brother held up a squat glass filled with a red liquid. "I prepared this the moment I sensed your return."

Another perk to their twin bond. They knew whenever they were in the same vicinity of one another with an uncanny ability to guess each others movements. Centuries ago, the skill had been an asset when they battled. Now it helped them to navigate Drake's empire without losing touch if they had to be separated for large periods of time.

Joining Kent and heading toward his living room, Ben gratefully accepted the drink and downed it in one swallow. Ambrosia. It was infused with restorative energy for those of their kind.

He took a seat on the leather sectional, grimacing when his brother chose to sit on his left. "Not enough room for you? In your own home, perhaps?"

Kent owned a similar condo on the floor above Ben while Drake occupied the two floors beneath theirs. Winston Enterprises owned the whole building so neither of them paid for the luxury space. Their boss was generous with the people he counted on.

A dark frown twisted Kent's mouth. "I'd love some sleep in my own bed right now but unfortunately we have problems."

Nothing disturbed his brother. Kent stayed calm in the most dire circumstances while Ben lived with the shorter fuse and limited control of their heritage. He leaned back on the sofa, resting his neck on the supple leather. "Tell me."

"There were threats prior to Drake's wedding."

"I remember." Kent's skill with computers came in handy as he sought to find the origins of the rumors. At last check, he'd come up with nothing more than a ghost trail left behind on the ethers.

Kent shifted his weight and Ben closed his eyes, his twin's presence soothing him in a way no one would ever understand.

“Initially we thought a business rival was behind them but last week someone attempted a hit and run on Toni. This is very personal.”

Ben jerked upright. “What!”

“Unidentified driver, stolen vehicle found abandoned several blocks away. A few days before that she says someone deliberately pushed her on an escalator at a department store. She would have fallen several stairs to the floor below if another customer hadn’t grabbed her hand and pulled her back.”

“Are we sure she’s not the target? Remember the last incident.” A goblin had plotted to kill Toni.

Kent shook his head in denial. “No. This is too close to the other things he hasn’t publicly disclosed. Viruses planted to infiltrate the network in DC, a breakdown in another negotiation he was signatures away from closing.”

Ben scrubbed his face hard. He was so damned tired and needed to concentrate. The magic infused wine helped but not that much. “That doesn’t mean it’s not a rival though dragging Toni into it is bullshit. Does Drake need me to be on her instead of him?”

Ben provided personal security for Drake but Kent had covered the role while he was gone. They often doubled up or exchanged duties when needed. Kent easily could have traveled overseas on this last assignment but Ben had wanted the distance thanks to his night with Christine. Their time together had rattled him more than he liked to admit.

Waking up to her sleeping figure curled beside him struck him like a punch to the heart. His desire to lay there longer even more unusual than his typical experiences with his lovers.

The sex had been amazing but that wasn’t what tempted him to wrap his arms back around her. There had been something more and it had scared him enough to accept the job Drake mentioned immediately.

“Drake hired two guards for Toni.” Kent suddenly grinned. “Which she hates.”

Ben snorted. He bet. Toni was new to the world of wealth she now had access to. Still, he couldn't see the former University employee causing too much trouble. She loved Drake and would do anything for him if it meant his safety. “Is she pushing back?”

Kent stretched his arms over his head and Ben ignored his own fatigue to notice the dark shadows under his brother's eyes and the tiny lines pinched at the corner of his mouth. Kent was just as worn out as he. What was going on with him?

“She complained in the beginning but Drake threatened to seal her mouth shut with a quiet spell.”

They both laughed. As a warlock it was well within his abilities but Drake would never abuse his magic in such a manner. Especially not with the woman he loved.

Kent's chuckles died down and he leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. He peered at Ben with a side glance. “My concern is the attacker looking for another target in an effort to hurt Drake. Someone close to him.”

“Good luck to them.” Drake's friends were all powerful in their own right.

“Drake received a call from Toni's friend, Chrissy, two days ago. Someone broke into her apartment and trashed the place. She sounded scared but refused his offer to fly her here to New York indefinitely. We think this may be connected.”

Ben's heart took up an erratic beat the moment Kent mentioned Christine. His fear about the emotions she brought out in him after their night together vanished beneath the crushing weight of concern for her. He rose to his feet and jammed his free hand into his hair. “How is she? Was she hurt?”

Kent sat up. “So she *does* mean something to you? Between everything that happened and your silence on the matter, I assumed she was another—.”

“Don’t say it!” Ben cut his brother off before he could demean Christine. The rest of what he said filtered through. “Wait, what do you mean by what happened?”

This was why he hated being out of the country. News tended to be the last thing on his mind unless it pertained to the financial and usually he needed Kent or Drake to prod him. He didn’t have the patience for nonsense.

Ben started to pace over his hardwood floors. “Tell me, Kent and don’t leave anything out.”

Red blotches dotted the tips of Kent’s ears and he cleared his throat. “At the wedding, the photographers caught her in a less than flattering action.”

Ben relaxed somewhat. That wasn’t bad. “So? Women always get upset if someone shows a picture of them with a strand of hair out of place or without make-up. Although I can’t imagine her looking bad in any light.”

She was beautiful. Perfect breasts for licking, perfect hips for gripping and a perfect mouth to do many things he’d yet to explore.

Kent stood and withdrew his phone from his back pocket. “A little more than that happened. I think it’s best if I show you. By the way, thanks for not preparing me for how she’d react when we met.”

Brows dipped low, Ben waited while Kent swiped his screen. The video was roughly two minutes long but it was enough to see the exchange with Christine and Morigan. The dark Fae tended to drive Drake crazy but made a good business associate.

Whatever Morigan said as he gripped Christine’s arm drained the color from her face. Ben’s fingers clenched on the empty glass in his hand and a muscle ticked in his jaw. Next, he watched the confrontation between Morigan and his brother.

“What the fuck!”

Kent grimaced and put his phone away. “Apparently you didn’t leave on good terms. Or rather you forgot to apprise Ms.

Jones of your disappearing act. Also, you owe me for the dry-cleaning bill. Your sexual performance may have been fantastic—her words not mine—but she still threw a full glass of wine on me.”

Stunned shock kept Ben from responding right away. He tried to gather his thoughts. “She threw wine on you?”

“At the reception.” Kent cracked a half-grin. “She announced to everyone in the room that you had fantastic, monkey sex with her and vanished.”

Heat burned his face as Ben experienced the rare occasion of being embarrassed in front of his brother. They shared almost every detail of their life but the few times they’d talked in the last month, Ben hadn’t so much as uttered Christine’s name once.

But now, the thought of something happening to her stirred the beast itching to break free from beneath his skin. If she had been hurt while he worked on this project far away and unable to help, Ben was going to lose his mind.

“What was that about with the dark Fae?”

Kent wrapped a hand around the back of his neck, the blue grey eyes they shared darkening. “She wouldn’t tell me what he said to her but he asked about the experience sharing her with you.”

The glass Ben held splintered, shards piercing his fingers. “I’ll kill him. I think you need to start from the beginning, Kent.” He met his brother’s gaze, anger a slow roll in his gut. “Just tell me this—is Christine alright?”

“She’s pregnant.”

Ben stumbled back as if he could avoid the blow. He shook his head then ran his non-bleeding hand over his face for good measure. His fingers were trembling. This wasn’t happening. “You’re wrong.”

Kent’s eyes darkened, the blue overshadowing the gray. “I wish I was. She doesn’t know I know and it’s early yet but there’s Berserker blood in her. I scented it when Drake sent me

to check on her and confer with the police on the break-in this morning.”

“She’s human,” Ben immediately countered and searched for a napkin for his bleeding hand.

“Yes, but she’s growing a little version of you. Or me, if we want to play off the twin thing.” Kent smirked and passed him a green dish towel from the table.

If Ben thought for one moment Kent had slept with Christine let alone touched her, they’d be fighting to the point of blood being drawn. “She’s not my fated mate.”

Lore dictated that a Berserker could only have children with the woman destined as his fated mate. For centuries, Ben waited patiently to meet his forever female. Eventually, he had accepted the possibility of spending his remaining years childless.

“She has to be your fated mate or else you couldn’t get her pregnant.”

It was too much. More than he could absorb in his state. To think, after all this time, he had someone who belonged to him. The memory of the attraction he’d felt that night exploded inside and sent him reeling.

If true, it would explain Ben’s fixation with her. The beast stirred again and this time with much more force. Ben clenched his fists, ignoring the pain from the tiny cuts on his palm and fingers. “I want protection on her.”

He knew his brother would understand. Ben planned to fly to Florida first thing tomorrow. But for now he needed to know that she was safe.

He didn’t question the physical urge straining to see to the matter himself but he literally could not step onto another plane without sleeping tonight. Even as a paranorm, he needed rest.

“I have Lennox watching as a favor. She doesn’t seem aware he’s tailing her. But he’s being called away by his shitty alpha to deal with another pack problem.”

Immeasurable relief filled him. The wolf shifter was ex-military and more than capable. “How does Drake want to handle this? If Toni and her friend are targets, they both need to be covered.”

“We’re going to continue to hunt down whoever thinks they can get to him with these petty tactics. Toni’s security will be tight and as long as we can get permanent coverage on Chrissy no one else is vulnerable.”

Ben didn’t want anyone else watching her. If she was pregnant with his child and he had no reason to doubt Kent’s assurance, then he’d become her security detail. His fated mate was his responsibility. “I’ll leave for Jacksonville tomorrow.”

Kent stepped closer and wrapped him in a tight hug. Ben returned the embrace without shame. “Love you.”

“Same. I’m glad you’re home,” Kent muttered before slapping him on the shoulder as he let go. “Don’t stay away so long next time.”

A half-laugh escaped. He hadn’t intended to be gone long this time.

Chapter 5

As soon as Chrissy got home, she ripped open the bag of cherries and bit into the succulent fruit. Juices ran down her chin but she didn't care. Seventeen cherries later and her craving was appeased. Chrissy counted the seeds on her paper plate to be sure. Yep, seventeen. "Argh, I need to get a grip."

She tapped her finger along the edge of her table then flipped open her laptop, deciding to cruise some of her gossip sites. Since she wasn't prominently featured in them, Chrissy didn't mind scrolling through the links.

At least she could go outside now. Reporters finally gave up on her doing her impression of a crazy woman and no longer camped on her doorstep. She eyed the remaining cherries in the clear plastic container. This sudden yearning for a fruit she didn't typically care for was a sure sign her monthly visitor was due. Late as usual.

She cupped her bloated stomach. She could do without the recently developed pooch though.

Now that she had the freedom to come and go as she pleased again, Chrissy made a mental note to use her gym membership more. Month after month the fee came out of her account and she had yet to visit. Maybe she'd try tomorrow since it was Saturday.

A hard knock on the door saved her from making a commitment she wasn't remotely interested in. Pushing away from her tiny kitchenette, Chrissy took extra care peeking out of her living room window. Drake and Toni stressed how careful she needed to be since someone wanted to hurt Drake through any means necessary.

As Toni's best friend, it meant Chrissy made the top of Drake's overprotective list. Just the other day he'd tried to get her to fly for an extended stay to New York because some losers had broken into her place. Unfortunately she didn't have any vacation time left thanks to helping with the wedding.

“Christine, open the door!” Another round of fierce knocks pounded but it was the voice which kept Chrissy from immediately opening it.

Ben? Standing on tip-toe, she checked the peep hole and sure enough, Ben *stupid* Griffith stood outside her apartment. She undid the locks with violent twists and swung the door open. “What are you doing here?”

Ben stepped across the threshold, forcing Christine to let him enter despite the glare aimed in his direction. “I heard about the break in.”

She slammed the door behind him. A navy blue tee hugged his massive upper body and khaki cargo pants strained to contain his thighs. Wide shoulders took up more space than possible. How could she have forgotten how big he was? Or how hot. “Yeah? Well no need for you to worry. *Now.*”

Where was he when she’d been hounded by the press? Did he think he could just waltz back in as if nothing was wrong? And why was she fighting the urge to throw herself into his arms and cry?

“We should talk. Can I sit?” Not waiting for her response, he walked past her and made himself comfortable on her blue sofa.

The robbers had broken her coffee table in the living area, ripped her corner desk to shreds and knocked paintings off the wall but the rest of her furniture in this room had come through unscathed. New sheets covered her antique bed after what seemed to be an accident with an entire bottle of ketchup. The empty container in her trash confirmed the thieves had used her own supply.

“Make yourself at home,” she jeered and reluctantly joined him. Instead of sitting on the couch, Chrissy chose the lone recliner and kicked back her heel which pushed the footrest out. Once she settled, she gave him a death ray glare. Anything to fight this unrelenting urge to crawl into his arms and be held. “What do you want?”

Ben leaned back, one arm along the top of the sofa, the other resting casually on his thigh. It was such a masculine pose that for a moment her ovaries whimpered. “Kent told me what happened at the wedding. Photographers tend to get a hard-on for anyone close to Drake.”

Chrissy’s mouth fell open. It flapped several times before she spoke. Of all the things she expected him to say, that wasn’t it. “You think I’m pissed about what happened at the wedding?”

“It was understandably upsetting for you.”

Ben was in uncharted territory. On the flight down to Florida, he’d try to think of the best approach to get Christine to allow him to stay with her until they found the person threatening Drake. The idea to state his intentions and dig his heels in sounded great until she’d opened the door and frowned.

Her displeasure combined with the rigid posture spoke volumes. A tiny part of him had hoped she’d be pleased to see him again. As pleased as he was to see her. The blistering glares aimed his way said different, outrage in every line of her figure.

“You gotta be kidding!” She leaped to her feet and yanked at her low hanging pony tail, causing the band to slip and free tendrils of blonde. The loose strands transformed her outrage to cute. “I don’t care about that any more.”

She paced back and forth in the narrow space of the living room. His gaze unintentionally dropped to her waist. To his untrained eye she might have gained a bit of weight. Or it could be her shirt. Ben dragged his gaze away and glanced around, taking in her home. A dark brown bookshelf leaned along one wall and held a mixture of books, statues of cartoon characters—if he wasn’t mistaken, and framed photos.

Ben stood, ignoring Christine’s mutters and walked around her to better see her pictures. Two he instantly recognized as Toni as they pursed their lips at the camera. Another revealed

Christine standing between an older couple wearing broad grins and the last contained a picture of a scruffy golden brown puppy. He turned, scanning her place then went into her kitchen.

“Hey, you can’t just walk around my place!”

Ben checked out the kitchen. Blue and white décor from the place mats to the curtains over the kitchen window by the sink. A cheerful duck holding cookies in its belly dominated the white circular kitchen table. A quick trip down the hall and a peek into her bathroom didn’t show a hint of what he looked for.

“Ben!” Christine chased after him and grabbed the back of his shirt when he reached the last door opened partway.

Pressing his palm on the wood panel, he pushed it open but didn’t enter. Her bedroom. An explosion of scents hit him at once. Fruit, flowers and a host of other smells which screamed feminine bedroom. He had to fist his hands at his sides to resist the urge to cross over and invade her private sanctuary.

She whacked him on the back, pulling his attention from the fussy unmade bed and the profusion of silk covered green pillows displayed across the top. His imagination took flight as the vision of the two of them tangled about her bed linens filled his head.

“Ben! You’ve gone too far.” She slid between him and the door, yanking it closed with a determined slam.

Locked against one another with little space to move, her breasts heaved with each breath and rubbed his front. The thin tee shirt he wore provided little protection and her nipples stabbed into his chest with their hard points.

For the first time since arriving, he took closer note of what she wore. A red tank top with no bra beneath which he could attest to and a pair of grey sweat pants which hung low on her hips revealing a sliver of skin above the rolled waist.

The lounging clothes should have made her appear relaxed but he caught the fleeting glimpse of fear in her eyes. While he

didn't know her very well, he was pretty sure she didn't scare easily.

And that pissed Ben off. She didn't deserve to be frightened. If he could, he'd crush the person who violated her place in an instant. Her lip quivered and once more his need to protect and see to her care was triggered. The Berserker in him wanted to smash any and all of her enemies.

That wasn't possible. Not yet, anyway. He had to calm down like Drake warned. There was one way guaranteed to soothe his ire. Leaning forward, Ben placed his face at the crook of her neck and inhaled sharply.

"Stop!" Christine pushed at him.

It was there. Light and almost unnoticeable to anyone who wasn't from the otherworld. Ben understood how Kent had been so certain. He straightened as shock rippled down his spine.

Brown eyes glared up at him, her lips pinched tight. She carried his child. A next generation of Berserkers.

"Where's your dog?" Ben asked, planting his hands at the side of her head and not letting her move away.

"My what?" Christine licked her lips and glanced over his shoulder.

Ben allowed more of his weight to fall against her, nestling his hips into hers. Softness cushioned him, her slender body molding to his hard angles. She gasped and jerked back to face him.

"Your dog?" he whispered, breathing in her intoxicating scent again. He hadn't thought it possible but Christine pregnant with his child meant she was his mate. *His mate*. His heart thundered in his chest. At last he'd found her and in a woman he hadn't been able to get off his mind.

"I don't have a dog." Once more she pushed his chest, adding more force to the efforts.

Ben wasn't going anywhere. "You keep pictures of your important things on the shelf in your living room. Your

parents, statues, Toni, and a dog. But there aren't any signs of you owning a dog here."

"For the last time, I don't have a dog." A frown furrowed her brow. He brushed his lips across her temple and she batted at his face. "Quit."

"Why the picture?" He spoke with his lips still touching her skin. He didn't want to move away.

Christine groaned and thumped her head on the door behind her. "I wanted a dog at one point. I took the picture with my phone at the shelter. I just never made time because I'm not home enough to own a dog. Satisfied?"

He didn't like the answer. She should have a dog if she wanted one. Ben stepped back and Christine slid away from the door.

"And don't call me Christine. Anyone close to me knows I like Chrissy."

"Am I going to be close to you...Chrissy?"

Pink seared her cheeks. She drove her fingers through her hair. "Argh! Did Drake send you?"

"We're all concerned about you after the burglary." Especially Ben. His mate. He still had trouble accepting it yet joy cascaded through his heart. His interest in Chrissy was already there and now he had an explanation for the hold she had on him.

"Tell everyone I'm fine. It was probably a prank or random vandals." She said the last over her shoulder as her ass twitched down the hall back toward the living room.

Heat pooled south as Ben followed. The clinging grey fabric cupped her amazing heart shape bottom to perfection. He knew what it was like to squeeze and kiss that delectable bit of flesh. "Drake has a stalker fixated on him. It's not the first time but the person behind this also seems determined to strike at anyone close to him like you and Toni."

That got her attention. Chrissy stopped at the center of the room, only feet between them. "Toni's safe though, right?"

Drake can use his *magic* and protect her?"

The way she emphasized magic left Ben smiling. Her reaction was typical of anyone not familiar with paranorms and the otherworld. "Drake will take care of Toni."

She exhaled and dropped her hip on the arm of the leather recliner she'd sat in earlier. When she canted her head up, Ben wasn't prepared for the force of her warm brown eyes. "I bet he sent you to protect me."

Ben braced his weight on his legs and glared, not liking the assumption. He would have come regardless. There was unfinished business between them. Mate or not. "No one had to send me. You're mine to protect."

Her lips curled in a smirk. "Cause you're a wolf?"

He snorted. "No."

"Dragon?"

Ben folded his arms over his chest. "No."

Chrissy threw her hands in the air and shoved to her bare feet, tiny red painted toenails peeking from the legs of her sweats. "Then how can you protect me? What good is an ordinary human?"

Ben laughed. "I'm far from human, Chrissy."

Chapter 6

Chrissy wanted to knock the smug look from the face of the dark-haired man staring at her. Hip cocked to the side as he watched her, she hated to admit how the arrogant pose worked for him. The inclination to jump him was hard to fight. Deciding to change her approach, she asked, “Are you and Kent identical?”

Confusion marred his features before he masked it. “Yes. Why?”

“Can anyone tell you apart?”

His answer this time was slower. “Nooo. No one’s ever been able to tell us apart. Not even our parents.”

Her mouth fell open. She’d been kidding. “Are you serious? No one? How is that possible?”

Ben shrugged his powerful shoulders. Chrissy rocked on the tiny arm of the chair and eyed him from head to toe. The reception blurred in her memory—intentionally, but she liked to believe if the two of them stood in front of her she could tell.

To be contrary, she said, “His eyes are bluer so you’re not all that identical.”

“They are not!” His arms fell to his sides and his nostrils flared.

Chrissy tapped her chin, playing the joke all the way. “His shoulders might be a little bigger too now that I think about it. They really filled out his tuxedo.”

Ben started to deny her claim but paused. He placed the tips of his fingers in the front pockets of his jeans, drawing the denim tighter against his thighs and groin area. “Kent and I are exactly the same in our measurements. He wore *my* tuxedo that night.”

From his pinched lips, she knew she’d struck a nerve despite the casual stance he’d assumed. Biting her inner cheek to hold in her amusement, Chrissy nodded and made her voice

thick with condescension. “If you say so. Although vampires might be the same size.”

A muscle ticked in his left cheek. “I’m not a vampire.”

“How do you expect to protect me if I don’t know what you can do?”

He sighed. “If you insist on knowing, we’re Berserkers.”

Nonplussed, Chrissy stared. She’d expected something spectacular. A shifter really would have been nice. Not a glorified gladiator. “That’s it?”

“Trust me.” He dragged one hand through his black hair and gripped the back of his neck. “You don’t need anything more with a rage demon by your side.”

Rage demon? Ooo-kay, Toni didn’t say anything about demons. “Wait, Berserkers like the warriors who lost their minds in battle and slaughtered their friends and family?”

Now he grinned and it screamed wicked. “Yes.”

“Sounds like sending a fox to watch the chicken coop.”

His cockiness came back in full effect. “No one will get past me to you, pretty girl.”

Pretty girl. She almost melted on the spot then her spine shot upright. He’d *left* her after they’d had sex. “Yes, well. I don’t really need protection. Something I stressed to Toni and Drake.”

“Hmm.”

Chrissy pulled her cell from her pocket. “Maybe I’ll just call Kent. He gave me his number in case I needed him. Better yet, he can protect me.”

She managed to press the button for her contacts before Ben snatched the phone. “You don’t need my brother.”

“He’s nice,” she lied. She had no idea of his personality beyond his offer of help at the wedding.

Ben’s lips flattened, turning his rugged features from annoyed to dangerous. “It’s not negotiable.”

Chrissy didn't bother arguing. She knew all about the male population. They could be stubborn beyond belief when they felt they had just cause. Walking to her kitchen counter, she picked up her car keys, letting them jingle. "I've been fine aside from the break in."

Ben watched her from the living room which pretty much had perfect views of her dining nook and kitchen from the one spot. Square footage had not been the selling point on the apartment. Safety and amenities were, though she had to question the safety aspect after the break in.

Chrissy headed for the door and opened it. "I'm going to the gym so you have to leave."

The lie at least motivated him to move. By the time she locked up behind her, Ben was practically glued to her hip.

"I'll go to the gym with you." After handing her phone back, he slid a pair of black shades over his eyes and peered around her almost empty parking lot.

Chrissy came to a stop on the driver's side of her little blue economy car. Ben strolled around the back, frowned, then walked around toward the front. Each dent screamed new driver to the unwary. She waited as his brows creased, noticing every scratch and bump to the vehicle.

"What the hell happened to your car?"

The gruff question raised her hackles. Chrissy wished she could see his eyes behind the blasted tinted lenses. Nothing riled her more than questions about her car and by extension, her driving skills. "Nothing happened to it. I just got my license last year. Those are growing pains."

He snorted. "We'll take my rental."

Chrissy held back a tiny growl of frustration. Ben flicked the locks on the remote in his hand and a truck four spots over chirped, lights blinking. The dark SUV was a huge behemoth like the man in front of her.

"I'm not going anywhere with you, Ben."

Her protest went unheeded as he turned around and headed toward his truck. Chrissy did *not* stare at his sumptuous ass.

“Ben! Ben, I’m not riding with you and don’t need protecting.” She stomped her foot then cursed because the action had toddler written all over it.

He opened the passenger door of the truck and leaned across the roof of the vehicle, tipping his head in her direction. “You prefer to have Toni worry over you? Does it mean more to you standing here arguing then to give your friend peace of mind?”

At the moment, Chrissy wanted to scream. His words hit home though. As much as she didn’t want to acknowledge the possibility of being in danger, Toni believed it and wanted Chrissy safe. If that meant letting this man tag behind her, she’d go along with it.

Temporarily. Until she called Drake and told him to tell his friend to back the hell off.

“Fine. Let me grab my bag.” Now she had to go to the gym for real or out herself for the lie.

Going to the gym rated at the bottom of the things she wanted to do today. Make that any day. Chrissy popped the trunk release but nothing happened. She pressed it two more times, not getting a chirp or flicker of lights. The problem might have stemmed from the last time she backed into a tree and jammed the rear.

Great. Something else that probably needed to be fixed on her little bruised and battered car.

“Chrissy, stop now! Get over here.”

Ben’s sudden command pulled her gaze from her car and the non-working remote. Instead of the irritation she expected, he looked worried as he edged away from his truck and sprinted in her direction.

Why was he freaked now? Exasperation pursed her lips. He really needed to calm down. “Settle down, buddy. I can open it manually from the back.”

“Chrissy, don’t!” His heavy footsteps pounded in her direction.

Contemplating whether or not to try the trunk release once more for good measure, Chrissy ignored him. Ben’s arm hooked around her waist roughly as he slammed into her. The keys dropped from her fingers.

“Ben—,” she shrieked but never finished her sentence as they hit the ground together and a loud boom filled the parking lot.

Concrete scraped her back and shoulders as she landed, Ben’s arms secure about her. Waves of heat blasted Chrissy’s face as she turned and spotted the inferno behind them. Smoke plumed into the air and her car blazed in one big ball of fire.

Shock filled her as her heart raced. “Oh my God! My car!”

A series of smaller explosions went off. Ben’s hand cupped the back of her head, tucking her face into his neck. Chrissy inhaled his masculine scent, overcome with the urge to burrow deep and never lift her head out. Her car was on fire. How could that happen?

“Are you alright? Are you hurt?” Ben flipped them over, kneeling by her side and patted her down.

Chrissy blinked as shivers ran down her spine and her legs started to shake. “My car...my car blew up, Ben.”

“I know.” He massaged her shoulders, her arms then a big palm settled over her mid-section. “It’s going to be fine. Just tell me if you’re hurt anywhere.”

She took stock even as her brain focused on the vehicle burning only feet away from them. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She could have been killed. If Ben hadn’t pushed to go in his truck, would she have been blown to bits?

“Chrissy? Christine. Look at me, sweetheart.” Ben tapped her cheeks lightly. He had smoky black streaks on his forehead, blue gray eyes studying her intently. “I’m here. Everything’s okay, pretty girl, but I need you to tell me if anything hurts.”

“N-no. I...I don’t think so.” Bruised a bit from being tackled to the ground and her butt felt tender but nothing serious.

“Good. Very good.” Ben grasped her under her arms and lifted her to her feet. The show of strength did not go unnoticed. He pulled her in close and squeezed her tight but the muffled words that came next were clear. “So glad you’re alright. My pretty girl.”

Fear. That emotion was reserved for Kent. Or had been. Now all Ben could think of was Chrissy. He’d never been frightened to the point of shaking.

Protect. Protect.

The urge, no, the compulsion battered at his senses. *Mate*, his Berserker mind roared.

Sirens blared in the distance and nosy neighbors made their way out to stare at the flames and burning bits of metal which had once represented Chrissy’s car. A shudder racked his frame and he clamped down harder on the delicate woman in his arms.

With the danger passed, fear didn’t quite fade as anger took its place. His rage demon wanted vengeance. Arguing with Chrissy had momentarily distracted Ben from realizing something more serious was wrong with her car. Then his cell buzzed in his pocket in a repeated pattern. Darkness had edged out his vision of the apartment complex when he figured out the coded warning.

Even now, his enlarged muscles quivered and his clothes felt tight. He’d morphed into his Berserker form the moment he realized the danger.

Attack his mate? Hurt his unborn child?

Those responsible would pay. They would pay when Ben ripped their heads from their bodies.

Sirens shut off and doors slammed. The chatter of voices invaded.

“Is she okay?”

“What happened out here?”

Ben ignored the questions, drawing Chrissy in as close as he could, his body wrapped around her until not one inch separated them. Anger. Rage. The emotions blasted through him and he instinctively shifted more, strength pouring through every inch of him, his clothes on the verge of splitting from his rapid increase in size.

“Ben, what’s wrong? Tell me you’re okay.” The worry in his brother’s tone bordered on panic.

Seamlessly, he connected with his twin in the telepathy they’d discovered as children. *“My mate. Someone tried to kill my mate, Kent.”*

Just acknowledging it tore a growl from his throat. Chrissy trembled and Ben nuzzled her hair. The scent of her lightly sprinkled with the scent of him. His child. Another growl broke from his lips.

“Calm, Ben. Be calm. I can be there in hours. I’ll take Drake’s private plane.”

His mind whirled. Blood pounded in his veins making clear thought difficult. *“She carries my child and someone tried to kill her.”*

“I’m coming, Ben. I’m coming,” his brother repeated, sensing Ben’s tenuous hold on his control and the rage demon wanting to destroy everything around them.

“Hurry.” He wanted his brother by his side. He trusted Kent to help him protect his mate.

“I’ll be there. Is Chrissy alright?”

“She’s in my arms.” His words were nothing but snarls yet Kent understood him. Of course his brother would understand him. They were the same.

“Don’t do anything we can’t fix.”

Don’t kill anyone, in other words.

“Ben?” Chrissy tugged at the hem of his shirt. “Ben, let me loose.”

His instinct demanded he refuse the request but the burn of several stares gave him the strength to ease back slightly.

A man with deep golden skin, one shade away from the color of molasses approached. The leather jacket in the Florida heat managed to camouflage the weapon holstered at his shoulder to unsuspecting gazes, the button down white shirt and jeans providing ample hiding space for other weapons. Ben glared.

“She good?” The man offered a chin lift, his hazel eyes narrowed.

Ben pushed Chrissy behind him. “Where the fuck were you, Lennox?”

The newcomer stiffened, back going ramrod and a deadly light glowed from his eyes as the predator within responded to the aggression. Not that it mattered. In this form, Ben blew by his normal six-four and stood six-nine with an extra seventy-five pounds of sheer muscle to back him up.

“I didn’t see anyone fool with her car, Ben.”

Unacceptable. “You were supposed to keep your eye on her.”

“Drake warned me to keep my distance.” This time there was some bite in the wolf shifter’s answer but his gaze softened when they landed on Chrissy. “Are you okay?”

“Who is this Ben? Did Drake and you have someone else guarding me?” Chrissy poked him in the side and came to his front.

Ben snatched at the back of her red top, keeping her from getting further from him. He needed her close until he calmed the fuck down. “This is Lennox Avanti.”

Lennox’s eyes gleamed with laughter, his feral nature fading. “Nice to meet you finally, Chrissy.”

Despite the smudges and rips in her shirt, Chrissy extended her hand to shake like she hadn’t almost lost her life. “I won’t

take my annoyance out on you, Mr. Avanti.”

“Call me Nox, please.”

Ben did not like Nox touching what belonged to him. The minute they finished shaking hands, he curved his arm around Chrissy’s waist and pulled her back. The contact reassured and soothed him immediately.

“We need answers. I want to know what happened here.” Ben glared at the overflowing parking lot. Residents from nearby apartments stood idle as they chattered and stared. A few pointed at Chrissy.

Two police officers with stern grimaces headed toward them. Nox’s upper lip curled in a snarl. “I think we can ask them but this is one time where you might want to call Drake.”

Ben arched a brow, surprised at the rancor. “Police are the human way.”

Nox shifted and tucked his hands in his back pockets. “But its otherworld magic I’m scenting as the cause for the explosion.”

Chapter 7

Although they stood mere steps away, Ben and his handsome friend talked in hushed tones she couldn't hear. As if afraid she'd disappear, Ben never took his gaze off of her. The overprotective stance normally would have pissed her off but right now Chrissy wanted to absorb every bit of security his heavy gaze promised.

At one point, Ben's voice rose and Nox slashed his hand through the air, a low growl escaping from deep in his throat. Chrissy perked up. Shifter, finally?

She studied the stranger with his warm brown skin, close cut hair and lean figure. His casual dress gave no hint to his human or non-human status. Since she bet Drake trusted only his friends to watch her, she leaned toward the non-human variety. And beautiful too.

Ben made her heart stutter but this man wouldn't be hard to wake up to in the morning. Something in his hazel eyes warned he'd bring those rough growls to bed with him. She tingled at the idea of some lucky woman getting all of that then snickered when Nox darted a suspicious look in his direction. She smiled and the corner of his mouth twitched, revealing pearly white teeth in a half-grin.

The police interrupted her stare-off and asked a ton of questions, promising to look further into the situation. Chrissy had no idea what was going on. She was handed her police report information and grimaced. One more to add to the collection. Combined with the break in at her apartment, she wondered if Drake and Toni might be right in saying she could be in danger.

Accepting the possibility left her feeling off balance and more than a little scared. When she thought the idea farfetched, she'd been fine. But now? Chrissy looked around at the emptying parking lot. The fire crew remained to clean up what they could and neighbors gradually drifted back to their apartments with furtive glances in her direction.

All in all, awkward and discomfiting. Ben finished his talk with Nox, then both walked toward her. Two men similar in their demeanor. Both carried an unexplained alpha vibe which held its own attraction. A confident swagger in the strides they took, along with glares for any who dared peer in their direction. And...Chrissy squinted almost unsure of what she was seeing.

Ben stood taller than he had earlier. His shoulders definitely appeared broader with his shirt stretched to the limits across the chest. What the hell?

“It was a pleasure, Chrissy.” Nox grasped her hand when he reached her side.

She shook it. “Same. And thanks for the protection even though I wasn’t aware.”

Ben knocked Nox’s hand from hers. What was wrong with him?

“I’m sure Ben will take good care of you,” Nox said on a chuckle then inclined his head toward Ben and left in a non-descript sedan.

Chrissy didn’t put up much protest when Ben helped her to his truck. She was all too eager this time around to get in and as far away from anyone wanting to hurt her.

Ben drove one hand on the wheel the other on the gear of the truck, his very energy filling the confines of the space.

Moving smoothly through the lanes and other cars, he never let up on the excessive speed. Somehow this didn’t worry Chrissy and she rated his skills behind the wheel levels above her own. Which wasn’t saying much all things considered.

He was on the phone the moment they got in the vehicle, the tiny earpiece limiting her to only a part of the conversation. Occasionally, he stretched his arm across the seat to place his hand on her stomach and his eyes darkened with turmoil and another emotion she couldn’t identify.

When he did it a third time, she knocked it away with an exasperated breath. His gaze met hers and his lips twitched.

“She’s with me now, Drake.”

Ah, Drake. That explained the caller.

“Yes. Yes.” A pause followed by another glance her way then a low muttered, “No.”

Chrissy tugged at the seat belt and stared out the passenger window, pretending not to listen. According to Ben, her place was no longer safe and he planned to take her to his hotel room. She debated calling a few friends to stay with but in the end gave in to his coercion because he appeared so distraught.

“Yes, Kent said he was on his way.”

At the familiar name, she perked up and peeked at Ben. His brows drew close together and his hand on the steering wheel clenched. Chrissy waited to hear more but what followed were low grunts, a few hums and then a rough growl.

He ended the call and turned toward her. “Drake is keeping Toni close to him for the next few days. She wanted to come down but he refused for obvious reasons. My brother is on his way and you won’t be out of my sight until we figure out what the hell is going on and who’s behind all of this.”

Chrissy straightened in the seat and shot him a glare. “There’s a better way of discussing this with me.”

Disbelief crossed his face. “Are you serious?”

She was. “I get that this could be tied in to what you’ve been saying but it doesn’t mean you get a pass to order me around. In fact, leave me in a hotel room, tell Drake I’ll stay put. I’ll order a ton of room service if it makes him feel better to let me blow his money on a dessert-fest. You, however, can go back to New York and say you did your part.”

The mood in the truck darkened. Ben’s eyes became more gray than blue and his lips pressed tight. When he spoke next, the hair on her nape stood up. “You are *not* going to be alone. You are *not* going to be without protection and I sure as fuck am *not* leaving. Get that through your head.”

His words stole the breath from her. Face growing hot, Chrissy swallowed on a wave of trepidation. “Ben, you’re

being ridiculous.”

And she liked it. No, she loved it. Had any man other than her father ever vowed to protect her so fiercely? God she missed her parents. Tears stung her eyes but she cleared her throat and tried for stern. “I can take care of myself. I’m a grown woman you know.”

“Who’s carrying my child!” he roared in a rare loss of control before facing the street again, releasing her from his gaze.

“What!?”

That wasn’t how Ben planned to tell Chrissy about the pregnancy. It was clear by the way she acted she had no idea. In addition, he felt certain she would have told Toni who would have told Drake and Ben would have heard about it. Since only Kent seemed aware, it stood to reason Chrissy didn’t realize her new condition yet.

“I’m not pregnant nor is that funny,” she snapped with a loud huff, turning toward the window. More mutters followed.

Anger draining that easily, Ben bit back a grin. Her head jerked around suddenly and she must have caught a residual glimpse of his humor. Her glare held enough heat to set him on fire. “I should have gone to New York when Drake asked.”

He agreed one hundred percent. “Yes, you should have. But since you didn’t, we’ll make the best of it.”

“I should have vetted you on the net.” Her leg twitched, foot tapping in a nervous rhythm. “I only sleep with people I check out. This is exactly why.”

That made no sense to Ben but he didn’t care. For all his annoyance, he liked her quirky ways. Any other woman would still struggle with the shock of recent events. Threats of someone after her, the break-in at her apartment and now the explosion of her car.

Chrissy possessed a hidden strength behind her zany persona. That was good. A Berserker’s mate needed to be

strong. As the future mother of a Berserker, she'd need a load of support as well which Ben would be present to provide.

"I don't have a presence online." Nor would he ever. Nothing but oversharing and cat videos.

"That's the first warning sign." More mutters came from the direction of his passenger seat.

Ben started to tease in an effort to lighten the mood but the sign for the hotel he'd selected caught his eye. After checking the rearview mirror and traffic, he took the exit, circled around and pulled up to valet parking. No one seemed to have followed them.

Ignoring the young man who came to the driver's side, Ben helped Chrissy out of his truck and tossed the keys.

With one hand firmly on her back despite her squirming to get away, he guided them inside the main lobby. Since he'd already secured a room, he bypassed the front desk to head straight for the mirrored elevator doors.

As soon as the double doors closed, Chrissy twisted away to stand across the elevator from him and folded her arms over her chest. The mutinous expression on her face had him bracing. "You were kidding right?"

Ben leaned back, remembering another elevator and another night. Lust stirred and he failed to connect to her question. "About what?"

Tiny lines formed on her forehead, tempting him to smooth them out but she wouldn't take kindly to the action.

"About what?" Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped. "The pregnancy! I am *not* pregnant. I'd know."

Ben heaved a sigh. They were back to this. "You are. It's early yet and only something one with strong senses would pick up on it. Considering I've been gone about a month, you should have had at least one obvious sign."

She slammed her head back on the wall again and again. Ben winced. "I knew it. I knew it. I warned you about protection. You told me it wasn't an issue."

Shame heated his skin. Normally, that would have been correct. Except at the time he didn't know she was his. Pleasure rippled through him at the thought but he cut off the joy the knowledge brought him. Ben felt certain informing her about mates and all it entailed wouldn't endear him to her so he'd leave those details for another conversation. Right now he needed to focus on keeping her and their baby safe.

"I apologize and accept full responsibility. If it helps at all, I really didn't think the possibility existed." How could he when he'd given up on ever finding the one fated to be his?

Ben hoped his words eased any concerns she may have had about his role and plans to help her in any way.

Her reaction was opposite of what he expected. Mouth open, eyes wide, she stared for a moment. The elevator slid to a halt and dinged as the doors opened. Neither of them moved.

"No, that does *not* help. *If*...and I mean that in the strongest sense. If I'm pregnant, you can't accept *full* responsibility for everything because you certainly can't carry it, now can you?"

Without giving him a chance to respond, she stormed through the doors. Ben caught them before they closed with one hand, jarring both as his long strides brought him right next to her. He grabbed her elbow.

All humor faded as he leaned in close to her and whispered harshly, "Be pissy. Be angry. In fact, it's okay to be scared. But don't be stupid, Christine. Someone is out to get you or to get at Drake through you. That means you stay by my side and don't so much as move without my approval."

Her nostrils flared but at least she slowed down. In silence, she remained at his side until he stopped in front of the door with their room number. He swiped the room key then shot her a look when she tried to shove forward.

Chrissy sighed. Not her usual sassy breath blown out but a disappointed sound which pulled at his emotions. He started to speak but she cocked her hip to the side, covering the hint of

vulnerability and waved her hand in an exaggerated move. “After you, by all means.”

Shaking his head, Ben did a quick turn around the one bedroom suite while keeping Chrissy in his view. Assured everything looked fine, he motioned for her to enter. She walked straight toward the living area and plopped onto the cloth sofa, running her hands over the tan fabric.

Ben whipped out his phone to update Drake. At the same time, Chrissy’s phone went off. She brightened at whatever appeared on the screen, jumped to her feet and started pacing from the sliders leading to the balcony then back to the sofa.

“Winston.”

Drake’s voice snapped in his ear. Ben skipped over unnecessary greetings. “I have Chrissy secure with me at the hotel I texted you. Lennox had to leave for a job for his alpha.”

“I know. Toni’s on the phone with Chrissy now. Kent’s already on his way to you. His flight will arrive in two hours or so. Can you manage until then?”

The subtext beneath the question was aimed at his Berserker side. “I’m calm for the moment.”

“Stay that way,” Drake returned instantly.

“Right.”

If no one fucked with his mate, no problem. Otherwise all bets were off.

Chapter 8

“Your car exploded?! That’s it. I’m coming down there,” Toni declared over the phone.

Fear struck Chrissy at the possibility of her friend being in danger too. “You can’t. This isn’t about me. It’s about Drake. You can’t be anywhere near this.”

Ben sent a sharp look in her direction and Chrissy lowered her voice, turning her back on him to face the patio doors leading to a balcony off their room. “Just...just hold tight, okay? Don’t do anything rash.”

Toni mumbled a few choice words that Chrissy had no response for. At last, Toni groaned. “Fine. But you need to do everything Ben tells you. Please. I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to you.”

“Same,” Chrissy said.

They said their goodbyes and ended the call. With her friend updated, Chrissy spent the rest of the evening contemplating how she’d ended up in this clusterfuck. There should be a limit to how many crazy attacks each person was allotted. As far as she was concerned, she’d hit her quota.

An hour later, a determined knock at the door had her head jerking around. Ben gave her a warning glare to remain in her seat as he approached the door alone and opened it. His brother blew into the room with an air of aggression. Kent’s blue gray stare zeroed in on Ben immediately before swinging in Chrissy’s direction.

She rose to her feet from the sofa and his gaze dropped to her mid-section. Instinctively, she covered a hand over her tummy and sent him a sharp glare. In response, a slight grin curved his lips. “Hi, Chrissy.”

She nodded an acknowledgment of the greeting. “Kent.”

Ben wasted little time and cornered his brother to one side of the suite where they whispered back and forth, tossing an occasional stare her way. Seeing the both of them huddled next to one another provided enough material to fuel Chrissy’s

fantasies for months to come. She snuck a look across the room and adjusted her time frame. Maybe years.

Chrissy played games on her cell until boredom set in. Holding the phone close to her face as if engrossed, she studied the twins.

Identical. Exactly as Ben stated. Side by side, she found it hard to single out any differences. Everything matched right down to the navy tee shirt and dark jeans. Had they planned it that way or mere coincidence?

Also, much to her confusion, Ben seemed to have shrunk in size after appearing larger in the parking lot which screamed all sorts of impossible. But there was no denying the change in his stature. The brothers stood eye to eye, shoulder to shoulder. An exact replica of one another down to the very tone of their matching voices.

Chrissy's gaze strayed to the man on the right. Ben. She knew it without a doubt though she would be hard pressed to pin down how she knew. Biting her bottom lip, she sent a quick text to Toni. *'Can you tell Ben and Kent apart?'*

'No,' came with an accompanying sad face.

Grinning, Chrissy texted another message. *'How are things with Drake?'*

'He's pissed. Don't worry though, he'll find out who's behind this.'

Surprisingly she wasn't worried. Ben wouldn't let anything happen to her. *'I believe you.'*

'How are things with you and Ben?'

Chrissy bit her lip and glanced at the subject of their conversation. How to answer? Technically things were fine but there was still the tiny matter of his claim from earlier.

Pregnant.

The thought scared her as nothing else could. She wanted kids. One day. Maybe in the distant future and with a husband who adored her.

‘?’

Taking her time, Chrissy pecked out her one word answer and added a smiley face. *‘Fine.’*

The phone rang in her hand an instant later, drawing Ben and Kent’s attention. Kent, on the left, arched a brow in inquiry but Ben, on the right, appeared seconds away from snatching the device from her hand. Chrissy turned her back on both and answered. “Toni,—”

“Something’s wrong and don’t try to lie to me.”

Chrissy held in a sigh which would have been a dead giveaway. Both men stared, making no attempt to pretend they weren’t listening. With no choice and seeking a modicum of privacy, she stomped toward the bathroom and slammed the door behind her.

“Ben seems to think I’m pregnant.”

“What?!”

Chrissy pulled the phone from her ear then placed it back. “I know it’s crazy. Irresponsible—foolish even.”

“Chrissy, stop right there. I wish I was with you. Start at the beginning. Are you sure?”

“No.” Chrissy gnawed at her bottom lip and stared at her dazed expression in the mirror above the sink. Dark circles had formed beneath her eyes and her face looked pale and drawn. “I missed my cycle but that’s understandable with everything going on. And really it’s only been a month. One time. Arghhh, Toni, I can’t believe this is happening to me!”

Her heart rate jacked up and Chrissy started pacing in the tiny space while digging her fingers into her scalp.

“Get a test, make an appointment with your doctor and we’ll take it one step at a time.”

We. Chrissy relaxed. She knew her friend would never let her tackle this alone. There wasn’t a single time when Toni wasn’t in her corner. “You’re the best friend ever.”

“I’m also jealous,” Toni countered, her glee coming across the line. “I want a baby and now you’ve beat me to the punch. Drake thinks we should wait—enjoy one another, but I keep having visions of little warlocks in my head.”

Chrissy couldn’t help her snicker. That would be something. “If they do magic as babies how will you control them?”

“Pffft. I’ll worry about that later. Or maybe Drake takes care of that part.” Toni gasped. “What about you? I don’t even know what Ben is.”

Chrissy had a hard time with his claim. “He says Berserker.”

“Berserker?” Disappointment colored the word and Chrissy could only laugh as she’d had the same reaction.

“Right. Not as exciting as I’d hoped.” Except everything about Ben excited her from his deep rumbling voice to his blue gray eyes.

Toni hummed under her breath. “Although with his body I can see it. Husky, built guy with layers of muscles.”

Jealousy pinched. Toni was a married woman and shouldn’t be thinking about Ben’s muscles. “Maybe we should get back to me and my potential problem.”

“Is it really a problem?” Toni asked, voice gone hesitant.

Coming to a halt in the center of the room, Chrissy nibbled on her thumbnail. She didn’t know how to answer. In the technical sense no, but she wasn’t ready and hadn’t planned for this. Only one thing to do, then she’d prepare and deal with what came her way. “I’ll get a test.”

“And call me right after?”

Chrissy huffed a laugh. “And call you right away, mother.”

She started to say more but a heavy fist pounded on the closed door. Chrissy rolled her eyes. “I have to go, Toni.”

“Be safe. Love you.”

“I will. Love you too.”

Chrissy swiped her finger over the screen as the door opened and Ben walked in, a dark frown pulling his brows down into a sharp crease. His gaze landed on the phone in her hand. “Everything alright?”

Aside from his presence arousing her, Chrissy felt great. *Not*. Someone wanted her dead or at least severely injured enough to draw Drake’s attention.

Kent crowded in the doorway behind his brother and winked her way. She didn’t really know him except for the one time he’d helped her get away from the reception despite the wine she’d thrown on him.

“Chrissy?” Ben’s voice deepened.

“I’m fine. I need to go to the store to check on the little problem you mentioned earlier.”

He stared a few seconds longer then nodded. “I’ll take you and Kent will stay here.”

During the ride to the drug store, Chrissy’s silence gave Ben pause. He kept glancing at her from the side of his vision but she stared out the passenger window and donned a pair of overlarge sunglasses which made her face looked years younger.

She’d fixed her hair and pulled it into a loose ponytail. He’d lent her his jacket and the sleeves slipped past her fingertips. At least it covered her torn and stained shirt. It also added a sense of possession. Now his scent covered her and no one could mistake she belonged to him.

“Are you still staring at me?” she groused without turning in his direction.

A smile tipped Ben’s lips up. He preferred her grumpy to the uncomfortable quiet that didn’t fit the little he knew of her. Seeing her place had been a revelation. The pictures of the dog she didn’t own, her few snapshots of Toni, none of family from what he could decipher, told their own story.

It concerned Ben in light of the recent attacks targeted toward her. She was vulnerable and alone. In addition, no matter what she thought, carrying his child. His protective drive still rode him hard and if not for Kent's presence, Ben would have demanded Chrissy come straight back to New York with him.

Chrissy blew out a breath and spun around to glare at him. "Stop, okay? I'm nervous enough as is."

Ben didn't like the sound of that. As his mate, her care and comfort were his priority. This feeling and the sudden urges to care for her were intense. No one had said it would feel this way when he found his mate. He'd gone from worry about a woman he'd been extremely interested in to full panic mode.

Pulling into a parking spot at the pharmacy retailer, Ben turned the car off and leaned an arm on the shoulder of the passenger seat as he shifted toward her. "Why are you nervous?"

She ran a hand over her hair then tugged on the end of her ponytail. "I don't know anything about having a baby. I mean, if you're right and I'm pregnant. I don't have a mother still around as an example like Toni.

"I don't have a family to lean on. It's just me. If there's a baby, I'm the only one it can count on and I'm not sure that's good enough. I'm not good enough."

"You're good enough," Ben growled immediately.

He hadn't expected such a detailed response but with a few short words Chrissy had told him so much. Kent was the calm and rational one. He was the one who managed his berserker half better than Ben but Kent wasn't the one with a baby on the way or a newly discovered mate.

Leaning in closer, Ben made sure to keep his eyes on hers. Chrissy watched him intently. Without thinking of his next action, he raised his hand and brushed his thumb across the curve of her cheek. "You will be the mother our child needs. You will be everything they could hope for."

She inhaled sharply, the sound overloud in the quiet of the car. “How can you say that? You don’t really know me. We had one night together.”

Despite what she said, there was a hopeful glow in her eyes. The scent of her mixed with the light fragrance of pregnancy filled his nostrils. It was intoxicating and impossible to resist. Stretching across the seat, Ben kissed her lightly on the lips. It was meant to be brief, a reassuring touch.

Chrissy moaned and lurched toward him, her hands digging into his hair and holding his head steady. He growled in possession before pulling back on a gasp. Now wasn’t the time. Chrissy blinked up at him and Ben wanted to do whatever it took to wipe the concern from her face.

In a husky voice, he said, “I don’t need to spend more time around you to know you’re going to be a good mother. You are all Toni talks about. Every story she tells is one where you haven’t let her down. You’ve always supported her and been there when she needed you. The friendship speaks a lot to the type of person you are, Christine. Never doubt it.”

She jerked and licked her lips. Lips he wanted to taste over and over. Her shoulders went back and the soft look on her face faded to be replaced with a narrowed gaze. “Well, it won’t matter. I’m sure.”

She opened the door on her side and hopped out. Snorting, Ben climbed from the truck, hurrying to her side. She was in for a surprise if she really didn’t believe him.

Chapter 9

Chrissy read the overhead signs in the aisles and located what she needed mixed with an array of condoms and other items. She grabbed two kits and hurried to the front. Ben stayed on her heels and didn't say a word. Thank goodness for that because Chrissy was sure she was on the verge of a panic attack or a serious sob session.

She really *really* wanted Toni here. Clenching her phone with one hand, Chrissy set the pregnancy tests on the counter. After the cashier rung them up, Ben leaned into her side and paid before she had a chance to open her purse.

The lady behind the counter smiled brightly at him. Her lips parted to speak but Chrissy grabbed the plastic bag and Ben's elbow, rushing them from the store. This was not the time for some hapless cashier to give her platitudes.

Back in the truck, she drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Not that it helped. Her heart raced a mile a minute and her pulse thudded hard enough it could be heard. Ben got in the truck slower and sat still for a moment.

When Chrissy glanced over at him, his gaze was on her. Saliva filled her mouth and Chrissy was pretty sure she was going to be sick to her stomach. "What?"

His eyes gleamed in the shadowy interior. "It really is going to be okay."

Why did he have to use that soft tone? It was easier to be annoyed when he was all growly and grumpy. Ben reached over and gripped her thigh, squeezing. "You're not alone in this."

"Well, I'm probably not pregnant either."

The words were sheer bravado. With the tests clutched in her lap, it felt more real than when he'd yelled at her earlier about being pregnant.

Ben's eyes narrowed but he didn't say anything. He started the car, turned on the radio and drove them back to the hotel. As soon as they got there, Chrissy made a beeline straight for

the bathroom. She ripped open the package, read the instructions and squatted over the toilet to pee on the stick.

There was a brief wait for results. During that time, she tore into the second package and peed on that one too. Now she had two tests to wait on. She washed her hands, adjusted her clothes and stared into the mirror to keep from watching the little pane on the thin sticks sitting at the side of the sink.

Pros, if she was pregnant, she'd deal with it. Ben seemed serious about helping and of course Toni would be there for her. Cons, she wasn't sure she was ready. Trembles shook her frame as she contemplated the idea of actually having a baby.

What if she dropped it? How was she supposed to know what was needed when it cried?

Books could only tell so much. Still, maybe she should have grabbed one of those books about pregnancy. Snatching up her phone, Chrissy did a search and flinched at the links that popped up on screen. She tapped on the first one and read the intro.

Nausea, bloating, mild dizziness. Moaning, Chrissy lowered her arm holding the phone. She had that. Maybe. Or was she creating symptoms in her head now that she'd read them?

The timer went off on her phone. *Okay*. Drawing in a deep breath and releasing it, Chrissy picked up the first test and eyed the pink symbol in trepidation. Her lungs seized. She dropped the test and picked up the other. Two lines.

Hyperventilating, Chrissy braced both hands on the sides of the sink and panted. *Pregnant*. She was freaking pregnant. Tears hovered on the edges of her eyelids. She didn't know how to be pregnant. Her job, her one bedroom apartment.

Chrissy jerked upright. She didn't even have a car any more! How was she supposed to do this? Her hands fumbled for her phone and she hit redial on the last number she'd called. Toni answered immediately, "What did it say?"

"I...I'm pregnant," Chrissy gasped, still unable to take it in

“Yay! Congrats, bestie. I’m going to be the best aunt ever. I can’t wait to take my turn watching the little wonder while you sleep.”

Chrissy blinked and swiped at the single tear that managed to fall. In a perfect world that would be great. Except. “You’re in New York and I’m here in Florida.”

“Oh.” Toni fell silent.

Someone knocked at the door behind Chrissy. She glared over her shoulder and shouted, “I’m busy.”

“Do you know how much longer you’ll be? My brother is getting a bit...impatient.”

Kent. That was Kent.

Chrissy sniffed and washed her hands after chucking each test in the waste basket. “I’ll be out. Tell him to chill.”

“Chrissy, I can talk to Drake about moving. He could probably run his business from anywhere. This is the digital age,” Toni said, rushing the words out.

“No. No, that’s not necessary. I have to figure this out.” Chrissy didn’t want her friend rearranging her life on her account. She’d just moved to New York to be with Drake. It didn’t make sense for them to turn around and move here.

Toni grew quiet. “Ok, but know that it’s on the table.”

Pregnant. Pregnant. Pregnant.

Toni rambled some more but Chrissy’s mind remained stuck on a loop.

Pregnant. Pregnant. Pregnant.

Shit.

Ben worried at how long Chrissy remained in the restroom. He knew she was scared. This was a big deal. Hell, he rammed his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. He was nervous too. He’d have to speak with Drake about relocating. There was no

way Ben could remain in New York while his mate and child lived in Florida.

Chrissy had a job she loved. She wouldn't want to quit and move to New York. If she hadn't done it already to be close to her best friend, she wouldn't do it so he could be close and active in her life.

"What's on your mind?" Kent asked from his slouched position on the tan sofa.

His brother had a remote in one hand, scanning through channels but the tv was muted. Ben braced his hips on the kitchenette table behind him. "I have to move. I want to be near them."

Kent blinked. He lowered the remote to his side and shifted his full attention to Ben. "You want to move here? Are you crazy?! What about Drake? Me?"

The questions came rapid fire as Ben knew they would when he shared his plan. He and Kent had a special relationship and had always spent their entire life together. What Ben proposed would be completely anathema to how they'd lived.

"I'm going to talk with Drake tomorrow. If I have to, I'll resign from the position. Chrissy and our child are my priority going forward."

Had to be. He wasn't sure his nature would allow him to live several states away from her nor did he want to. Having a mate was something Ben had dreamed of. He wasn't going to waste the opportunity by shitting around when it came to her. His heart couldn't take it.

Kent continued to stare. His expression ranged from shock to horror and finally dawning sadness when he realized Ben was serious. The realization that there was another person who would have priority over him in Ben's life was slowly sinking in.

"I'm pregnant."

Ben's heart leaped in his chest and he spun around at the announcement. Chrissy walked out of the bathroom slowly.

Elation pulsed through his veins as he crossed to her and clasped her forearms.

Pressing his forehead to hers, Ben breathed in the combined scent she carried. The knowledge had never been in doubt for him but he knew she hadn't wanted to accept the truth. "It's going to be okay. Trust me."

She huffed and pulled away. "Trusting you is why I'm in this position."

The sassy retort was classic Chrissy. Ben grinned. He much preferred her this way than the startled, frightened look she'd worn when she first entered the room.

"So, uh," she rubbed her hands together and grimaced. "What's the plan?"

Kent growled and lunged to his feet. "Why don't you ask him? Apparently, my brother has it all figured it out."

With a glare at Ben, Kent stormed past them and left the hotel room. The door shuddered behind him but Ben knew he wouldn't go far. His brother took his role as a guard too serious to leave no matter how angry he was. He just needed some time to accept the coming changes.

Chrissy's brows creased together. "What's his problem?"

Since he had no reason to lie, Ben told her. "He's concerned about me moving here."

"What?" Now she folded her arms across her chest and hit him with a defiant stare. "Not for me I hope. Maybe it's not your baby."

Ben laughed outright. "It's my baby. Kent knew it was my baby and as soon as I was near you, I knew it was my baby."

"Kent knew already?" Groaning, Chrissy's arms fell to her sides and she threw herself to the sofa dramatically.

Laughter rolled up and rumbled free again. "Berserkers can scent pregnancy."

She lifted her head from the sofa enough to snark. "Still think you could have been something cooler."

“If you’d ever been around a shifter as a baby, you wouldn’t say that. They growl and mark territory until they’re old enough to know better. They chew on everything and have major separation anxiety from their parents as infants.”

Chrissy jerked up, her expression stunned. “Are you playing me or telling the truth?”

Ben snorted. He knew enough shifters to confirm everything he’d told her. “Truth.”

“Huh.” Chrissy slumped back but kept her eyes on him. “What about warlock babies? What’s Toni in for?”

“Toni’s pregnant?” Ben shouted.

The door swung open and Kent stepped through. “Does Drake know?”

“Wait. What?” Chrissy sat up, her gaze going from him to Kent. “I didn’t say that!”

Ben reached for his phone and hit the call back button all while saying, “You asked what Toni would go through.”

“What’s happened, Ben?” Drake asked in a calm voice.

Chrissy leaped to her feet and reached for Ben’s phone. He held her back easily with one hand.

“You may need to alert the guards to the fact that Toni’s pregnant,” Ben warned.

Chrissy waved her arms frantically but Ben shifted about so she couldn’t take the phone from him.

“What did you say?!” Drake barked. In an aside, he muttered, “Why didn’t you tell me you were pregnant?”

“Because I’m not,” Toni exclaimed in the background.

“It’s okay if this is sooner than we wanted,” Drake continued.

Chrissy gripped Ben’s wrist. “I didn’t say Toni was pregnant, you idiot. Hang up!”

Kent stared. “She’s not?”

Ben focused on the annoyed twist to Chrissy's lips, the narrowed gaze aimed at him and said to Drake, "My mistake. Call you back."

He ended the call and sighed. "I'm pretty sure after that now isn't the time to tell Drake I want to relocate."

Kent ran a shaking hand through his hair. Ben had never seen him so rattled. "Is this what she's going to be like pregnant? I'm not sure I can handle it already."

Chapter 10

Ben and his brother spent the evening hovered over the laptop set up on the kitchenette table. From what Chrissy could gather, they were discussing security measures. Not that anyone bothered to include her in that conversation.

Stretched full length on the sofa, she scrolled through shows she had no interest in watching and stalked a few of her favorite celebrity sites on her phone to see what was going on in the world.

Mayhem, drama and chaos. The usual.

After a room service dinner of cheetos, tacos and a side of fries which had both men staring, Chrissy announced she was going to bed. Kent waved at her and Ben eyed her longer than she cared for as she made her escape.

In the privacy of the bedroom, her hand drifted to her belly and she cupped the nonexistent bump. Now that the initial panic was starting to fade, Chrissy let herself think about the idea of a baby.

It seemed inconceivable but the proof was in the test. Or two tests. Fear crept along the edges of her mind but Chrissy shoved it back. Yes, this was a lot to take in but so was the explosion and apartment break in. There was no ignoring the fact someone was after her. She'd been a fool to try and pretend.

A hearty sigh escaped as she flipped over onto her back. This thing with Ben bothered her too. He'd allegedly flown back to protect her but now she wondered if it had more to do with the baby. Would he have rushed to watch over her if there wasn't a kid involved?

The whole mate thing didn't sit well with her either. She didn't want someone who only became interested in her because it was preordained by mystical means. Also, how much stock was she supposed to put into that? What about love? Where or when did that come into play?

Her gut churned. Over the weeks, she'd had time to see the whole experience with a little distance. The reason she'd been so hurt wasn't strictly because Ben had disappeared with no contact. It was because she'd felt abandoned.

At some point the light outside dimmed and shadows flickered across the walls. Chrissy wasn't sure how much time went by. The door opened with a low squeak. She kept her gaze pinned to the wavering stripes on the ceiling.

Steps neared and Ben climbed onto the mattress and lay next to her. She tipped her head to the side, expecting him to speak or push but he stared back and held his silence. His blue-gray eyes were determined, long lashes guarding the beautiful orbs. His dark hair held grooves from running his fingers through it.

Her gaze lowered. She knew his clothes hid a body worth ogling. Chrissy had dated a lot using online services, friend recommendations, meet cutes in coffee shops and once in a book store. Those men had ranged in looks from incredibly handsome to quirky nerd and without fail each ended up being a major loser. It was as if a radar pointed toward her with a *kick me* sign.

Nothing about Ben said loser but he'd also disappeared the night after they had sex. That didn't exactly scream 'I'm interested in dating you.'

The silence between them stretched and Chrissy wanted to curl into a ball and avoid reality. Based on his lengthy stare that wouldn't be possible. They would be talking about the elephant in the room whether she wanted to or not. She cleared her throat. "I guess you were right."

His gaze softened in a way Chrissy hadn't expected. In their short acquaintance he'd mostly exhibited three reactions—gruff, sharp and fierce.

Of course if she considered the one night they'd shared, he'd been demanding, sexy and aggressive. Which was the true Ben or was he a combination of all those traits?

He lifted a hand and tucked a loose bit of hair behind her ear. The touch sent tiny shivers down her spine. “I meant it when I said I was sorry. I would have never put you in this position without your permission.”

It meant a lot hearing him say that. “I feel bulldozed. This pregnancy. My car exploding. Now you with this mating thing.”

“It’s not some mating thing,” Ben returned. He swiped both thumbs across the slant of her cheekbones and stared into her eyes. “And I don’t want to bully you, Chrissy. There was a connection that night. I felt it. You felt it. But I was too scared to explore it which is why we’re in this situation now.”

She cringed. “Great. You only want me for the baby.”

“Fuck no!” he exclaimed, jerking back his hands from her face.

His response shocked her. Passionate denial blazed from his eyes.

“I wanted you then, wanted you while I was gone and want you still.”

Her mouth fell open at the admission. It was more than she’d expected. Ben’s lips tipped up as he continued. “That’s right. And if you’re honest with yourself, you’ll admit that you still want me too.”

She did. She wanted him as much as she’d wanted him that night in the hotel. Being abandoned the next morning had played on her issues of self worth. If she were to believe Ben, what they’d shared wasn’t a one off. He had feelings for her.

“I don’t know what to say,” she whispered.

His gaze grew intent and he leaned toward her. “Let me protect you. Let me show you that we can have something special. A mating is a rare chance for a love of a life. Nothing compares to it. My heart will beat for you and only you. No other will come close to loving you the way I will, if you just give me a chance to prove it.

Chrissy whimpered. His impassioned plea touched her. Should she trust his words? Why was this so hard? Was this how people felt risking it all for a relationship?

No researching. No online stalking. Just taking a leap of faith on what one felt.

She *did* want Ben and those emotions from that night could easily translate to something more. Deeper.

Maybe.

Chrissy nibbled her bottom lip. She went through this all the time when she met a new person. Getting in her own way was a continual problem for her. The real fear came from handing her heart over to a man and getting a broken shell back in return months later. Hell, sometimes weeks later.

“I’m scared, Ben. I want to see where this goes but things haven’t always worked out for me in the past.”

He nodded and twisted onto his side to face her. “I understand. I feel some of that too because I never expected to find the perfect match to me.”

Perfect? Chrissy tensed. She was far from perfect. “What if you don’t like who I really am? Once you get beyond the sexual attraction between us.”

Would he still want her? Would he still think her perfect?

Ben’s eyes suddenly blazed with a fierce light. “Not possible.”

The intensity with which he spoke sparked a need in her. Hadn’t she imagined someone having strong feelings like that toward her? Hearing Ben make such a bold statement terrified her. More than anything Chrissy wanted what he offered.

Shifting her gaze to the ceiling again, she murmured, “Okay.”

“Hey,” Ben said. He cupped her jaw and turned her face toward him. “What do you need from me?”

He was being so kind. Since he continued to watch her with a worried look in his eyes, Chrissy sat up and shook off

her apathy. She sent him a self-deprecating grin. “Don’t worry. I’m not going off the deep end. This is a lot to process.”

“Will you...have a problem keeping the child and seeing this through to the end?”

The hesitancy in his voice confused her until the meaning sunk in. “Oh.”

She shifted around and pulled her knees in close to her chest to rest her chin there. They did need to clear the air on this part. Having a baby would be a huge adjustment and she didn’t take that responsibility lightly. “While I wasn’t ready to be a mom, I plan to carry the pregnancy to term. I’m a firm believer that things happen for a reason and maybe this baby, this life was meant to arrive this way.”

“Your life will change,” he said.

“I’ll adapt to my new normal.” Chrissy was good at that. Her best friend had been attacked by a creature that shouldn’t have existed. Look at Toni now.

His relief was obvious, though he tried to mask it with a congenial smile. He pushed off the bed on the opposite side and stood. “I’ll leave you to your rest. In the morning, we can go over the plan Kent and I devised.”

Chrissy pursed her lips. If any part of it involved wrapping her in cotton and hiding, she’d have something to say about that. “I’ll listen accordingly and decide if I agree.”

Ben snorted but his mouth turned up at the corner as he left her alone and closed the bedroom door behind him. Chrissy’s phone buzzed a moment later. The image of her and Toni goofing around appeared on screen. She answered immediately. “Toni?”

“Why does Drake think I’m pregnant?” her bestie screeched.

Chrissy groaned and flopped backward, while palming her face. “I’m sorry. I never told anyone you were pregnant but Ben and Kent misunderstood what I said and next thing I know Ben’s calling Drake.”

Toni chuckled. “I had no idea what he was going on about. Once I got him to believe that there is no little Drake growing, he settled down and returned to his home office for an important video conference.”

Drake was over the top in all things business related. Based on current behavior, it was clear he would apply that same level of dedication to Toni.

“You know what’s funny,” Toni continued before Chrissy could comment. “I think he was a bit excited at the prospect despite the fact we’d already discussed waiting.”

“Lucky you,” Chrissy moaned, pinning her gaze to a tiny brown stain on the ceiling. Or was it a dead bug?

Toni switched gears in the same breath. “How was Ben’s response?”

“Considering he’d already sensed that I was pregnant, it was pretty much the same. He said he’ll be here for me and I’m pretty sure moving was mentioned.”

“What? Moving! Wait.” Toni muffled the phone and Chrissy couldn’t make out the mumbles. “Ok, sorry. Drake just walked in. Apparently his work call didn’t last long. Ben hasn’t mentioned moving to him.”

Ugh. Chrissy smacked her palm over her forehead a few times. Was she not supposed to mention it? “Tell your hubby to go away and stop listening to girl talk.”

Drake’s husky chuckle came through the line before Toni sighed. “Alright. He’s walked back out. I’m sure this will be a conversation we have tonight in bed. Drake wouldn’t know what to do without Ben helping to hold down the fort.”

“It’s not official yet.” Chrissy tried to stave off any problems for Toni. Ben couldn’t possibly plan to rearrange his whole life for her. It didn’t make sense that he’d even try.

Grumbling under her breath, Toni said, “Doesn’t matter. This is a good sign that he’s already making plans to be there for you and offer support.”

Now was as good a time as any to bring up the next touchy subject. “He says I’m his mate.”

Quiet. Then, “I don’t want to keep saying *what* but WHAT?! Wait, ugh, I feel like we need to switch this call to video chat.”

A second later, Chrissy’s phone buzzed. She accepted her friend’s incoming call and Toni’s cheerful face appeared on the screen. Her black hair hung about her shoulders in thick ringlets and her amethyst eyes gleamed with excitement. A single eyebrow arched as she asked, “Mate? Deets. Tell me everything about this and don’t leave out a word.”

Laughter sputtered from Chrissy’s lips as she rolled to her front, kicked up her feet behind her and crossed her ankles. “Not much to tell. There’s the whole he knew I was pregnant before me based on smell or something. Then he said only a mate could conceive his child and basically declared he’d move here to take care of me and the baby.”

Toni gaped. “This—this is so crazy.”

“More crazy than you falling in love with a warlock?”

Snorting, Toni rolled her eyes. “Well, when you put it like that.”

More laughter.

Toni rubbed her hands together. “Enough with the serious stuff. Let’s talk baby.”

“I’m sorry,” Kent said as soon as Ben entered the living room area. “I shouldn’t have snapped about you wanting to give your all for your mate.”

For more reasons than the obvious. Ken knew his mate. Their paths had crossed once and she’d disappeared the same day. He hadn’t seen her since despite their best combined effort.

“No apologies necessary, brother.”

Neither of them ever held a grudge against the other.

Kent asked, “How is she?”

“Fine. I think.” Ben joined his brother on the sofa. Their thighs brushed due to the size of the miniscule furniture. “The pregnancy is a shock to her.”

Kent jabbed an elbow into Ben’s side and grinned, his annoyance from earlier gone. “Duh. For obvious reasons. No one likes a surprise baby.”

Sending him a mock glare, Ben leaned back and tried to wrap his thoughts around the idea as well. A baby. A new Berserker for the world.

As far as they knew, he and Kent were the only of their kind left. Berserkers had a genetic tendency to seek out fights. They struggled with uncontrollable tempers and were known to die in battle rather than surrender. A mentality like that led to a higher number of deaths, thus the rapid decline in their race.

An unexpected friendship with a warlock in a pub one night had saved Ben and Kent from a similar fate. Drake had spun around on his bar stool and tossed out a trivial question in their direction at a neighboring table. One thing led to another and soon all three men were embroiled in a hearty debate that lasted well into the morning light.

They’d become fast friends. Throughout the years, they’d part ways and go about their individual business, travel to different countries or whatever caught their attention. Later, they’d all found themselves living in North America at the same time. Ben and Kent in Canada and Drake in the states.

When Drake slid into his corporate role among human businessmen, it seemed only natural to follow suit so they’d joined him and been with him ever since.

During their years living between two worlds, he and his brother had vowed not to lose their hearts to a human. They’d thought there were no mates in their future from the other races and had resigned themselves to never being in a fated relationship.

Then Kent met his mate but she ran off. He'd vowed not to look for her after a tireless week combing the internet for any trace of her.

At some point, maybe, Ben would have settled with a woman from the otherworld. Now, he didn't have to. His heart skipped a beat. "I'm going to be a father."

"Which makes me an uncle," Kent chimed in. He reached over and gripped Ben's hand. "I'll watch over your child and mate as if they were my own. You know that."

He would. The bond between them was strong enough to drive both of them to care for those the other loved.

Ben squeezed his hand in return. "I know you will."

Now he just needed to eliminate the danger and convince Chrissy that they could have a life together.

Chapter 11

“You can’t be serious!” Ben declared the next morning.

Chrissy had slept fitfully during the night but dragged herself out of bed to shower and dress in her yucky clothes from the night before. She craved a hot, soothing cup of tea but didn’t have time for it right now. Going home and getting fresh clothes was a priority.

“I need to go to work. I already used a lot of time and my job at the University is important. I can’t just decide not to go to work.”

Kent laughed from his slouched position, leaning against the wall by the kitchen entryway. Once more, the two wore dark denim jeans, a hole in the exact same spot on the left knee and black tee shirts. How Chrissy could immediately tell Kent stood in the kitchen and Ben sat on the sofa, she had no idea.

Ben glared at his brother then faced Chrissy again. “I thought we could go over the plan from last night.”

“Explain the jeans to me first.” She couldn’t stand the curiosity. “How do you both have a hole in the same spot and it’s not a store created hole.”

Ben groaned. “The clothes are Kent’s idea of a joke. It’s not enough that we’re identical. He changes clothes to match or eavesdrops in my mind to find what I’m wearing. In this instance, he tore his jeans. The holes are *not* exact but close enough to the casual eye.”

That was...ridiculous and amusing at the same time. Chrissy glanced at Kent and he merely arched a brow. *Okay, then.* She moved back to the topic. “In the plan you and your brother came up with, did either of you take into account my job?”

Judging by the red stains filling Ben’s cheeks, the answer was a resounding no. He huffed and lunged to his feet. Chrissy maintained her position in the center of the room and folded

her arms over her chest. If he thought he could steam roll over her...

“Fine.”

Chrissy froze. “What?”

“I said fine. We’ll follow you to work. I’ll stay at your side and Kent can keep an eye on the building from the outside,” Ben continued, gathering his keys from the coffee table and a pair of dark shades.

Stunned for a second, it took a minute for the import of his agreement to sink in. She’d fully expected to have to fight a little more. Not wanting to ruin her luck, Chrissy ran to the kitchen island and snagged her purse. “Ready.”

Kent snorted from the left of her but she ignored him. Chrissy had a feeling she’d be doing a lot of that in the future. The nice guy from Toni’s wedding had hidden depths and showed signs of being as ruthless as Ben.

“Let’s go. I’ll take her in the truck and you follow in a separate car,” Ben directed toward his brother.

They left together, Ben walking at a clipped pace, one hand lightly at the bottom of Chrissy’s back. They bypassed the elevator and trotted down several flights of stairs. In the lobby, Kent strode ahead and shoved the glass doors open before them.

Outside, the two of them drew attention from male and female gazes alike. Their identical presence would have caused a stir regardless but it was more. Danger rippled on the air in the path they cut through the crowds milling about.

Ben looked over the truck from top to bottom with a handheld device before keying the lock and helping Chrissy inside. She shoved at his hand that paused too long on her butt as he boosted her up. His lips twitched as he strode around the front of the vehicle.

Kent clicked his teeth and Ben responded with some super macho hand signal and they were off. Chrissy adjusted the vents and increased the flow to have maximum air blowing in her face.

As usual, the Florida heat and humidity were in full force at seven in the morning. The sun gleamed down through the windshield and she tipped her head to the side mirror to see the dark sedan following behind them. Kent.

“How do you plan to catch the person doing this?” she asked as they sped down the road.

Ben briefly glanced in her direction before focusing on the street again. “If they try to go after you again, I’ll be ready. Kent and I also reached out to some friends and hopefully we’ll hear back something.”

Sounded like a needle in the haystack to her. “Does Drake at least have an idea or clue who’s doing this?”

Ben’s lips pinched tight and his eyebrows drew together, creating tight creases in the middle. “Not yet but he will. Drake doesn’t fuck around when it comes to those he cares about.”

And because of Toni, Chrissy fell into people Drake Winston cared about. Her heart thumped and the odd urge to cry bubbled up. Wow. Tears weren’t usually her go to. She bit her bottom lip and crushed the sensation. Maybe it was pregnancy hormones.

Pregnant. Oh, God. Her pulse raced and Chrissy pressed a hand to her chest as her breathing grew choppy.

“What’s wrong?” Ben reached over and squeezed her thigh. “Chrissy, are you alright?”

She caught a glimpse of his strained features. Panting, she managed, “Fine. I’m fine. Just a reaction to remembering that I’m pregnant. I have to make a doctor’s appointment, get vitamins or whatever pills I’m supposed to take.”

How did women figure this stuff out?

“Do you want me to take you to your doctor’s office instead of work?” His gaze skittered back and forth between traffic and her. There was a wild look on his face that caused Chrissy to laugh.

“This is going to be the worst. We’re both neurotic. Poor kid.” She cupped her stomach. “I’m sorry in advance that mommy and daddy are slightly off center.”

The tense line along Ben’s shoulder eased. He signaled and turned the corner toward her apartment complex. “Our son or daughter will be fine.”

Drawing a deep breath, Chrissy reminded herself that Toni was a phone call away. Ben had already promised to help. She could do this. He wheeled into a spot in front of her building and Kent parked a few spaces away. There was no sign of her burned car.

Ben turned toward her and undid his seatbelt. “Your car was towed away. Drake’s taken care of notifying your insurer. Another vehicle was delivered this morning.”

He pointed to a black four door. The car held a brilliant sheen that spoke to its cost. Chrissy stared at the car, unable to drag her eyes away. Her lungs tightened. “Drake bought me a car?”

“It has bulletproof windows and an armored exterior. The wheels are runflat tires.”

That he would do something like this touched her. “He didn’t have to do that.”

Ben caressed her bottom lip. “As far as Drake is concerned, this is his fault. He’d never let you pay for something that he considers his responsibility. Come on, I don’t like having you exposed out here. Get what you need to cover several days.”

Chrissy slid out her side of the truck. Ben appeared on her right and cupped her elbow. Inside, he entered her apartment first and gave it a thorough walk through before allowing her to come in.

She grimaced at his precautions but a part of her heart warmed. No one looked out for Chrissy. She was the funny friend, the party person, the individual you went to for a good time.

Toni was the only one who saw through the façade. Toni checked on Chrissy and truly cared about her. Their friendship was the best thing to ever happen to either of them.

In her bedroom, Chrissy threw together a few things and hiked the duffel toward her bed. She took a quick shower while Ben prowled her living room. Afterward, she dressed in a light flowy dress that stopped mid thigh. The pale shade of green complemented her tan and brought out her eyes. A pair of neutral flat sandals finished her look.

The admiration in Ben's gaze when she re-entered the living room made the extra effort of adding mascara and lip gloss worth it. He reached for her bag and shouldered it. Chrissy didn't bother fighting.

In short order, they were back on the road and Ben headed unerringly toward the University. "You know where I work?"

He smirked. "I know everything I need to protect you, pretty girl."

Whew. Heat flared in her lower belly. The seductive endearment brought back the memories of their night together. Shifting about in her seat, Chrissy crossed her legs and hummed under her breath. "Right."

She wasn't going to touch that comment at all.

Ben walked side by side with Chrissy across the bustling campus. Off to his right, Kent followed on a separate pathway, both of them taking in everyone who could remotely pose a potential threat. His skin crawled at the volume of people she crossed paths with daily. Keeping her safe would be a nightmare if this lasted longer than a few days.

Students and teachers alike waved and called out greetings. Chrissy spoke with every single person who stopped her. Her smile remained steady and never once did she appear annoyed or impatient.

At last, they reached a small red brick building set amidst others. Inside, the cool interior did nothing to calm Ben's nerves. The sway of Chrissy's hips beneath the green dress

drew his gaze time and time again. Her scent combined with his had teased him all morning.

Sleeping in a separate room had torn at his control. His Berserker nature wanted her within reach where he could keep her safe. Demanding she share a bed with him wouldn't have gone over well though.

Despite the wild attraction that still existed between them, he knew Chrissy wasn't ready to resume that part of their relationship yet. He'd bide his time because his end game was for them to be together forever.

More voices called out greetings to Chrissy as they made their way through the stairs to the second floor. Her stride became looser as she strolled down the hall, her smile brighter. Her skin glowed and her eyes sparkled at a few students who stopped to speak with her. A few gazed at Ben in question but he held his silence and Chrissy's running chatter prevented introductions.

By the time they reached her office and she closed the door behind them with a relieved sigh, Ben added another piece to the puzzle that was his mate.

"You're introverted," he declared.

She made her way to her desk and tossed her purse on top before slumping in her seat and looking at him in confusion. "No, I'm not. Ask anyone who knows me. I'm probably the loudest one in the office most days."

On the surface, yes. But the strain around her eyes attested to what a trial it had been to get to her office. The moment they got out of the car on campus, it was as if a switch had flipped.

The sunny smile, friendly waves. Everything from her facial expression to her body posture had changed. Now, she let the shield drop and it revealed the slight worn edge and the toll it had taken on her.

"You're naturally quiet. It's what threw me off at your place. At first, I thought you were lonely and that was exacerbated by Toni moving away. But that's not it. You like

the quiet and peace. You have dozens of books at home and the colors you chose to decorate your space at work and in your apartment are pale and soothing.”

The more he thought on it, the more Ben knew he was right. He waved a hand in her direction. “This version of you is for show. To help you do what you have to do. At home, you reveal your real self.”

When she flinched, Ben settled. This was why she was a perfect match for him. Fate hadn’t steered him wrong. Part of the conversation he and Kent had last night centered around his brother’s concern that Chrissy’s personality would wear on Ben. She came across as high energy and Kent knew Ben loved his silent moments to temper his impatience.

Working for Drake required he maintain a certain level of vigilance as well as being able to keep up with the rapid pace due to the multiple businesses Drake ran. During his off time, Ben needed to decompress and a part of him had worried that would be a point of concern with Chrissy.

But it wouldn’t be because they were more alike than she’d let on. He’d been pulled in by her provocative and sassy conversations but the softer moments she revealed piece by piece drew him just as much.

At her core, Christine Jones was sweet and shy. An introvert who pretended to be extroverted to avoid attracting unwanted attention. No one looked closely if you behaved the way they expected.

The door burst open behind him and Ben’s instincts flared to life. He spun around gripped the shoulder of the dark-haired man hurdling through and pinned him to the wall.

“Ack! Chrissy, what’s going on?” the newcomer choked out around the hold Ben had on his shirt.

“Ben, stop! Let Carson go.” Chrissy jumped from her chair and scrambled around the desk.

“Stay there!” Ben barked, not wanting her any closer to danger than necessary.

She froze and clenched her hands into fists at her sides. When she spoke, it was through gritted teeth. “That is one of my coworkers. Please let him go.”

The guy stuttered and twisted about but couldn’t get free of Ben’s hold. “Yeah, what she said. We’re coworkers, man.”

Ben released him slowly and stepped back. “You ever hear of knocking?”

Chrissy rushed forward. She brushed at the wrinkles on the dark blue material of his shirt, glaring at Ben. “He doesn’t have to. Are you okay, Carson?”

Carson smoothed a hand over his precision cut waves, jerked at his shirt to fix it and darted a nervous look at Ben. “Fine. What’s with the wrestling move from the behemoth?”

Ben grunted and moved back slightly but remained close enough to get to the guy again if he proved a danger to Chrissy.

“That’s...uh...that’s Ben,” she stammered.

“Her boyfriend,” Ben added.

Chrissy gasped. “You are *not* my boyfriend.”

“What would you call the man you’re pregnant by? I thought we were both too mature for baby daddy.”

“You’re pregnant?” Carson cringed.

Seeing his reaction caused Chrissy to flush. Ben wanted to slam good old Carson into the wall again for making her feel that way. She had no reason to be embarrassed or ashamed.

“Um, yes. I haven’t had a chance to mention it to Avery yet.”

“Wow. I guess that lunch date is out of the question now, huh?” Carson’s gaze flickered to her midsection and he looked mildly ill.

A growl slid past Ben’s lips. Chrissy wouldn’t be going on any dates with this weasel. Or anyone else for that matter. She belonged to Ben.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea. I have some things I need to work through.” The smile she directed at Carson remained bright.

Carson huffed. His gaze narrowed and a slight sneer twisted his lips. “A baby. I guess rumors that you get around were true.”

Ben lunged for him,

“Ben!” Chrissy hurried forward, stepped into his path and slammed a palm to his chest. “No.”

Carson danced back and bumped into the partially opened door. Glancing over her shoulder, Chrissy shot Carson a dark look. “You can leave.”

After one last glare at Ben, he spun on his heels and fled. Ben snarled. “You should have let me hit him. At least once.”

To his surprise, Chrissy laughed. “Carson’s not worth it. Now, I have a good reason for him to leave me alone.”

“He bothered you?” An important piece of information. “Maybe I should have Kent do a security check on his background.”

It would please Ben to no end to dig into Carson’s life and tear it to pieces.

Chrissy shrugged, making her way back to her desk. “He’s been trying to get me to go on a date with him since I started working here. I tried to let him down gently.”

Still angered at what the bastard implied, Ben asked, “Has he always been such an ass to you?”

If so, he needed to go on the list of possible suspects harassing Chrissy.

She sat in her chair and slid it forward under her desk. Her lips puckered. “No. Never. I can’t believe he went there either to be honest. I have a great relationship with most of the people in my department and those who work in this building. I bring donuts on Fridays and bake cookies on Mondays. People *like* me.”

People liked who they thought she was. Not that they wouldn't like the real Chrissy Ben was slowly discovering. It was just easier for them to relate to the bright bundle of sunshine who probably bounced in every morning with a warm greeting for each person she passed as she'd done today.

The phone on her desk rang. Annoyance vanished and her features smoothed back into one of positivity.

Ben picked a spot that gave him visibility to the window and the door then dragged a chair to sit. He'd save his questions about Carson for later.

Chrissy rocked in her seat back and forth while she handled one call after the other. Ben pulled out his cell and tablet and began clearing up the work he typically handled for Drake.

Most of it consisted of emails, managing the volume of people wanting to get on his schedule and handling Drake's extensive travel. He sent an update to Kent, received a quick reply and settled in.

With Kent on guard outside and Chrissy within his sight, Ben allowed himself to breath easy. No one would get to her.

Chapter 12

Chrissy stayed busy for the early half of the morning. At noon right on schedule, her stomach growled. She wrapped up a few reports then closed the windows on her screen and declared, “I’m hungry.”

Ben looked up in an instant, shoving aside the phone and tablet he’d been industriously bent over. “What do you want to eat?”

Just like that. No prevarication or delay. Her need was his priority. It took a moment to clear the lump from her throat enough to speak. “Pizza. I’m in the mood for pizza.”

He didn’t bother hiding his wince. His glance dropped briefly to her midsection then jerked back up. “You don’t want fruit? Something with vegetables?”

Chrissy bit back a snarl. He had to be kidding. “Piz-za.”

She made sure to enunciate her choice. He gave in with a sigh. “I’ll text Kent to meet us at the truck. I’m assuming you know a place nearby.”

“Mhmm.” Chrissy could almost taste the cheesy goodness already.

During the ride she logged on to her telehealth account and scheduled an appointment with her gyn. There was an opening for this afternoon. She clicked the necessary boxes, confirmed her information and set the phone in her lap. The act alone created a thread of anxiety which she choked off with a sigh.

Ben pulled to a smooth stop in front of the Italian shop. The glass window of the store front had specials emblazoned across it in chalk as well as a paper menu taped in the middle.

Inhaling and exhaling in delight, Chrissy got out and paused on the sidewalk. Sauce, onions and other rich scents filled the air.

Kent parked behind them and trotted over from his car to mutter at Ben, “No one followed us.”

“Good. Any update from Drake?” Ben asked.

Kent looked at Chrissy and she narrowed her eyes. If he dared to hide anything from her, she'd kick him for sure. Flushing, Kent cleared his throat and faced Ben. "My contacts didn't turn up anything yet but Drake called during the drive over. He thinks his sources might have an answer today."

Chrissy's ears perked. If he discovered who was behind the attacks this nightmare could soon be over for her.

Ben grunted then tipped his head toward the pizza spot. Kent assumed a position on one side of her with Ben on the other side. Ben caressed her hip and nudged her forward. Rolling her eyes, Chrissy palmed the door open, causing the old fashion bell above the entry to jingle. She barely fit through as both brothers squeezed her in the middle.

"Is this necessary?" she grumbled, stumbling forward from their protective stance.

"Yes," they said at the same time, displaying that uncanny twin power.

Ben guided Chrissy to the counter. While she stood in line waiting for her turn, he kept his hand cupped at her hip. She glanced up at the strong angle of his jaw about to make a glib comment when a crash sounded behind them. Something slammed into the floor, drawing her gaze. A brick skidded across the tiled floor, leaving black gouge marks from the force of impact.

Someone screamed. Glass shattered and the beautiful front window she'd admired tinkled to the floor in a dangerous shower of glittering shards. Customers jumped from their tables and dove toward safety. Food clattered to the floor amidst the chaos.

"Get down!" Ben wrapped his arms around her waist and curled his body around hers as he shoved her down.

Chrissy's knees hit the floor. She gasped from the sharp spike of pain. From behind, Kent yelled something she couldn't make out. Her heart thundered an erratic beat. Ben flipped a round table over and dragged it in front of them. She

caught a glimpse of his harsh features as he shouted instructions. “Find them, Kent. Don’t let them get away.”

Murder gleamed in Ben’s eyes and was backed up by the weapon he held in his hand. A gun, she realized.

Ben had a gun!

“Are you okay?” he asked, hovering beside her on his knees.

“Maybe,” Chrissy gasped.

“Is she alright?” Kent called out.

Voices rose in a panic around them. Chrissy licked her lips and searched for signs the danger still existed. Ben didn’t take his gaze off of her face and answered, “She’s fine.”

“Just a brick, everyone. Someone threw a brick through the window,” a lightly accented voice announced.

Chrissy recognized Andy, the son of the owner of the Pizzeria. His red hair stood on end and his face was more pale than usual. He clenched his green apron in his fist and tugged at the back of his neck with his other hand.

People slowly stood, crawling out from behind whatever shelter they’d found. Ben kissed her forehead. “Don’t move yet.”

He rose easily, arm down with the gun pressed along his thigh. Glass crunched underfoot. Anger and fear vibrated from Ben’s pores but he didn’t move more than an inch away from Chrissy. For that she was extremely grateful.

Kent joined them and eyed Ben from head to toe. “You good?”

“Yeah,” Ben grunted.

Kent nodded. “I managed to tackle one of the two assailants and tied him up. The other got away. I’ll be right back.”

With that, he took off and leaped through the wide gap where the front window had once been. Ben helped Chrissy to her feet and tucked the gun into a holster at his waist then

tugged the hem of his tee shirt over it. She'd had no idea he carried a weapon. "Are you supposed to have that?"

"Paranorm authorization," he muttered. His arm came around her shoulders as he pulled her into his side. They hustled toward the door just as sirens rang out.

"Shouldn't we talk to the police?" Chrissy asked as she rushed to keep up with his quick steps through the door and down the sidewalk.

Constantly looking around them, Ben ushered her to his truck. He hit the locks and helped her in. "No."

He hurried around the front of the truck and hopped in the driver's seat. The engine started with a rumble. Two police cars squealed to an abrupt stop behind them. Chrissy peered in the side mirror, watching the officers race inside. They should at least stay to give their input.

Ben must have noted the confusion on her face. "This might have been random but I doubt it. The human police can't help with otherworld matters."

"What about Kent?" She didn't want anything to happen to him.

Gaze on the rearview mirror as he backed out the space, Ben answered, "He'll be behind us as soon as he retrieves what he left."

Chrissy puzzled through this and froze. *What he left.* Kent had said he tied up one of the assailants. Would he turn the person over to the police and join them after?

Otherworld matter implied a human wasn't responsible. Chrissy noticed the white knuckled grip Ben had on the steering wheel.

Instead of taking her back to work, Ben encouraged Chrissy to call out for the remainder of the day. When she sought to protest, he hit her with an inarguable fact—someone else could get hurt in the crossfire if she continued to go in with this matter unresolved.

There had already been a bomb in her car and now the incident at the pizza shop. Throw in the home burglary and Chrissy didn't want anyone else involved in this mess. She called her boss, Avery, and told her she would be out sick for the week.

There was some grumbling because of her recent absences but Avery said she'd have someone cover her work. Ending the call, Chrissy's hands shook when she dropped her cell phone back in her purse. Her paycheck would suck but she'd deal with that later.

As they pulled into the hotel valet lane, Ben paused. "I'm going to get out first and we'll walk in together. If I tell you to run, head straight for the lobby and don't stop."

Chrissy jerked around in her seat. Her heart thumped. "What do you mean? What's happening?"

Ben ran a soothing hand down her arm. "Hey, hey. Easy. Just a precaution because Kent isn't covering us and I don't know if we were followed. I didn't see anyone but I won't take a chance with your life."

His touch eased some of her concern but Chrissy still didn't like the thought of him putting himself in danger for her. What if he got shot trying to defend her? She drew a deep breath and reached for calm.

There was none.

"We can run in together," she coaxed, hating the whine in her voice.

Ben shook his head. "Trust me."

She did. Oddly enough, Chrissy did trust him. She released a husky exhalation. "Alright."

He studied her for a second then leaned over and kissed her forehead. "I won't let anything happen to you."

Chrissy waited as he made his way to her side and opened the door. He grasped her at the waist and lifted her out. "Stay close."

Though she knew it wasn't the case, Chrissy felt as if every eye was on them. Ben hustled her into the lobby, tossing the keys to the uniformed young man who trotted over to move the car. They bypassed the crowd checking in at the front desk and went straight to the elevator.

When an elderly couple tried to get on with them, Ben blocked them with an arm up and hit the button for their floor. The doors closed on their disgruntled expressions.

While Chrissy was in the bathroom, Ben called Drake and told him about the incident at the pizza shop.

"I'm coming down," Drake announced.

It was Ben's job to protect *him* though as a warlock Drake did a damn good job of watching his own back. "It's not necessary. You're the target and coming here will give your enemy exactly what they want."

"Maybe that's what I need to do instead of letting them terrorize an innocent woman," Drake blasted in return.

Ben understood exactly how he felt. "No one wants to protect Chrissy more than me. But if you come, Toni will assist on following. Then we'll have both of them to contain."

Drake made a disgruntled sound. "If one more thing happens, I'm on the first flight out. Nothing you say will stop me. You do whatever you have to and keep her safe, Ben. Toni would be devastated if anything happens to Chrissy and so would I."

"Meet Taylor Lane," Kent interrupted as he burst through the door of the suite.

With one hand on the blonds' torn collar, Kent dragged a guy dressed in jeans and a tee shirt behind him. The door slammed shut from the powerful kick his brother aimed that way as he tossed the cowering man to the floor.

Handcuffs prevented the newcomer from catching his balance and he crashed onto his face. The corner of Kent's lips curved up in malicious pleasure.

Ben tensed. Was this the one after Chrissy?

“Is that Kent? What’s going on?” Drake barked from his end of the phone.

“We may have someone to question and put an end to this,” Ben answered absently. “I’ll call you back.”

“This is the guy who thought it would be fun to break a window at a shop while people were in there eating and relaxing,” Kent muttered, prowling closer.

Taylor Lane had overly long blond hair and brown eyes. Ben joined his brother to stand over the sniveling man. Taylor looked up, gaze going from Kent to Ben. Fear glinted in his eyes. “It was just a prank. Someone paid me to throw the brick as a joke.”

Believable. Except there was always more. Ben squatted until he was face to face with good old Taylor. Dried blood dotted his lip and the beginnings of a black eye darkened his left eye. Kent had obviously said a few things to Mr. Lane with his fists. “Who? Give me a name and contact.”

“R-R-Russell Billings,” Taylor stuttered as he pushed upright with his cuffed hands clasped between his parted legs.

Ben stilled. He knew that name.

“Russell, the wolf shifter,” Kent pressed.

“Y...y-yes.” Taylor cleared his throat. “He said the owner and he had a long standing joke and that he’d pay for the damages.”

Kent exchanged a look with Ben. Russell was a long time member in a wolf pack led by Dario Avanti. Dario had become alpha a few years ago by defeating the previous alpha who’d still been recovering from another challenge.

It was a shitty move but no one protested due to shifter protocol. Only the toughest got to rule. Unfortunately, ever since Dario took over as alpha, the pack’s reputation had suffered. He ran the wolves along parts of the east coast with cruelty and greed.

He'd drawn attention not just from the human authorities but paranorm ones as well. Sooner or later things would come to a head in the shifter community.

None of that explained what Avanti had against Drake. Ben would have to go back and look at recent dealings and see if there was a business connection he might have missed.

"Give us Russell's info and maybe we won't turn you over to the police," Ben demanded.

Not that Taylor would get away that easily. He planned to drop a specific clue for the local authorities. It wouldn't surprise Ben if Taylor had a history of doing bad things for money.

Taylor rattled off the number he'd used to contact Russell as well as the email from the confirmation when he'd received his payment for the job.

After a few more questions, Ben nodded at Kent that he was done. They'd let Taylor go running for now, set a man on him and see if they discovered anything else.

The bathroom door opened and Chrissy walked out. She stopped and stared. "Who is this?"

"No one you need bother with." Kent dragged Taylor to his feet and escorted him to the door. The cuffs were removed roughly but Taylor only glared.

Ben moved to place himself between Chrissy and the other man. She leaned around him anyway. Kent muttered something in Taylor's ear that caused him to pale right before Kent shoved him out the door and slammed it shut.

Chrissy huffed and pushed at Ben's back. He stepped aside now that the danger was gone.

"Is anyone going to explain what that was about?" she asked

Kent arched a brow and waved a hand at Ben. "My brother can explain."

Ben flipped him the middle finger. "That was the one responsible for the excitement at the pizza shop."

Chrissy jolted. “Him? But why? He can’t be tied into the Drake thing, right? I thought a business rival was behind this.”

Ben hated to disappoint her. “He was paid by a shifter named Dario, the alpha of an east coast wolf pack. He’s known for doing small shit like this but never outright to anyone of power like Drake.”

She tucked her hands under her arms. “Do you think he had something to do with the other stuff? My apartment and car?”

Hearing the concern in her voice raised Ben’s hackles. She shouldn’t have to deal with this. “We’re not sure. I plan to have a conversation with the alpha to find out.”

Excitement glittered in Chrissy’s eyes and a flush filled her cheeks. She dropped her arms and danced on the tip of her toes. “You’re going to talk to a real shifter? Wolf?”

The dramatic change in mood reminded Ben of her human status. The world he lived in was new to her. She didn’t understand the real danger posed in beings with above normal senses and strengths. To her, it was a magical fantasy world she’d only dreamed about.

“Alpha Dario is an out of control dangerous man with no restraint. As a shifter, this means he’s deadlier than many in our world. Don’t think this is like any show or book you may have seen or read about,” Ben warned.

And if the alpha was responsible for putting Chrissy’s life in jeopardy because of a stupid vendetta against Drake, well, Ben would show him what it was like to have the full attention of a Berserker turned on you.

Chapter 13

Chrissy shivered. The glow emanating from Ben's eyes was frightening to behold. He was right. TV and movies gave the world of paranorms a romantic haze while bypassing the true danger in such.

She cleared her throat. "Okay. So what do we do next?"

Kent jumped in to say, "I'm going to make a few calls. Right now, the focus is on maintaining your safety and keeping Drake from feeling the need to come down here."

Chrissy could see it. Toni would beg and plead to be here to support Chrissy. With everything going on no way in hell Drake would let her come alone. Both of them would descend on Florida like a bad nightmare.

"Stay in touch and call if you need me," Ben told his brother as Kent left.

Chrissy moved to the kitchenette set and sat down. So far, this day had been running full steam ahead. Ben drifted closer. "I don't want you to be scared, Chrissy. I know this is a lot to take in."

"That's an understatement."

"Just know that you have me. I'm not going anywhere."

It was the sweetest thing he could say to her. "I know."

"Do you also know I'm halfway to falling in love with you?"

The bottom dropped out of her world and Chrissy almost tipped out of the chair. No way, no way. Not ready. Except, her heart swelled in her chest from his words. Unable to deal with the emotions bubbling up, she put her hand over his mouth. "Ben, you can't, it's too soon."

He shook his head, dislodging her hand. "It's not too soon. I don't want to be with anyone else besides you, Chrissy. I don't need time to know that."

She choked back a sob. “It’s because you think I’m your mate.”

“Absolutely not. Being my mate is a plus. Wanting you and my feelings growing for you is separate from that.”

Having something she’d always wished for terrified her. Someone to love. A man who wanted her. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Humans are slower at seeing the truth I’ve noticed.”

Laughing, Chrissy smacked his chest. “I’ve been let down so many times. I told you relationships never seem to work out for me. I want to believe you mean it and not because of the baby.”

“I told you. The baby is a perk. If you weren’t my mate, I’d still have pursued you. We were never going to be over.”

She exhaled softly then leaned over and hugged him. Ben squeezed her back. They stayed like that until Chrissy cleared her throat and settled back in the chair. She really wasn’t good at this emotion thing. “Should I cancel my doctor’s appointment?”

Ben dropped to a squat in front of her and ran his hands over her thighs. “When is it?”

“This afternoon. In an hour actually. There was an opening so I picked the first one. I’m sure there are things I’m supposed to do, instructions on how to be pregnant or something.”

The chuckle Ben let out gave Chrissy goosebumps down her arms. Humor only enhanced his hottie appeal and the damn dimple was hard to ignore. He flicked his arm up and checked his watch. “We can go. I think it’s important to make sure everything is ok.”

Right. Because she was having a freaking baby. *Deep breath, deep breath.*

Gathering her purse, Chrissy stayed behind Ben as he contacted someone to cover their rear. Reinforcement guards

sent by Drake had apparently arrived. Another call went to Kent, informing him of the change.

They reached her doctor's office with a little time to spare. Fortunately, they had no problem with her early arrival and handed Chrissy a tablet with preset forms to fill out. Swallowing a wave of nausea, she made her way through the routine information plus a few more details.

Ben sat in the chair beside her, filling the waiting room with his dominant presence. Women stared blatantly and Chrissy had a mind to poke their eyes out. Instead, she tried to avoid what felt strongly like jealousy. Ben didn't belong to her and she didn't belong to him no matter what he said about being mates and falling for her.

Denial was a beast.

Halfway through, Chrissy leaned toward Ben and murmured, "There are a few medical questions about the father."

Ben glanced over, reached for the tablet and scanned it. Using his finger, he tapped away then handed it back. Flushing, Chrissy checked his answers for her own future reference but nothing stood out.

"Should we mention your...history?" she asked.

"Not now." He hesitated. "If you're okay with it, I'd like to have you see one of our own for that part."

Hmm. He was right. Seeing someone familiar with non-human pregnancies was probably a smart thing to do. "Sure."

Ben whipped his phone out and tapped away. Seconds later his phone beeped and he smiled at her. The sweet gesture sent shivers down her spine. His smiles were getting to her. "Done. We can go after here. Drake vouches for this doctor and it's only an hour drive away."

Chrissy stared in shock at how fast he'd accomplished that.

"Christine Jones."

She jolted in her seat and shot to her feet. "Here...I mean. That's me."

Rushing forward, Chrissy handed the front office associate her tablet and with Ben at her side, followed the young lady in blue scrubs to the back. They were led to a room with delicate scroll designs on the door panel.

Inside, the familiar sight of her doctor's smiling face sent waves of relief through Chrissy. She'd known Dr. Roshni Patel since her teen years and always felt comfortable with her.

Chrissy sat on the side of the paper covered bed while Ben stood in the corner, shoulders tense and eyes on the doctor as if she posed some great threat. Dr. Patel spared him a brief glance, but professionalism kept her focus on Chrissy.

A warm smile graced her smooth brown face as she spoke. "Well, Ms. Jones, according to my notes, we're confirming your pregnancy today?"

"Yes." Nervously knotting her fingers together, Chrissy added, "I took two at home tests and both said positive. There have been some other signs and...well, I believe I'm definitely having a baby."

Another smile from Dr. Patel accompanied by a loose chuckle. She took a seat on a rolling stool and slid across the floor, closer to Chrissy. She reached out and gripped one of Chrissy's dangling hands to offer a light squeeze. "I can confirm based on the sample you submitted when you arrived that you are indeed with child. It's still too early to listen to the heartbeat. We can, however, discuss next steps or any other questions you may have though."

Blowing out a shaky breath, Chrissy nodded. She wasn't surprised or shocked. With every passing hour she became more accepting of her condition. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do or what I shouldn't do."

Patting her hand before releasing it, Dr. Patel said, "Easy enough. I'm going to write you a script for vitamins and there are a few pamphlets you can take today. There are some other tests we need to run and blood work but that can be scheduled. I'm sure this is a lot but I believe you'll rise to the occasion, Chrissy. Remember, I'm here if you have any questions."

That meant a lot. She didn't have to sit quietly and spiral alone. "Thank you, Dr. Patel."

"Alright. I'll step out, give you a few moments and then we can conduct your exam and address any concerns before you go."

True to her word, the exam was over within moments. Chrissy could only think of a few questions then it was done. Ben remained quiet throughout the process, thankfully. In the end, she walked out with a handful of prescriptions and a stack of pregnancy booklets.

Throat tight, Chrissy got into the truck and stared out the window.

Ben didn't speak as he drove Chrissy to the otherworld doctor recommended by Drake's friend and former therapist, Brody Curran. Dr. Siobhan Silvas was a noted obstetric doctor who only saw otherworld clients. From the quick rundown Drake gave him, Ben had no worries outside Chrissy's current stillness.

Her quiet since the appointment with the human doctor left him at a loss. He didn't know what to do to improve her mood.

All of this was new to Ben—caring for someone other than his brother, worrying about a woman. A woman his feelings grew for by the day, no, by the hour. Chrissy's brightness and laughter were a large part of her appeal and the current lack of both was easily noticed.

"Should you call Toni? Let her know about the doctor's visit. I'm sure she'll be excited."

The skin around his collar heated. Did he sound as awkward as he felt? He only wanted to see her happy and glowing again. Needed it.

Chrissy turned toward him and perked up. "I should tell her. She wants to be kept up to date."

Ben relaxed the moment she took her phone out. Within moments a lively conversation ensued. The rest of the drive

went by with her talking nonstop interspersed with a return of her laughter.

Breathing out a sigh of relief, Ben telepathed his brother. *“Where are you? I’m almost at Siobhan Silvas’ office.”*

“I tracked Taylor and he went back to a rundown house in a neighborhood not far from Chrissy’s. I called Nox to check on the Dario angle since it’s his alpha we might be dealing with. He wasn’t aware of any involvement but offered to keep his eyes open.”

That was something at least but Dario didn’t trust many and his own brother wasn’t on that list.

“Keep me posted if anything changes.”

“You know I will, brother.”

Kent’s presence faded along with his voice. Ben saw his exit and changed lanes. Chrissy watched him with a bemused expression. Catching his questioning stare, she said, “You were far off in your own world.”

“Sorry,” he grunted. “Talking to Kent.”

Chrissy poked her tongue in her cheek. “Should I ask?”

Chuckling, Ben told her, “We can communicate telepathically.”

She turned in her seat toward him and leaned her back against the passenger door. “Really? Is this something all paranorms can do? Will our baby do it?”

Ben hadn’t thought about their child having the ability. More than likely not. “It’s not a universal skill. It depends on the race and their powers. I don’t think the baby will be able to. Kent and I discovered it by accident and think it’s more a byproduct of being twins than our Berserker heritage.”

“Huh.” She tapped a finger to her chin. “Are you sure a shifter baby is more trouble caused the thought of a baby who can read minds is slightly scary?”

She had no idea. Ben thought of the last shifter toddler he’d been around and laughed. “Trust me. You don’t want a

shifter baby.”

She grinned and crossed her legs. “I don’t know. Might be fun. Now that I’ve seen my doctor, I feel a little better. Maybe I can do this.”

Heart in his throat, Ben reached over and stroked her leg, revealed by the raised hem of her skirt. Seated beside him, Chrissy glowing and smiling again meant everything. Fucking beautiful in his eyes. “I know you can. I have no worries.”

She licked her lips and leaned forward. Desire exploded in the air between them. The sign for the doctor’s medical building on the left caught his eye. Ben whipped into the parking lot, shifted the truck into park then undid his seatbelt. Chrissy gaped at him but Ben reached across the seat and yanked her toward him.

Being around her and not touching or tasting her was driving him mad. Enough was enough. His mouth crashed onto hers with all the pent up attraction he’d been feeling and holding back.

Chrissy moaned into his mouth, her arms coming up around his neck and holding him close. As if he’d want to move away. Ben ran his hands up her back and pressed her into his chest.

She was so small so delicate and his child grew inside her. His baby. Ben pulled back sharply and eyed her passion swollen lips. Face flushed, her lashes flickered as she opened her eyes. “Ben?”

So much fear and doubt there. What he’d said earlier hadn’t really sunk in. He had to make her understand where he was in this. “This isn’t just a mate thing. I want *you*. Christine Jones. I’m going to keep saying it until you believe me.”

Shock then relief flashed over her expression. “O-okay.”

They got out of the truck and Ben kept a hand on Chrissy’s back as he walked her toward the white stucco building. He scanned the area and his sharp eyes caught the security measures in place. Motion activated cameras, guards in casual clothing patrolling the grounds. All of it met his approval.

Anyone Dario sent here would have a hard time sneaking up on them.

“What’s wrong? Chrissy asked.

“Nothing.” He held the glass door for her and waited until she entered to release the breath he’d subconsciously been holding.

The sunny interior was well lit and there was a digital display showing all of the medical offices, room and floor numbers. Chrissy eyed the list and smirked. “I have no idea who we’re seeing.”

That was his fault. He’d rushed her to see a doctor from his world without giving any details. “I’m sorry. Dr. Siobhan Silvas. A paranorm specialist for obstetrics.”

“It’s alright. Looks like we need to go to the fourth floor, suite four-one-three.”

On the elevator, Ben kept his attention on Chrissy. Tension flowed from her and filled the enclosed space. Her stress was impossible to ignore. So he didn’t. Stepping closer, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

Chrissy ran her hands up and down her arms while in his embrace. “I don’t know why I’m jittery all of a sudden again.”

He did. Everything was flying at her face all at once. “You’re still processing.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

Doubt covered the words and Ben let it rest. This was new to her. Threats and attacks. It was part of his world and one he’d long since grown accustomed. Now Chrissy was thrust into it and not in a good way. On top of that, she had to deal with an unplanned pregnancy. The blame for that rested solely on his shoulders.

As they neared suite four-one-three, the door opened. A tall blond stepped through, holding the hand of a delicate redhead with a round belly straining the red tee shirt she wore. As soon as the man saw Ben standing there, a low rumbling

growl rolled from his chest and he pushed the redhead back behind him.

Aggression filled the air, the scent so strong it burned Ben's nostrils. His instincts rose in reaction to the lion shifter's display.

"Carrick!" the redhead snapped but the man blocked the entire doorway now. His fingers flexed and razor sharp claws slid from his fingertips.

A fight with a shifter being protective of his pregnant mate wasn't something Ben would tempt on a good day. He held up his hands, using his body to gently bump Chrissy backward. "We're here for an appointment too. I'm no danger to your mate."

Golden brown eyes narrowed and another growl rattled forward. Chrissy gasped behind him, the scent of her fear adding a sour tinge to the air. The smell ignited Ben's anger. Dropping his hands, he braced his weight and snarled. "Move. Now, you're scaring *my* mate."

The lion's growl broke off abruptly and the menacing stare shifted to the left of Ben as if noticing Chrissy for the first time. Slim fingers grasped the bulging forearm and the redhead forced herself through the small space in the doorway, shoving and pushing the entire time until she popped free. There was no other way to describe how she appeared.

Slightly out of breath, she smiled at them and gestured at the bump beneath her shirt. "Sorry about this. Carrick's been a little on edge with the baby. I'm Evie."

Human. Evie was human and mated to a lion shifter. Ben accepted her apology with a nod. Chrissy moved to Ben's side despite his attempt to keep her away from the erratic lion. When she stepped forward to shake hands with Evie, Ben raised his arm and blocked her forward momentum.

Damned if he'd let her anywhere near a volatile shifter. They were hyper sensitive and protective around their pregnant mates.

Carrick snorted and retracted his claws. He swiped a hand over his blond waves and offered a sheepish grin. “The fault is mine. I apologize. My inner cat’s finding it hard to relax now that we’re in the last weeks to Evie’s due date.”

Chapter 14

A real shifter. Chrissy could only stare. Blond hair touching his collar just so, eyes an unusual shade of light brown or maybe gold. Tall, but not as broad as Ben. He nevertheless managed to give off a wave of danger. Or maybe her survival instincts were better than she knew.

A dirt streak marred the hem of the white tee shirt stretched across his chest. The blue jeans were faded at the knee and there was an interesting tear way too close to his inner thigh, flashing a glimpse of bronze skin underneath. Ben was the only man she wanted but Chrissy wasn't blind to the sight of someone more gorgeous than was natural.

When a feminine throat cleared, Chrissy jerked her gaze up. Heat burned its way up her neck and into her cheeks as she met twinkling blue eyes. The woman, Evie, winked. "Are you here to see Dr. Silvas?"

Before Chrissy could work past her embarrassment to answer, Carrick's nostrils flared. He cocked his head to the side. "She's with child. Early. His scent is light but present."

Surprise threw Chrissy for a loop and she blurted, "You can smell that? Is it because you're a shifter? What else can you tell? Is it a girl or boy?"

Carrick blinked and his stunned gaze moved to Ben. "I can tell she's human but is she not...aware of our world?"

Evie elbowed him sharply in the side but Carrick didn't flinch. Ben tugged Chrissy close. "My mate's aware but never been in close circles with those of the otherworld. She's new to this. Shifters in particular are fascinating to her."

Evie's gaze softened and she turned a wide smile on Chrissy. "I'm human too but was raised by a lion's pride. I don't have a lot of human friend's and I'd love to talk to someone in a human paranorm pairing like me."

Carrick stiffened and his eyes narrowed to slits but Chrissy already stepped forward and extended her hand. "I'm Chrissy and you have no idea how exciting this is. My best friend

married a warlock recently. She's new to this world too. We can all be friends."

This time Carrick's brows shot up and he stared at Chrissy. "Is your friend married to Drake Winston?"

"Yep." Of course everyone knew Drake. He stayed on the who's who list of top richest men each year.

Evie eyed Chrissy and a crafty look entered her blue eyes. "I know him. He's in talks to buy my cosmetic company but I'm still feeling out if it's a good move or not."

Cosmetic company?

"You and I may have a *lot* more to talk about," Evie added with a sly grin.

Chrissy finally took note of Evie's full ensemble. The red shirt she'd taken for a casual tee was designer, the white capris screamed expensive label and her silver heeled sandals definitely cost as much as the matching hand bag slung on her shoulder.

Another look at the man at her side and Chrissy's initial impression of him remained the same. His jeans and tee shirt were probably older than her. Not store bought vintage either. He'd actually owned his clothing that long.

Evie squeezed the hand she held then tugged Chrissy in for a hug. Chrissy responded instantly and returned the embrace. A solid thump tapped her midsection, causing her to pull back.

"Oh, wow."

After they separated, Evie rubbed her distended belly and laughed. "Sorry about that. Future rugby star here."

"Soccer," Carrick corrected, looping an arm around her shoulders with a proud smile.

"Here, let's exchange numbers." Evie pulled out her phone from her metallic silver bag and waited patiently.

"Sure." Chrissy whipped out her device and they swapped numbers.

Evie dropped her phone back in her bag. “I’m going to call you later. Probably today because I’m needy for human friendship so don’t judge me.”

Chrissy laughed, liking her already. When Evie leaned in again for another hug, Chrissy met her halfway and Evie murmured, “He’s the pride mechanic. Dresses like this every day and I don’t know how I got to be this lucky.”

A laugh burst free. Chrissy pulled back and said, “He’s the lucky one.”

Evie blushed. “Thank you.”

They left and Chrissy entered the doctor’s office feeling better than she had the entire ride over. Filling out the electronic forms for Dr. Silvas took no time and soon an older woman escorted them to a room in the back.

“I’m Ms. Pat.” She beamed as she spoke.

Chrissy hopped up on the bed, surprised when Ms. Pat wheeled a machine over. Wasn’t it too early to see the baby or hear the heartbeat? At least that’s what she got from her appointment with Dr. Patel.

Ben took a seat in the only available chair in the room. His large frame barely fit and the metal squealed in protest. His scowl loosened some of the tension building again in Chrissy’s chest.

“Should I undress,” she asked Ms. Pat.

“Not at all. Just lift your shirt and lay back on the bed. Nice and comfy. The doctor will be in shortly.”

Chrissy tugged up her shirt to beneath the bottom of her bra, heart drumming hard enough everyone in the room could probably hear.

Standing near the unknown machine, Ms. Pat flicked switches and input information on the keyboard. The door opened and a brown skinned Black woman strode in with a wide smile and a white lab coat over a navy blue dress. Her rich black hair was up in a bun and her dark eyes immediately settled on Chrissy.

“Christine Jones?” Her voice held husky undertones.

“Yes.”

Dr. Silvas strode toward her and stopped to the left of the bed. “I’m Dr. Silvas. It’s nice to meet you.”

Swallowing, Chrissy managed a rough, “Same.”

Dr. Silvas shifted a bit to stand next to the intimidating machine. Ms. Pat moved to the corner of the room. Gaze landing on Ben, Dr. Silvas arched a brow. “Who did you bring with you today?”

“Ben. He’s the father.”

A swift glance down at the tablet she held. “Hmm, father is listed as Berserker. Is that correct?”

“Yes.” Ben slid his chair closer to Chrissy’s side of the bed and she’d never been more thankful.

Dr. Silvas brown eyes narrowed. “A rarity. I’ve never treated a Berserker.”

Chrissy stilled. That wasn’t what she wanted to hear. “Will that be a problem?”

Dr. Silvas grabbed a tube of something Chrissy couldn’t see. “Not at all. I’m going to place some gel on your belly and see if we can get a peek inside. It’s been warmed.”

The clear gel the doctor used turned her stomach into a shiny mess. Grimacing, Chrissy shot a look at Ben. He reached out and gripped her hand and squeezed. A soft exhalation slipped free. Ben wouldn’t let anything happen to her. He’d made a promise and she believed him.

“Isn’t it too soon? I’m only about a month along from our rough estimate.”

Dr. Silvas tossed Chrissy a pleasant smile. “Paranorm pregnancies and births are different from humans. Paranorm and human hybrid births are even more different from those.”

Oh. Chrissy exchanged looks with Ben. He stared intently at the doctor and his lips were pinched tight. “What does that mean?”

Holding up a long wand, Dr. Silvas met his gaze. “It means there are many differences and this pregnancy can not be compared to your mate’s human expectations.”

Chrissy flinched and Ben stood up slowly. “I got your name from Drake Winston. Dr. Brody Curran recommended you to him. If you have an issue with humans let me know now and I will take her elsewhere.”

Dr. Silvas froze, the wand held aloft, inches from Chrissy’s flat stomach. Her throat bobbed as she swallowed. “You misunderstand. I don’t have a problem with humans. A large number of patients in my practice are human hybrid pregnancies. I assure you I am the best there is. I wanted to clarify because humans often come in with notions that don’t align when a paranorm baby is involved.”

It took another moment of tense silence before Ben sat back down. The doctor did a few more adjustments and a whooshing sound filled the room. With a smile, Dr. Silvas said, “That is our very strong heartbeat. This is typical since paranorm babies advance at a faster rate.”

Listening to the sound, tears welled. Chrissy firmed her lips and held back the relieved sob. She wasn’t sure what she’d expected but hearing a heartbeat made the idea of this pregnancy more real.

Next, the screen on the machine lit with a wavy image. She tipped her head to the side and looked at the yellowish flickering outline.

“Give me a moment,” Dr. Silvas muttered, staring intently at the screen.

Ben’s hand was a warm weight in Chrissy’s. The whooshing sound continued as she waited with bated breath.

“Hmmm.” The doctor moved the wand over Chrissy’s belly. “How far did you say you think you are?”

Something in that mysterious humming sound caused a bubble of concern but Chrissy ignored it. “One month, give or take.”

“I see.”

Ben leaned forward, his gaze locked on the screen as well. All Chrissy could make out was a gold and black squiggly blob that zoomed in and out with each click of a button.

Dr. Silvas sat the wand on the side. “Give me a moment.”

Ms. Pat moved forward and they talked in whispers.

“What’s wrong? Is it the baby?” Ben asked.

Dr. Silvas had a tablet in hand, her finger flying over the screen. “Do *not* get worried. I’m just looking into something and might have to call a colleague.”

Not worry? How was that possible when she was acting so mysterious?

Ms. Pat offered another smile. “We’re going to step out and make a call. We’ll be right back.”

They left together and the silence in the room was oppressive. Chest tight, Chrissy stared at the machine which had gone dark and wondered what could possibly have shown up.

Based on the expression on Ben’s face, he was as worried as she. Chrissy nibbled her bottom lip. “I know I’ve only known about this baby for a day but I’m scared, Ben.”

He leaned down and pressed his forehead to hers. “Don’t be. We’re fine and our baby is going to be fine.”

A sob worked its way up her throat. “I...what if...”

“Shh.” He used his free hand to press two fingers to her mouth, stopping her next words. “Let’s not borrow trouble. Dr. Silvas said not to worry, remember?”

Chrissy sniffed and blinked while looking at the white ceiling. She didn’t want anything to be wrong. The baby was here now and she didn’t know what she’d do if the doctor found something wrong at this early stage in the pregnancy.

The door opened, breaking into her thoughts. Dr. Silvas came right to them. “First, let me assure you the baby is fine. During the ultrasound I was concerned about the size and development of the baby.”

Was that good or bad?

“Oookaay,” Chrissy breathed out slowly.

“I talked with a specialist for otherworld pregnancies based in Sioux Falls. As a Fae, I thought Dr. Chu the best medical professional to have a quick consult with. I’ve never treated a Berserker birth and she’s the oldest paranorm I know in the medical field,” Dr. Silvas continued. “Dr. Chu hasn’t worked with a Berserker either but she had a few records and stories regarding a similar case centuries ago.

“Berserkers grow at a rapid pace in utero. We won’t know how that looks as a hybrid since your human DNA will undoubtedly have some impact on that. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were at twelve weeks not four. That’s where my concern came in.”

Scooting forward in his seat, Ben asked, “What does that mean for Chrissy? Is she in any danger carrying the baby?”

That was a concern Chrissy hadn’t had a chance to wrap her head around. Her hand drifted to her belly and hovered over the gel covered goo. “I’m not showing though. My human doctor didn’t note anything abnormal.”

Dr. Silvas sat in a chair and drew close to the side of the bed. She met Chrissy’s gaze then Ben’s. Her tone was very serious as she explained to them. “Size wise the baby would appear on track if she didn’t use a 3D machine. The equipment I have is far more complex because of the patients I treat and like I mentioned, the development stage of the baby is beyond where it would be based on your gestation timeline.

“The size is small for now but from what Dr. Chu explained that could change by the week, even the day thus my concern.”

Sweat broke out on Chrissy forehead. *By the day?* “How long would the pregnancy last at that rate of growth? Would it hurt the baby?”

Reaching out, Dr. Silvas touched her shoulder and squeezed. “I don’t believe so. It may mean we have to change the timeline and due date which is why I’m going to want to

keep a close eye on you and do frequent ultrasounds to help us track the growth.”

Chapter 15

The doctor's explanation sent bolts of terror through Ben. His heart lurched and lodged in his throat. A rapidly growing baby didn't seem safe for Chrissy. He'd just found his mate. Having something happen to her this early seemed like a cruel twist of fate. He couldn't lose her.

"So, I'd like to set you up with weekly visits. Will that be alright?" Dr. Silvas said.

"Yes."

Chrissy spoke at the same time as he did. Ben glanced down at her worried face and let her hand go to stroke his fingers through her hair. She needed him. His support.

"Good." Dr. Silvas stood, her smile bright and firmly back in place. "Trust that I'll do my best to take good care of you and your coming little one. Would you like to know the sex?"

Ben stilled. Was that possible already? Then again, she'd already told them due to his genetics the baby was developing at a rapid rate. He turned to Chrissy, leaving the choice up to her.

Though her smile quivered at the corners, she nodded. "Yes, please."

"A girl. Congratulations to both of you." Dr. Silvas handed Chrissy a stack of paper towels to clean the gel from her stomach. She shook Ben's hand and left them alone.

Ben helped Chrissy sit upright. She tossed the used towels in the trash and tugged her shirt down. They stopped at the front desk to schedule the weekly appointments then walked outside into the bright sunshine, hand in hand.

Fear played like a loud drum at the back of his mind. Ben couldn't let her hand go. His gaze kept dropping to her shirt covered belly. There was no one to talk to about a Berserker baby. How had his parents done this and during a time when modern medicine didn't exist? Twins no less.

“Do you think I should cancel my appointments with Dr. Patel? After hearing what Dr. Silvas said, it seems like I should stick with someone in your world for the health of the baby.”

Helping her into his truck, Ben paused, standing between the partially opened door. “What do you want to do? You can see both if it makes you feel comfortable.”

Chrissy leaned her head back against the seat and sighed. “I think Dr. Silvas. For all I know, this baby could be born next weekend.”

Ben laughed outright and hurried around to the drivers’ side. “I don’t think she meant that soon.”

Then again, what did he know? He drove back to Jacksonville, stopping at a drive thru to grab them food which they ate in the car. Chrissy turned toward him suddenly. “We’re having a baby girl.”

The reminder sent another shaft of terror down his spine. Ben blinked at the stretch of road ahead. A girl. A daughter. Outwardly, he sought to retain his calm. “Yes. Are you happy?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m more stuck on having a baby. I thought I’d have nine months to adjust but now I could have a few weeks.” She laughed while digging through her purse. “I have to tell Toni.”

Listening to the murmur of her excited voice, Ben kept his eyes on the road. Surprisingly, there wasn’t much traffic at this time of day. There were only two dark SUV’s behind them and a small blue electric car ahead of them in the right lane.

They’d be back to the hotel shortly and Kent would be waiting. Next to him, Chrissy laughed and squealed. Ben smiled. For all her introverted ways, she was over the top when she and Toni got together. Or perhaps that was her way. He’d caught her hugging Drake once and his boss looked frozen, arms awkwardly held out before he’d patted her back hesitantly.

Ben's phone rang. Kent's name flashed on the dash. Activating the Bluetooth in his ear to keep from interrupting Chrissy, he answered, "What's up?"

"Good news," his brother said. "Drake had a conversation with Kale and it seems he had his own run in with Dario a while back."

"Really?"

Kale Serano was the only djinn living on this side of the veil. He was richer than Drake and ten times as ruthless. The cold bastard made Ben and Kent nervous in his presence. Dario was truly a fool if he'd had a run in with the powerful man.

"Apparently, they had a dispute about some property and Dario tried to control negotiations with Kale by threatening his wife."

Ben winced. Bad move. Very bad move. If there was one thing guaranteed to break Kale's icy façade, it was any hint of a threat to the woman he'd married. "I'm sure that didn't go over well."

Kent snorted. "Not at all. From what Kale gathered, Dario often lends himself and members of his pack out for dirty work. If we get to Dario, we get the name of the man pulling his strings."

Then Chrissy would be safe. Excellent. "Good work, brother. We'll be there in less than thirty."

"I'll be waiting. I'm already at the hotel and checked the suite. No one's been inside. The guards outside haven't reported any unusual disturbances."

"Thanks. Take care," Ben said

"Same."

As soon as the call ended, another number flashed on the screen. It was Nox. Maybe he was calling with news about his brother. "Talk to me, Nox."

"Ben...don't...can."

Noise and static crackled across the line. Brows drawn together, Ben tried to decipher his words. “I can’t hear you. It’s a bad connection.”

“Chrissy...my alpha...hit...be...ful.”

Stiffening, Ben glanced at Chrissy. Her concerned gaze was on him though she continued to talk on the phone. “Tell me again. I didn’t catch that.”

Suddenly Nox’s voice came through crystal clear. “Be careful. I just left a meeting and my brother sent—”

The call dropped midsentence. Ben hit redial and got a busy signal. He slapped the steering wheel. “Fuck!”

“What happened?” Chrissy had her phone in her lap obviously finished with her call to Toni.

Ben hated having to tell her bad news but forewarned was forearmed. “The call was from Nox. Something about a meeting with his brother and being careful.”

A frown creased her forehead. “His brother?”

“Dario Avanti is Nox’s brother.”

Sweet and handsome Nox, who’d been watching her, was related to the man after her? That was news to Chrissy. She didn’t recall Ben or anyone mentioning their connection before.

“Drake called to say the alpha is working for someone else. If we get a hold of Dario we can find out the person behind this,” Ben said.

Her hand slid to her flat stomach. She had a life to protect. “What should I do?”

“Kent’s meeting us back at the hotel. We’ll increase security around you and send some of our team to confront Dario if he’s at the main pack residence in New York. I just need you to stay calm.”

Despite danger surrounding her, Chrissy *was* calm. For the first time in this mess, she wasn’t worried or scared and that

was because of the man seated beside her. “Why is this wolf shifter so focused on Drake?”

Ben’s lips firmed and his brows drew together. “That’s what I’m gonna find out. As soon as we get to the hotel, I’ll start combing through all of Drake’s business dealings to search for the connection.”

He changed lanes, checked the rear view mirror. Chrissy glanced on her side to see what held his attention. Nothing to her untrained eye. Just the same two SUVs. She turned to Ben. “Maybe I can help. I don’t like being a bystander in all of this.”

She might not be a big baddie in the paranorm world but she had a brain and loved researching online. Ben tossed a grin in her direction. “I’ll let you look—”

He broke off what he was saying and yanked the steering wheel hard. Something slammed into the truck on her side. Chrissy screamed and braced a hand on the dashboard. The world spun around her, the road through the windshield a blur.

“Hold on, Chrissy,” Ben growled.

The truck rocketed forward. Tires squealed and the smell of something bitter battered at her nostrils. The seatbelt tightened in an unbearable way and Chrissy choked from the unexpected pressure across her chest. Fingers trembling, she reached up to ease the tension.

Dazed, she looked around. In the side mirror, the same two black SUV’s hovered at their rear. The front grill of one was smashed in while the other had smoke rising from beneath the hood. “B-Ben...?”

An engine revved, the view of the vehicles getting closer. Another lurch. They were rammed again. Chrissy jerked forward. Their truck spun and flew off the road onto the shoulder. Ben cursed and wrestled for control.

Gunfire joined the medley of sounds assaulting her ears. Gravel sprayed in an arc in the air. The windshield cracked, thin lines spreading rapidly. Chrissy raised an arm to protect her face.

“I need you now!” Ben yelled.

Chrissy had no idea who he was talking to. Everything tipped sideways. She caught a glimpse of Ben’s harsh cut features then her head slammed into the passenger window and her vision dimmed around the edges.

“Chrissy!”

Liquid dripped into her eyes and the arm she had up slammed onto the dash. Something wrenched the wrong way. Savage pain bit into her side followed by Ben’s roar of anger.

Suddenly they rocked to an abrupt halt.

Holy shit.

They’d crashed. Chrissy head bounced and everything went dark.

Chapter 16

Ben's breath came in jerky pants. He undid his seatbelt and reached for Chrissy's limp body. A twist of his hand and her seatbelt tore away. Blood streaked her face and she slumped forward the moment the restraint wasn't holding her in place. He caught her weight and gently eased her into his arms. Getting out of the truck was priority.

Ben climbed out and searched for the two vehicles that had rammed them over and over. Both were flipped and rested on the hoods. Smoke and flames shot straight up.

No. They didn't get to escape his wrath. Ben telepathically roared for his brother. "*Kent, I need you!*"

"On my way."

With Chrissy in his arms, Ben moved away from his truck and laid her down on the ground. His heart thundered in his chest as he ran his hands over her body, looking for broken bones or any other injuries besides the scrape on her temple.

When he'd first seen the wound, he'd feared she'd been shot. His jaw hardened. He was going to make the drivers in the other car pay.

Chrissy's eyes blinked open. "Ben, what happened?"

"We were run off the road. How are you feeling?"

"O-okay, I guess," she murmured, voice husky.

When she attempted to sit up, he pressed his hand back to her chest. "Stay down. I don't want you to move yet. I'm going to check on the ones in the trucks that attacked us. Do you think you'll be alright while I run over?"

Chrissy peered around his shoulder and flinched at the wreckage. "Yeah. I'm fine. Go help them."

She didn't look fine. She looked on the verge of tears.

"Alright." His brother was on his way and Kent would bring the security team. A quick kiss to her trembling lips and Ben stood, turning toward the burning vehicles.

Help was the last thing on his mind. He stalked forward, his gaze narrowed on the four men scrambling from the trucks. Two from each. They spotted him approaching and sheer terror flashed across their features. They should be scared. Ramming them off the road had sealed their fate. If anything had happened to Chrissy...

Ben's fists clenched. He wouldn't think about that.

Three of the four fled on foot but one stopped beside the smoldering truck and braced himself, legs in a widened stance. "I can explain!"

Ben continued to storm toward him and swung his fist. The blow connected despite the attempt to dodge. The man fell backward and scrambled to regain his footing. Ben punched him again, making sure he was down. Then he crouched to straddle his prone figure.

"Who are you?"

Punch.

"Who sent you?!"

Punch.

"What do you want?"

Punch.

"Alright! Alright! My name's Jerry." Jerry held up his arms to block Ben's next blow. "I'll tell you what you want to know."

Ben eased back but didn't move away. "Talk."

"The alpha from the Avanti pack asked my crew to do this job," Jerry babbled.

Ben kept his arm aloft, fist cocked at the ready. "More."

"H-he said the woman was trying to get away after stealing from the pack."

What the fuck? Ben lowered his arm. "What were your instructions?"

“Listen. This is just a job. Nothing we haven’t done before.”

“What was your job?!” Ben roared.

Jerry whimpered and tried to curl in on himself. “To scare her. That’s all.”

“You almost killed her,” Ben bit out, fighting the urge to punch Jerry one more time.

Jerry glared. “You were the one who pulled the wild driving maneuver.”

Was he actually blaming Ben for the wreck? Letting his fist fly, Ben aimed for Jerry’s jaw and knocked him out. Rising, he glanced around, searching for the others. They were gone.

Couldn’t have gone far. He could follow their trail and catch up to them in no time in his current amped Berserker state.

“Ben!”

He spun around. Shaking, Chrissy stood with one hand braced on the hood of his rental. He had a choice. Give chase after the other three or see to his mate.

“Don’t kill him,” she begged and wobbled a step in Ben’s direction.

He snarled. She shouldn’t be on her feet. Jerry forgotten, Ben moved to intercept her and pull Chrissy in close. He buried his face in her hair and ignored the scent of smoke and ash around him. Everything he cared about was right here in his arms. To think he could have lost her in a senseless accident was too much to contemplate.

A car sped by and screeched to a stop along the shoulder. The door swung open and Kent leaped from the vehicle. Chrissy stiffened but Ben kept his arms around her. Another car pulled up and he recognized the two guards tasked with their security.

Kent’s gaze locked on him, his voice reaching Ben seconds later. “*What the fuck, Ben? You threw off enough emotion to*

power a business complex. I couldn't get through to you."

Because Ben had been in a rage. More than the last time Chrissy had been in danger, if possible.

"Avanti sent men to scare Chrissy according to this bastard," Ben growled aloud, tipping his head at the man behind him.

Kent drew near and braced his hands on his hips. He looked at Chrissy. "How you doing?"

She poked his middle and Ben reluctantly let her go. It would take a long time before he erased the look on her face from his mind when he'd fought to keep from rolling the truck.

"I've been better," she managed with a weak chuckle.

Using his thumb, Ben carefully wiped the blood from her face. She winced and jerked away.

Chrissy's heart was settling into a reasonable rhythm. She'd watched Ben beat the man who'd crashed into them until he slumped to the ground. For a moment, she'd fear he intended to kill him. It had taken every ounce of strength she possessed to get to her feet and stop him.

The men who'd arrived with Kent joined them. Hard looking men in tee shirts and jeans. The guards Ben had referenced, she realized.

Kent offered her a smile. "One of the guards with me has medical training. Will you let him take a look at the scrape on your head?"

She nodded. Chrissy felt fine other than being shook up from the crash. Ben drifted to the side, eyes on her while he spoke with Kent.

"I'm Donovan and my partner is Ross," the man slapping on rubber gloves from his back pocket said. There were tattoo sleeves running up both arms and a deep scar cutting through his left eyebrow into his hairline.

“Hey.” Her greeting was weaker than normal.

Chrissy didn't have much cheer and perk in her right now. If Ben hadn't been so quick to react, the accident would have been so much worse.

Hell, if she had been behind the wheel, they would have died. The thought caused her to shiver, drawing Ben's concerned look and an arch of the brow from Donovan as he dabbed at her temple.

“I'm fine,” she felt the need to say.

“At least it doesn't need stitches,” Donovan volunteered. Then mumbled under his breath, “Ben would *not* have like that.”

Chrissy huffed a laugh. Donovan met her gaze and winked. “I'm sorry we didn't get here sooner. Kent notified us when he couldn't get a hold of Ben after his call and we took off right away.”

“Don't worry about it. I appreciate any and all help to keep me safe.”

Donovan palpitated her left arm from shoulder to wrist then did her right. As soon as he touched it, Chrissy whimpered.

“Be careful, D,” Ben snapped.

“Got it.” Donovan grimaced and opened the shoulder pack he wore to retrieve a long strip of material. He looped it around Chrissy's wrist before wrapping it over her shoulder and tying it off. Once finished, Donovan stepped back to stand beside Ross.

Ben's gaze landed on the makeshift sling. Another dark glance past over his face before he updated them. “I was just telling my brother there were four men total. Three ran off but I was busy with this one and didn't go after them.”

In an instant, Donovan morphed back into the steely eyed guard. “We can track their scent. They reek like the one on the ground.”

Ben nodded. “Do it.”

Donovan and Ross put on a burst of speed and ran across the grassy area toward the buildings far off in the distance. Going that fast, there was only one thing they could be. “Shifters.”

Kent snort laughed and Ben rolled his eyes. Sirens blared in the background and flashing lights flickered.

“Human or paranorm?” Ben asked Kent.

“Paranorm. I notified them the moment I sensed your distress when you reached out.”

Ben moved toward Chrissy and cupped her shoulders, mindful of the sling Donovan had created. He smoothed a hand over her hair. “This has been one helluva day.”

Chrissy couldn’t help but laugh in return. “I’m starting to think you brought the trouble to my door. The explosions, car chases and crashes started after you arrived.”

Ben cringed and tugged her in close. “You have no idea how damn sorry hearing that makes me.”

Guilt immediately assailed her. She didn’t mean for him to take on any blame. That rested firmly with the person after Drake. Running her good hand up Ben’s back and leaning into his warmth, Chrissy whispered, “This isn’t your fault. I was joking.”

He’d been nothing but good to her since coming back. She was close to believing his feelings had nothing to do with the baby and maybe he did truly like her. She wasn’t brave enough to think about the other L word.

“I promised to take care of you and haven’t done a good job of it,” he muttered into the top of her head.

Chrissy pulled back so she could look into his eyes. “You’ve kept me alive. With my driving, I would have wrecked and took both of us out.”

Behind her, Kent chuckled. Chrissy tossed a glare over her shoulder only to have her arm twinge. Ben caught her wince.

“Is everyone okay?” someone shouted.

Chrissy glanced up. Members of the emergency crew trotted down the slope of the highway. A fire truck, ambulance and police car were parked along the shoulder.

“I have a feeling this is going to take a while,” she muttered.

Chapter 17

Dr. Randall, who treated her in the emergency room, put away his supplies and threw away his gloves. He stared at Chrissy and offered a word of caution. “You’re a very lucky woman. I recommend you take it easy over the next few days, Ms. Jones.”

“I will.” Chrissy had a mild sprain of her right wrist and a few bumps and bruises. There had been concern for the baby and a nurse made sure to have a tech come to see her. Chrissy got to listen to the heartbeat and almost cried hearing the strong thump thump.

The doctor sent a narrow eyed gaze toward Ben and Kent. The two refused to let Chrissy out of their sight. Ben, in particular, kept one hand on her at all times. Through the ambulance ride, the physical check-up and during the new sling and wrap being put on her arm.

Overhead, Dr. Randall was paged and left. A nurse said she’d be released shortly.

They were well into the evening and exhaustion beat at Chrissy’s senses. She just wanted to get out of this hospital room and back home. As time wore on, she found herself leaning her weight into Ben more and more.

How long did it take to check a person out? Ben brought her snacks and drinks from vending, forcing her to sit on the side of the bed when her feet started to hurt.

On a good note, the paranorm police took Jerry away after the doctors cleared him. He didn’t have anything more to add. Chrissy got to hear the story firsthand about Dario paying him to scare her since he yelled it as the officers took him away.

She shook her head. Causing someone to wreck a car on a highway was more than scaring her. Donovan and Ross had also arrived. The two guards stood with arms folded over their chest by the nearest exits in the hall. They were unable to catch the other men. Too many scents mingled in a close knit

setting once they hit the neighborhood beyond the expressway had muddied the trail.

“Chrissy!”

Kent closed his eyes on a sigh. Ben’s gaze immediately went to the couple coming in the room, the woman bursting through first. Chrissy turned as well and her heart leaped. She tore from Ben’s hold with a gleeful shout. “Toni!”

Her friend slammed into her full force, hugging tightly. They’d been parted a short time but it already felt like forever after living in the same complex for years. “I missed you, bestie.”

“Same.” Toni’s grip pressed on her tender arm and a whimper slipped free.

“She’s hurt, Antonia. Be careful,” Drake warned from behind them.

Toni eased up instantly, giving Chrissy a clear view of her husband. Chrissy smiled at the debonair warlock in his customary attire. The navy blue suit and pinstriped tie were so him. She wasn’t sure Drake would know how to dress casual if he tried.

“Are you alright? Is the baby fine? I thought Ben was watching over you.” Toni rattled the questions off in a flurry and aimed a glare at Ben on the last.

“I’m okay. Baby’s fine and Ben saved me.”

“You crashed!” Toni exclaimed, wiping back tendrils of black hair from her top knot.

Chrissy finally took in her friend’s appearance. Toni wore a blue tee shirt and black yoga pants with a pair of white canvas sneakers. On her finger, a large diamond glittered but other than that she was the same. Being married to a millionaire hadn’t changed her at all. Not that Chrissy thought it would.

“We did crash but you know if I was driving, we probably would have flipped over to the opposite end of the state.”

Toni burst into laughter. “True. Remember when you backed up into the dumpster and thought someone had moved it there on purpose?”

Chrissy giggled. “Let’s not bring that back up.”

Ben came over and greeted Drake and Toni. The look on Drake’s face grew intense. “Kent caught me up to speed. I also looked over the email you sent.”

Email? Chrissy wondered when Ben had time to send an email.

“Are you sure it’s him?” Drake continued. “I’d hate to make a move on someone and be wrong.”

“His name is the only one that makes sense. There’s also his connection to the wolf shifters.”

Toni shared a look with Chrissy easy enough to read. Neither of them had a clue of what was going on. Chrissy gripped Ben’s arm. “You know who sent Dario after me? You never said.”

“I wasn’t certain until Kent sent me the follow up to what I needed when we got here,” he explained.

Kent chimed in. “The pieces came together once Ben sent me the name of the head of Ori-Dar organization to look into. Haywood, the former head of the Oriso family, has been the picture of a professional businessman. He’s had a good relationship with Winston Enterprises in all their business dealings. It’s his son, Kieran, the current president of Ori-Dar that I decided to dig into further.”

“Wait, I met Kieran at one of those charity dinners we went to a few weeks ago,” Toni interrupted.

Drake slid his arms around Toni’s waist and tugged her in front of him. He nuzzled the side of her face. “I will tear Ori-Dar down and sell it piece by piece for what Kieran has done.”

Chrissy didn’t know Kieran or his dad but sensed Toni’s upset and that was enough for her. “Why would Kieran go after Drake if they work together?”

Ben answered for her. “Because Ori-Dar has been losing market shares over the last several years. Kieran wanted to form a partnership on a deal with Drake that would have pulled them into the black easily.”

Drake spoke up. “It wouldn’t have been good for Winston Enterprises so I turned the opportunity down. It’s not the first time I’ve turned things down. Even with Ori-Dar.”

“Except,” Ben said, “Kieran has stretched the company’s resources too thin with bad decisions and poor management. He’s not the long thinking, brilliant leader that his father was.”

“And the wolf shifters?” Chrissy wanted to know why she was on a wolf pack’s hit list.

“Kieran is married to Dario’s cousin. A distant member of the Avanti pack,” Kent filled in.

Well. There it was. Chrissy’s mind tried to wrap around this information. “Kieran’s wife has her cousin attacking me for what purpose?”

“To draw Drake out, of course, and it worked,” a new voice said.

Chrissy froze. The opened door of her hospital room closed with a snap. Ben shoved her behind his back but the slender man walking slowly toward them waved his gun side to side. “Ah ah. Move away from her Mr. Griffith.”

He wasn’t alone. There was a woman with short brown hair styled in a faux hawk at his side.

“Kieran, you’re making a big mistake,” Drake growled, straightening and easing Toni behind him.

Kieran had dark hair in a slick wave back from a prominent forehead. He wore a black suit, black shirt and black tie that screamed custom. His stormy gray eyes stayed on Drake but the gun never moved from Ben who continued to shield her. “You’re the one who made the mistake, Drake.”

Where were the guards?

As soon as the thought hit Chrissy, she knew something had to have happened for Donovan and Ross not to be racing

in here.

The corner of Drake's lips curled up but there was no humor in his violet colored eyes. He barely flicked a finger at Kieran and muttered a phrase. Chrissy bit back a cheer. Drake would wipe the floor with this sucker.

But nothing happened. Creases formed between Drake's brows. Kieran chuckled and rocked back on his heels and hiked a thumb at the silent woman. "I'm sure you know my new friend here."

"Emma?" Outrage filled Drake's tone.

Tears glimmered in Emma's eyes. "I had no choice."

"Oh, Emma," Toni said, sorrowfully.

Kieran chuckled. "If you want to fight back against a warlock, who better than a witch?"

Every nerve in Ben's body lit with urgency. His heart pounded an erratic rhythm and his chest squeezed tight. By aiming a gun at Chrissy, Kieran Orison had sealed his fate.

Ben's nature commanded he take out the threat and he wanted to answer the call eagerly. Muscles pulsed and stretched, his shirt straining with his enhanced form. Fists knotted, Ben stepped forward. Anything to get that fucking gun away from Chrissy. "Turn that away from her."

The demand echoed with the pulse of power in his voice. Rage and decades of fighting enabled him to channel all of that into a sound that struck terror into enemies and right now this man threatening Chrissy was his enemy.

"I don't think I will." Kieran gloated. "You see, Emma here erected a magical null field over this room. Basically, Drake is powerless."

Ben knew Emma. The witch had helped Drake save Toni and the two had formed a friendship of their own. If Kieran coerced Emma to help him, it could only mean he'd threatened her family in some way.

More specifically, her child. Elise loved getting into stuff and Ben recalled chasing her through a garden while her gleeful laughter rang out as Emma and Drake talked.

“Someone will notice and eventually come in. How do you expect to get away with this, Kieran?”

Kieran smirked at Drake. “Emma placed a keep away spell outside the door. Any time someone thinks or considers coming in here, they’ll convince themselves to go elsewhere.”

“And the guards?” Kent asked.

A cruel smile twisted Kieran’s lips. “Let’s say they decided to take a nap.”

Toni shook her head. “You think you’re so smart but you won’t get away with this. Attacking my friend, threatening us...”

“You know nothing,” Kieran sneered but that damn gun hadn’t veered from Chrissy on Ben’s left. “I’ve already gotten away with it. Drake’s going to sign the electronic contract on my phone giving Ori-Dar approval for the joint venture he previously declined and everything will be set. It’s known in the business world that he never backs away after committing.”

Toni snorted. “How long will that last? As soon as you leave, we’ll send the authorities after you.”

“That’s the brilliant part of bringing a witch with me. Emma’s going to throw a forgetful spell and none of you will remember anything that happened in here. Tomorrow will be as if none of this occurred.”

Drake appealed to Emma. “That’s a dangerous spell with far reaching consequences. If you get any part of it wrong, you could cause permanent brain damage to one of us. Not even as a warlock would I attempt it.”

Emma’s lips quivered. “I’ve studied it over and over. I can do it, Drake. Trust me. It will be as good as anything a djinn could throw.”

“Enough talk! Sign or I start shooting. First your wife’s lovely friend. Then your wife,” Kieran snapped, reaching into his pocket and tossing his phone toward Drake.

Drake caught it one handed and didn’t hesitate. He used his finger to scrawl his name over whatever was onscreen and threw the phone back. The vicious toss should have provided Ben with a distraction for him to leap toward Kieran but the other man must have expected the move.

The gun lifted the slightest, adjusting from Chrissy’s torso to her head. A kill shot.

“Don’t do it,” Kent warned. “We’ll get through this.”

Kieran snatched the phone from the air and smirked at Ben. “Now that we’ve cleared that up. Emma, do it.”

Emma nibbled her bottom lip and raised her hands palm outward. “Drake’s right. This is a dangerous spell, Kieran. There has to be another way.”

“Do it! Or I tell my man to shoot your husband and your kid!”

“I’m sorry, Drake,” Emma said. “It will all work out though. Trust me.”

Ben tried to appeal to her. “Emma, don’t. Kieran won’t stand by his word.”

Tears trickled down her cheeks as Emma flicked her fingers in their direction and murmured the words to a spell. A bolt of lightning struck Ben in the forehead and he had enough time to see his brother, Drake, Toni and Chrissy drop to the floor as if puppets with their strings cut.

His knees gave out next and he hit the floor.

Chapter 18

Chrissy woke in a daze and moaned. Her head throbbed. She rolled to the side and cried out when her weight pressed on her sprained arm. Bad idea. Flopping down, she took a second to catch her breath.

“Chrissy.”

Toni’s voice came from her left. Chrissy turned her head carefully. Her friend leaned against the wall, pale and shaking. Drake was on his knees beside her, one hand pressed to his head.

“What happened?” Chrissy asked as she managed to sit up and glanced around. Ben lay flat on his front, dark hair covering his face. She frantically crawled across the floor and shook his shoulders. “Ben!”

When she didn’t get a reaction, Chrissy feared the worst. A wide chasm cracked open in her chest. He couldn’t be dead. She smoothed his hair back with trembling fingers and his face came into view, lids fluttering.

“He’s coming around. Give him a sec,” a familiar voice rasped. Kent came toward her on unsteady legs. He dropped down beside her and eased his brother onto his back. “The dark cloud in his mind is clearing.”

Exhaling softly, Chrissy checked out the rest of the room. Emma sat in a chair with her arms draped between her legs and met her gaze. The other woman’s expression was drawn into strained lines and her eyes darkened. “I am *so* sorry. I had no choice but to put up the magic field and the stay away spell.”

“You did what you had to, Emma. We’re not mad at you,” Toni called out.

Drake heaved to his feet, wobbled before bracing his back against the wall. “Fuck! That wasn’t a forgetful spell. What did you use, Emma? I feel like I went several rounds in a boxing ring and lost.”

“It wasn’t me.” Emma grimaced. “Drake, I can’t apologize enough. Kieran sent shifters to snatch Garrett and Elise from her school. If I didn’t agree to go along with his plan, he said he’d kill them.”

A snarl twisted Drake’s lips and his brows drew low. “Why didn’t you come to me? You should have asked for help.”

“I did ask for help!” she yelled.

“Chrissy.” Ben shot upright, almost hitting Kent who jerked back just in time.

“Right here.” Chrissy dove into Ben’s lap and his arms clamped around her waist. Every bit of fear and worry from Kieran’s threat erupted and she locked her arms around Ben’s neck. “I was scared. So scared.”

He squeezed her tight, pressed kisses to the side of her face and made soothing sounds. “I know. It’s alright. When I saw the gun pointed at you, I wanted to kill him.”

“Will someone please tell me why I remember everything and where the hell is Kieran?” Drake demanded.

Chrissy wondered the same thing. She remembered Kieran coming in, using the woman to block Drake’s magic and forcing Drake to sign a contract. After that, lights out.

The door opened and a tall dark-haired man wearing a gray suit and crisp black shirt unbuttoned at the collar entered. His gold gaze glittered like coins as he scanned the room. “I believe I can answer that, Drake.”

Emma jumped to her feet and clasped her hands together. Hope gleamed in her eyes. “Kale, is Garrett...”

“Safe. He and Elise are at your home in Virginia with Jadon to guard them. I assure you no one will get by Jadon,” Kale said.

That voice. Pure power and magnetic energy pulsed with each word he spoke. Chrissy huddled a little closer to Ben.

“Tone it down, Serano. You’re making my mate nervous.”

Kale Serano, the billionaire djinn, shifted his attention toward them. He eyed her from the top of her hair and down, paused on the sling she wore, then lifted his gaze back to meet her eyes. "I'm sorry."

Energy crackled in the air.

Holy. Shit. Chrissy clenched her fingers on Ben's tee shirt.

Kale's nostrils flared as he drew a deep breath and exhaled. Long lashes flickered over those eerie eyes. "You are with child."

Chrissy preferred not to answer but found herself stuttering out a reply as if compelled to speak. "Um. Y-yeah."

He inclined his head. "I didn't mean to frighten you, Ms. Jones."

Whoa. He knew her. She wasn't sure what was worse. Almost being mind wiped or having the most powerful man on the planet knowing who she was.

"Where is Kieran, Kale?" Color had returned to Drake's face.

His jacket was ruffled, shirt tails not quite tucked in his pants and his blond waves disheveled. Chrissy had never seen him look less than composed.

The djinn waved his hand to the side and a six foot glass box appeared. The large cube hovered in the air next to the bed and Emma. Toni let out a startled squeak.

Inside, a bedraggled Kieran banged on the walls and screamed. There was a darkening bruise on one cheek and a rip in his shirt.

Chrissy's lip reading skills weren't great but she was fairly certain he shouted obscenities. Fortunately for them, they couldn't hear a single word.

"Oh yes, Kieran," Kale said, walking toward the glass box. He drew to a stop and tapped a finger on one of the walls.

Kieran stopped banging and glared at the djinn. Chrissy imagined smoke coming from his ears. She knew it was wrong

but part of her was gleeful to see him trapped. This was the man responsible for sending attackers after her.

Kale didn't take his gaze off the other man as he continued. "Kieran has been very naughty. Wanting a forgetful spell which was created for the use of a djinn only. Blackmailing people I know. Kidnapping the husband and child of a woman I consider a respected ally. I can't allow that to go unpunished."

No one spoke, just quietly watched the tableau unfold. Ben helped Chrissy to her feet and Kent crowded her on the opposite side. She was grateful for their protection.

Emma stepped forward, shot a dark look at Kieran and faced Kale again. "I'll owe you a favor if you send me to Garrett and Elise right now"

Pleasure suffused Kale's face and his smile broadened. "Done."

He snapped his fingers and Emma vanished. Just poofed away. Chrissy looked at Toni and found her friend watching her with the same shocked eyes. Hearing about the djinn's powers was a lot different than witnessing it in person.

Ben must have felt her shiver and wrapped an arm around her shoulder, tugging her in close to his side.

"Where are Donovan and Ross?" Kent asked.

Another snap from Kale and the two men appeared in the room.

"What the fuck?" Ross gasped.

Donovan stumbled forward before regaining his balance and jerked his gaze around the hospital room. "What's going on?"

"That's what we're waiting to find out," Drake countered.

Circling the hovering glass container, Kale absently filled in the blanks. "Emma only had time to call me after Kieran snatched her family. She explained what he planned and asked for my help. The spell I gave her is a tweak on the one Kieran

actually wanted her to use but as a non-magic practitioner, he didn't recognize the difference."

"It packed a punch that's for sure," Ben muttered.

Kale looked up. "The headache will fade. Better to still have your brain in one piece."

Chrissy winced. She definitely preferred to have her brain in one piece. "How did Kieran get by Donovan and Ross?"

"Bastard had the witch knock us out before we could react," Donovan grumbled. "They stepped off the elevator and she threw out a spell as fast as any I'd seen Drake do."

Expecting Drake to be offended, Chrissy was surprised when he chuckled. "Emma's a combat witch. I'm not surprised."

"If there's nothing else, Drake, I'm going to take our friend with me and remind him why he should be careful of who he hurts."

Kale didn't wait for confirmation from anyone in the room. He inclined his head toward Drake and snapped his fingers. The glass box containing Kieran disappeared along with the djinn.

Silence remained until Chrissy couldn't hold it in any more. "Am I the only one blown away by that?"

Toni snickered. "Kale has that impact on those he meets. His wife is lovely though."

The Seranos were a private couple and lived in Maryland. They showed at public charity events but rarely stayed long. Kale's name had been linked to celebrities and superstars around the globe. His wife, a lesser known woman, was an author who avoided the public eye when possible. Gossip blogs loved to use them under titles like couple goals, or dream relationship.

What must it be like to be married to a man with unfathomable power at his fingertips? Rich beyond belief and a well of never ending magic. Chrissy couldn't imagine.

“Are you really okay?” Ben asked, leaning over to speak to her.

“Yes.” Not all the way, but she would be. All Chrissy really wanted right now was rest.

The decision was made for them to return to Ben’s hotel room to regroup. A few explanations had to be made at the hospital but since Kieran’s arrival and attack had been contained to Chrissy’s room, most of the staff were unaware of what had taken place. Drake’s donation also helped a lot in soothing administration’s anger.

Chrissy sat on the sofa with Toni at her side, their heads pressed together as they chatted. Ben breathed a sigh of relief any time he remembered the weapon aimed at her.

“With Kieran out of the picture, the attacks on Chrissy should be over,” Kent said, joining him at the kitchen island with a beer in his hand.

Ben tipped his head to the side, considering things. “You don’t think Dario will keep coming for her?”

“Nah.” Kent pointed with the hand holding his beer at Drake. Their boss had been on the balcony with a phone to his ear for the last hour. “Not after Drake gets through. He’s reaching out to the shifter community and contacting every pride or pack he has a connection to. Dario is going to have his hands full and the Avanti pack won’t know what hit them by the time he’s done.”

True. Drake had been in a rage during the drive over. Dragging Emma and her family into this was the last straw.

Didn’t stop Ben from wanting to personally put his hands around Dario’s throat and squeezing the life from him. The one good thing to come from this was that the packs would probably force Dario to step down as alpha, clearing the way for someone else to lead the Avanti wolves. Any improvement would be better.

Chrissy pushed off the sofa and headed toward Ben. Kent smiled. “Guess that’s my cue to vanish.”

His brother moved to take the seat next to Toni. The two immediately began arguing. Ben didn't have to be close to hear. Toni was on a mission to set Kent up. If only she knew Kent already had a female. Somewhere.

"I guess it's over, huh," Chrissy asked.

Careful of the sling she wore, Ben tugged her close. She nestled into his chest and lifted her head up to keep their gazes locked. "If not already, it soon will be."

"Good. Then we can focus on this mate business of yours. I want dates. Plenty of dates and wooing."

Holding in a smirk, he asked, "Oh? What exactly is entailed in these dates?"

"You'll have to post on social media at least twice a week. Pics I can look at and decided if you're a safe bet or not," she answered promptly.

Grimacing, Ben rejected that immediately. "Won't happen. I *will* take you out, spend time with you and prove that as my fated mate we belong together."

"Done." She leaned up and kissed him.

Their tongues entwined and if not for the others in their hotel suite, he would have swept her off her feet and to the bedroom. He'd save that for later. They had all the time in the world together.

Epilogue

Three months later

“I’m in,” Chrissy panted from inside the kiddie pool set up in their bedroom.

Ben dabbed at the damp hair on her temple with the cloth he’d been provided. He hated to see her in pain. And what the fuck was a water birth and why had he agreed to it? “In with what?”

“The mating. I agree. With the baby coming, it makes no sense not to be mates,” she said.

Her brows furrowed in the next second and she leaned forward groaning as the labor pains increased.

“You’re doing great. A nice push. There. Good job,” Abbie, their doula, encouraged.

Chrissy loved Dr. Silvas and when she mentioned wanting to have the baby at home, the doctor referred them to Abigail Spencer, a lion shifter, from funny enough Carrick’s and Evie’s pride.

Abbie gestured at Ben. He scooted closer on his knees. One arm was braced behind Chrissy’s back to help hold her up. Chrissy made another awful sound and blew out her breath in the steady pants they’d practiced over the last month.

At the end of the contraction, Chrissy glared at Ben. “Did you hear me? I said I agree.”

Ben laughed. As if she’d had a choice. The last few months had come with lots of change. The dating he’d agreed to had been initially delayed as he frantically worked to clear up things for Drake. Kieran’s father was running the company again with Kieran being sent overseas to handle a small international branch.

Whatever Kale had done frightened him so bad he refused to live in the states and uprooted his wife with him. The Avanti pack was in turmoil. The shifter community called for Dario to

step down as alpha, but he'd vanished and no one had heard or seen him.

Nox did his best to keep things in the pack together. He'd challenged Russell to a fight and kicked the other wolf's ass, declaring him an outcast to all packs for his actions to assist Dario.

Ben bought a house in Maryland three months ago and promptly moved Chrissy in. Her tiny apartment had almost drove him crazy with its size and her aggravating neighbors. This new location put him in close proximity to a high frequency airport and shortened the distance for his travel to New York which made it easier to continue his work with Drake.

It helped that Chrissy found a college she loved in Maryland to apply for. They eagerly welcomed her to the staff in a role similar to the one she'd left in Jacksonville. He'd tried to get her to apply to schools in New York but she'd vetoed that suggestion immediately.

And vehemently. He smiled, remembering the argument which led to a pretty wild make up session. Being creative with her expanding belly had not hindered him at all.

"Why are you laughing?" Chrissy gasped. "I'm about to push your rapid growth baby out with only four months of prep and you find something funny?"

Ben quickly masked his expression. The sunny disposition Chrissy tended to exhibit had suffered...slightly over the very short pregnancy. "I didn't mean to laugh. It's only...you've been my mate since I claimed you that day in your apartment. You've been my mate since I bought our puppy Max. We've not been apart a single day since we moved here and got the house. We've been mated."

"Okay. Almost here. One more should do it," Abbie said, moving from Chrissy's side to the bottom of the kiddie pool.

"But I didn't agree," Chrissy wailed then cursed and whimpered.

She gripped the back of her legs and puffed out a series of heavy breaths then let out an aggressive yell.

Water splashed in the direction Ben refused to glance. He kept his gaze firmly on Chrissy's face. Abbie cheered and held up his daughter.

Their baby. She wiggled in Abbie's hands and made tiny whimpering sounds. Chrissy leaned back into his arm and moaned. "We did it, Ben."

He blinked away his tears and choked back the emotions boiling up. He pressed his head to the side of Chrissy's sweat soaked face. "No. You did it. You are amazing."

"It feels good to be mates now," she whispered.

Ben held in a snicker. "Thank you for accepting."

"Your welcome." She turned her face to kiss his cheek then stretched her arms out to demand. "My baby."

Abbie grinned after toweling off the newborn now wrapped in a pink blanket and came around to pass their daughter over. Tears streamed down Chrissy's face as she nuzzled the top of the baby's bald head. "We have a baby. Our baby. I can't believe it."

Ben leaned closer, inhaling their daughter's scent. "Are we sticking with the name we chose?"

"I think so. Welcome, Sierra Rose Griffith."

Ben touched the tiny fist in awe of the life they'd created. Abbie claimed she was full term but to him she still seemed so small. He faced Chrissy. "Are you going to say it now?"

He'd been telling her for weeks and already knew how she felt but this moment seemed the perfect time to hear the words.

Chrissy smiled, eyes glowing in a way he'd become accustomed. Everything she felt was there for him to see. "I love you, Ben."

"I knew you did."

"Ben!"

He laughed and wrapped his arms around Sierra and Chrissy. "I love you, my pretty girl."

Author's Note

Hello all!! Wild Lover is the third book in the Magical Lover series. Man, it's unbelievable how an idea can pop into your head. Chrissy is a great heroine and pairing her with Ben worked way better than I imagined.

Now I know some of you wanted a ménage with Ben, Kent and Chrissy but I have a tiny squick factor about brothers in bed together with a woman just in case things go bump in the night by accident. LOL.

The good part though is that I get to do a story for Kent and his absent fated mate. Soonish. Not sure when but definitely on the table.

As always thanks for taking the journey with me and I look forward to seeing you at the end of the next book.

Please post a review on the sites if you enjoyed the story to share feedback with other readers.

Thanks,

Michelle H.

Also by Michelle Howard

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About the Author

About the Author

Michelle Howard like many authors dreamed of writing since reading her first romance novel many years ago. She loves paranormal and contemporary romances and is a fan of the classic romances by Judith McNaught and Julie Garwood.

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