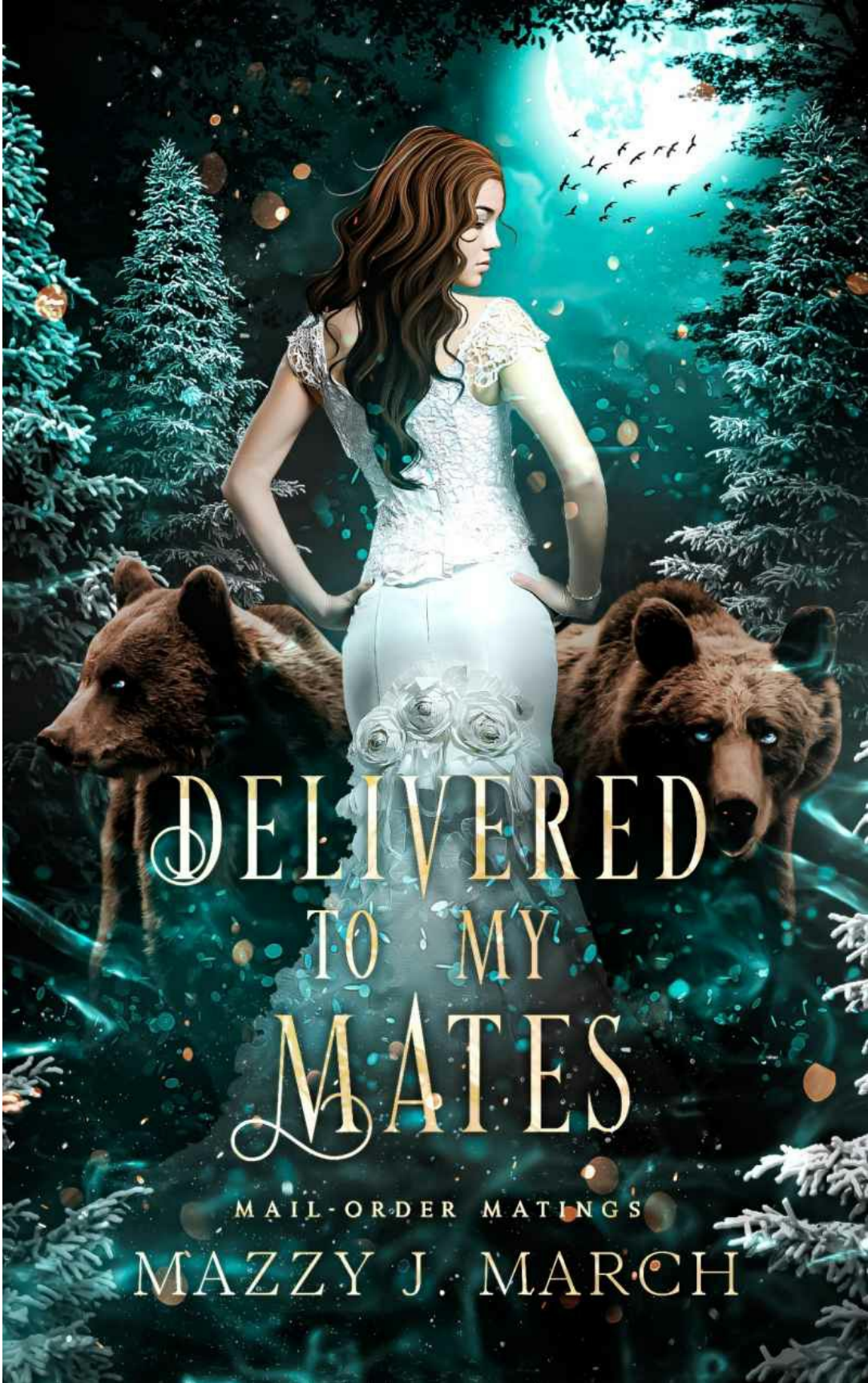


DELIVERED
TO MY
MATES

MAIL-ORDER MATINGS

MAZZY J. MARCH



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MAIL-ORDER MATINGS

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No one makes me submit—no one. That’s why I was banished from my old pack. A pack where good females were second-class citizens whose decisions are made for them. And any who disagreed were cast out.

Most would call me rogue but I prefer the term free. Of course, free comes with a price. I work two jobs, barely making ends meet. My wolf yearns for a pack, for a community. She aches with loneliness. We have no friends. And no time for any. Scraping by. Broken and crushed with rejection.

While working at the local dive, a lady left a card with the name of an app on it. The Mail-Order Matings app. I downloaded it for curiosity’s sake but by the time I was done, I had applied to be just that—a female to be ordered like cheesy fries.

Never thought someone would actually make an offer. They had no social media presence. Searching on the web had no results. They were shadows. Still, they promised me a good life, luxury, comfort, and most of all, freedom. I packed up before reading the terms. That may have been a mistake. Because when I got there, the two men who I had promised myself to weren’t men at all. They were bears. Shifters. Men who changed into monsters.

Everyone knew bear shifters were the worst. But I didn’t run. I could last ninety days. Then I’d run.

Delivered to Her Mates is Book 1 in the brand-new super-sweet with building heat Male-Order Matings Series. Delivered to Her Mates features a female wolf shifter who refused to allow her life to be decided for her then let herself

be matched up to bear shifters across the country, two bears who get more than they expected, an arranged mail-order mating, true love, and a found family. And of course, Mazzy promises a happy ever after. If you like true mates, fate taking a hand, and shifters surrendering to love, one-click Delivered to Her Mates today.

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Delivered to My Mates
Mail-Order Matings Book 1

By
Mazzy J. March

Chapter One

Evangeline

Happy Birthday to me.

I lingered in my bedroom well beyond my usual rising time, as if by doing so I could avoid what awaited me at the end of this benighted day. Every birthday until now, I'd awakened early, joined my mother and siblings at the breakfast table for cake and presents, and enjoyed the rest of the day doing whatever I wanted. Our pack encouraged youths to work hard, but at least they respected birthdays.

Respected...what a laugh. That respect ended on the day a female became an adult. Her eighteenth birthday when she transitioned from protected-if-overworked young person to naked female being fucked in front of the entire adult pack. Oh, I supposed the guys might not all enjoy it, after all, they weren't 100 percent assholes, but they also weren't doing it on their birthday. And they were older and presumably experienced.

Some of those who were taking a mate on her eighteenth birthday were *much* older, but that was not going to be the case for me. I wished I could be glad that I wasn't getting a wolf old enough to be my grandfather, but the one selected for me was far worse. An older one would probably slobber all over me during the ceremony, which might make me gag. *Would* make me gag. Might not even be able to do the deed, saving me a portion of the humiliation—actually no. One of my older cousins was mated to an elder who spent an hour trying to shove his wilted pecker into her, no less rape than if he'd succeeded, but when he announced that he refused to be her mate because she was so completely uninteresting to him, claiming it was her fault that he couldn't get hard, she ended up leaving the pack and hadn't been heard from

since.

Of course, those underage were not present for this ceremony, so I hadn't seen any of it, but neither was I entirely shielded from the pack gossip.

Two different versions of the story filtered down to the nearly adults awaiting their ceremony. The one told by an elder to a small group of seventeen-year-olds that attempted to make something terrifying and borderline rape sound romantic. But we also heard the other side of things in a less official manner—by eavesdropping or from those who chose to keep the lies to a minimum.

The only reason it wasn't rape, under pack law, was that we had a "choice." Unfortunately the alternative to showing up for the ceremony and signing the mating certificate was leaving the pack. At eighteen. With nowhere to go and no particular skills to survive on the outside. So, whether you refused your selected mate or he was unable to complete the mating, the female was cut loose and, according to those in charge, would likely starve to death in the human world. Or possibly be murdered because humans hated our kind and would surely kill the female in a matter of days. Brutally and without mercy just for the fun of autopsying the freak.

In my case, refusal was completely impossible. Not only was my future mate pack royalty, but by completing the act, I would ensure my widowed mother would never lack for anything. No pressure whatsoever.

The young matrons whose job it was to prepare me for my mating fluttered around, bathing and dressing me in the long, loose white dress, doing my hair and makeup, and generally making me ready for having all of that messed up during the ceremony. I had already been informed of my duties for the day by an elder female who told me to, "Show up, shut up, and do whatever your mate wants." Not exactly what we were told in the early

lecture but more what I expected. My helpers were not saying a lot beyond how pretty I looked and how once I got through today, I'd never have another similar experience. Their advice came down to, "Close your eyes and think of something else. This too shall pass."

Yeah. What a way to spend my birthday.

It would help if the pack royalty in question was someone I liked. I didn't know him well; he hadn't paid a lot of attention to me in the past, but I'd seen his general attitude to other people and was far less than impressed.

As I studied my reflection in the mirror and adjusted the crown of spring flowers on my head, I tried to tell myself that it was only a matter of hours. I could survive anything for a few hours, and every mated female I knew had done the same. Maybe it wasn't as bad as it sounded. Fated mates were overrated and, according to the alpha, fake. If you looked around our pack, you'd have to agree because I didn't know of one pair that found one another in that way.

"Evangeline? It's time." My mother stood in the doorway, dressed in her finest and pale as a ghost. "Are you ready, dear?"

"Will I ever be?" Sighing, I tore the crown off and tossed it on the floor. "Why pretend this is a happy occasion?"

She wrung her hands. "I wish I could stop it. I wish there were another choice." I took back what I said about fake fated mates. My parents had been the real thing, probably more by chance than anything, but until the day Dad died, they'd shown me what could be had. And what I never would experience.

"It's okay, Mom. We have to do what we have to do."

She took a tentative step inside then another, and closed the door behind her. "Don't do this for us. We'll get by. Your uncle will help us." Dad's brother. He'd always helped, true.

“We can’t ask him to take us on forever. And it’s not just for you guys. What if I didn’t? I wouldn’t know where to find another pack, even if I thought they might let me in. And the humans hate us. So, I’d end up dead either way.”

“Eva, I have to tell you—”

The door opened so sharply, it shoved her forward, and whatever she’d planned to say was gone. “They’re ready for you.” The second beta in charge stood aside for us to pass. “Hurry up.”

“Eva...”

I kissed my mother on the cheek and took her hand. “It’s all right, Mom. I know my duty. I will survive today and all the days to come. Somehow.”

Together, we walked down the hallway to the gathering hall where everyone of adult standing waited to watch my humiliation. I swore to myself that I wouldn’t give them a show. I’d stay stoic and show no emotion whatsoever, no matter what happened. If my mate thought he could conquer me—which was a popular theme, I’d been told—he’d find nothing there to vanquish. I’d keep my spirit, the real me, deep inside, leaving him nothing but my body to deal with. My limp, disinterested form.

The sound of chatter and people moving around greeted us at the doorway.

I entered the room, and my mother stepped aside and moved to a seat in the back row. If I could have, I’d have spared her this, but nobody over eighteen could miss these events without repercussions. The room was crowded, but my arrival had silenced all the noise. I could see every emotion displayed on the faces turned to watch me walk past down the center aisle. I’d not only left the flower crown trampled on the floor but the bouquet of flowers provided to me on the bathroom counter. I might have to show up and deal, but I did not plan to pretend I was celebrating this mating.

Most of the men looked eager, but a few, some I recognized as fathers of daughters around my age, displayed tension, sadness, maybe frustration. The women showed sadness, as well, but in many, I recognized underlying rage that matched my own. With each step, it became harder to maintain my calm and unfeeling mien.

And then I was face-to-face with him. Arch. The alpha's son and my mate for life. He wasn't bad looking, and I knew some of the girls were jealous, wishing he would have been chosen for them. I wished he had, too. Because there was nothing about him I wanted. He repulsed me, and I only hoped I wouldn't vomit when he mounted me.

When we stood face-to-face, his father had us sign the contract then waved him on. "Go ahead, son, and unwrap your package."

My outrage flared and spilled over, fists clenching at my sides. His package? Packages have no dignity, no autonomy, so perhaps it was appropriate. But it didn't make me want to claw my "mate's" face off any less. It just added his father to my hit list. I had almost no control right now, but I would make them pay.

But things happened fast then, and before I could respond further, my dress was torn from me, leaving me bare underneath. After all, why wear underwear that's just going to slow things down. I closed my eyes, pictured my favorite place in the woods, and waited for him to lay me down on the pile of quilts and claim me. The steps were clear and really the only thing that made it anything like a ceremony.

But when nothing happened, I opened my eyes to find him staring at me. "Ugh. You looked better with clothes hiding all that fat."

Fat? I had curves, but never had anyone called me fat. Still, I saw no advantage in replying. It just made me hopeful that his disgust with me would keep him from touching me too often. I made a mental note not to pass on

dessert ever again. I wasn't going to get truly overweight to suit him, but I for sure didn't want to lose any and make him like me more. Asshole.

He still hadn't touched me though.

"Turn around and get on your hands and knees. I don't want to look at your face while I take care of this."

Apparently, even I have limits.

Who knew?

My hand shot out in a slap across his jeering face. "No." I gave him a shove. "Why don't you get on your hands and knees like the pig you are."

What happened after that blurred, but he launched at me, fists flailing, and I tried to scramble away. I was still conscious, barely, when a couple of betas pulled him off me, telling him I wasn't worth it.

I didn't really care about their opinions as long as the punches and kicks stopped.

The alpha tore the mating contract in half and banished me, but it wasn't until I was being dragged out of the hall, naked and stunned, that things solidified again. My mother wept in her seat, and guilt suffused me. What had I done to her and my siblings? My uncle would help them, but they would have no status, barely get by.

Oh gods.

At least I'd be dead soon. It was no less than I deserved. I wondered how the humans would do the deed? I hoped it wouldn't be too painful. Maybe they'd at least make it quick.

Chapter Two

Adir

Two years later

Suits and ties were the most uncomfortable pieces of clothing ever to exist. They were stiff and incredibly unforgiving. The thing was, being uncomfortable had become my comfort, strangely. As I drove home, I blasted the music and took off my tie. My neck was thick, and the damned thing choked me. I had tried different ones over the years but in the end, the tie and my life were both nooses around my neck.

I loved my job. I did. Defending those who weren't able to defend themselves was an honor but, like all good jobs, it helped to go back to a home—not a house where every motion made an echo against the empty walls.

My best friend Byron and I made meals for two and, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't keep myself from gazing every once in a while at the empty seats that surrounded the dinner table.

“You need new brakes, man. I heard you at the stop sign two blocks away,” Byron said as I walked into the house, before I had the chance to shut the door.

“Shut up. I'm taking your car tomorrow. The dealer is picking up the truck and delivering a rental.”

Byron walked toward his office with a cup of coffee. The man was a complete and total addict. It was probably his fifth cup, and it was almost six in the afternoon. “What makes you think I'm not going somewhere tomorrow? I might have a meeting with my agent.”

“Bullshit. You meet with him over video call whatever. I'm the one who

takes actual meetings.”

Byron was in a hooded sweatshirt with our alma mater’s logo across the front. He’d been wearing that thing the day I met him. He had tossed a football and popped me in the nose. It bled everywhere. We discovered we were both fans of the same teams and were both shifters. Been friends ever since. “Yeah, well, this house was paid off by both of us, so kiss my ass.”

“It’s not that kind of friendship,” I hollered out while going to my room for a change of wardrobe before I made dinner. It was my night.

After a long, hot shower I donned a T-shirt and basketball shorts. I had taken some chicken thighs that morning from the freezer and intended to make...something. What that was, I hadn’t decided.

Pressing my fingers to my phone, I chose some rock music and put it on full blast. Byron always wrote with symphony music or some white-noise shit in his headphones and wouldn’t hear a word or a guitar chord. I decided on chicken teriyaki that I would cook up outside on our propane wok. It was minimal cleanup, and I fucking hate dishes.

With the rice cooker on and some broccoli steaming in those little bags, I ran out and grilled the chicken, adding the sauce to make layers and layers of flavor. When I went back inside, Byron was already popping the tops on two bottles of beer. A different brand for each of us, straight out of the freezer.

“I have an idea,” he said as I put the platter of chicken in the center of the table.

“Sounds expensive,” I joked.

“A little, but I think it’s worth it.”

I sighed and plated up rice and veggies, tucking the soy sauce and sesame oil under my arm. “We’re not getting an outdoor sauna.”

He chuckled. “No. I want to try this app.”

I shook my head while my stomach growled. “An app costs, what, two

bucks? Lots are free. Why do you need to talk to me about an app?"

Byron sat down. "Adir, it's an app that finds us a mate."

I scoffed. We had tried that before. Byron and I knew from early on in our friendship that we would share a mate. The two of us weren't romantically involved, but our animals knew our mate would be claimed by both of us. "It doesn't work with us. We've tried. Remember that fiasco?"

Fiasco was a bit much. We got passed the registration and realized the app was for one-on-one relationships only.

"Yeah. I do. But this one includes RHs. There's a special category and everything. Harems, reverse harems, all kinds of polyamorous relationships."

"Give me that." I put down my fork despite my bear's demanding more. My hunger for a mate was greater than any gnawing inside my stomach. Byron slid his phone across the table, and I barely caught it.

"This one? The MOM with the wolf?" The icon was teal and simply had the letters MOM across the front. I supposed that was a front and also the acronym. It worked. Either that or Byron was into some things I didn't want to know about.

"Yeah. Mail-Order Mate."

I journeyed through the app, seeing the spot for polyamorous people. "How much is it?" I asked.

"It's \$200 for the registration but, if you don't find your match within six months, they refund it. It's an extensive process, almost guaranteed to find us a mate."

I put the phone down. "I'm guessing you want to do it."

Byron sighed. He was usually a cheerful guy, but mate talk put an abrupt halt to his joy. "We're not getting younger, Adir. We're not. We've decided to share a mate but, in this world of clicking and swiping and online bullshit, we don't have a chance of finding our mate. But, now we do. I say we take it.

We have the money. We have the money a hundred times over.”

I blew out a breath. This was my sore spot. A mate. I’d pretty much given up. “I’ll think about it. Okay?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Okay.”

Chapter Three

Evangeline

I didn't die.

And since I hadn't received a single reply to the letters I'd sent to my mother in the past two years, I could only assume that she was not receiving them. I'd called, as well, but her number was disconnected. Sometimes I wondered what she'd been about to tell me when we were interrupted on that worst day in my life so far.

Had she known that those who left didn't die? That humans weren't waiting at the edge of the forest with pitchforks and machetes to tear us to shreds for being shifters. They didn't seem to even be aware that we were. When I was tossed naked out of the building, I'd found a packed bag in the high grass near the door. No note...probably in case someone found it. I'd almost have preferred that note, though, a few words of goodbye from someone who loved me enough to make sure I had what I needed. I had been wondering if I'd have to shift and live in the woods until I figured something else out.

But, that leather satchel made it possible for me to get from naked rejected mate to survivor after all these months. Especially because under the folded jeans and hoodies and sneakers was a wallet stuffed with cash. Two thousand dollars. It seemed like a lot to me because I'd never really dealt with money at all before, but once I entered the human world, the larger world in general, I learned how quickly the funds could dissipate.

I hiked to the highway and hitched a ride to the nearest town, where I'd been able to get a motel room for a few nights while I searched for a job and a place to live. The bag, no doubt packed by my mother and the funds

supplied by my uncle carried me over.

A sign in the window of the tiny corner drugstore drew me like a magnet on my second day in town. They were looking for a sales associate, whatever that was, so I trooped in and announced that I was their girl. Amazingly enough, they bought it and were willing to train me to do the job. They probably wondered at the gaps in my education that sometimes added up to my not knowing things that “everyone” knew, but they also appreciated my hard work and determination to learn.

Two years later, I generally smelled like Ben Gay and spilled iodine, and I was barely making ends meet, but I was getting by. I wanted to try to find some of the other women who had left the pack, like my cousin, but there never seemed to be time, and maybe I was just a little bit afraid that they hadn't been as lucky as me. I no longer believed humans were wanting to kill us, or that most even knew about us, but there were still so many dangers for an eighteen-year-old girl on her own with such a sheltered background. We'd learned reading and writing and basic math, but pack school was low on tech subjects and other things that human kids studied as a matter of course like history and geography.

I was allowed to use the computer at work when I wasn't busy, but for such a small place, we served the town and surrounding countryside, and there was almost always something to do. When I scraped up enough to buy a phone of my own, even though it was used and not fancy, it was a revelation, opening a world of information to me.

Despite my growing awareness that nobody was going to kill me anytime soon, it was awfully hard to put aside the years of warnings against humans and, in fact, any outsiders. Our pack didn't mingle much, if at all. So I'd grown up with all the same people in my world, family and friends and people I didn't have to explain myself to in any way. And now...I lived in a

whole different kind of place. I'd lost some weight but was still pretty curvy, healthy enough. Just so lonely. I had no friends. I was pretty much all right during the day, but when I got home at night to my apartment over the fabric store, I cried.

Every damn night.

One of those nights, after smiling at all the humans and selling about a thousand diapers and Band-Aids, I went home and heated up some chicken noodle soup from a big kettle I'd made on my day off. I curled up in my comfy chair with my tablet, planning to look at some more videos of places around the world I'd once not even known existed. It was educational and entertaining, but I was starting to wonder if I might not be able to find a wee bit of a shifter social life through the net.

Maybe find one of the women who'd left the pack? I wasn't interested in meeting strangers. If our pack was any indication, I might not like what I found.

I was entering different search criteria when a pop-up ad caught my attention.

Mail-Order Mating app... It was a shifter app, and my search must have triggered it. If you'd asked me two years ago if I wanted a mate, I'd have said no. But now...my wolf and I were both so lonely, I was willing to try anything. Almost.

Chapter Four

Byron

It wasn't anything out of the ordinary for me to stay up late, or into the wee hours of the morning, but this time it was for reasons other than my manuscript going to the editors. No matter what I tried, I couldn't get the idea of the app out of my head.

This was our chance to find our mate. I knew it.

Still, I didn't want to betray Adir's trust. We were opposite when it came to things like this. I jumped in heart first—wanting to breach the waters immediately.

Adir, he liked to think about things. Mull them over. Make a mental list of pros and cons and decide the most sensible option.

For me, sensible and logical things went out the door when it came to this subject. I craved and pined and drowned in need for someone I didn't even know. My bear wanted a mate, a companion, a friend to share my most intimate thoughts and other intimacies with as well.

Plus, I was getting older. My bear and I wanted a family. When I was younger, I wanted nothing to do with a family or a mate, thinking that both would tie me down and dictate my life.

Now I knew how hollow life could be without people to love and take care of and protect. That didn't necessarily mean children, but it most certainly meant a mate.

Yeah, I had my writing. It occupied most of my time to the point where I only worked, ate, and slept. Adir and I hit basketball games sometimes or went out to play pool, that sort of thing, but those nights always meant coming back to this empty house. I'd long outgrown one-night stands and

frivolous dating. They quelled my need for a moment, but I never woke up satisfied. I needed more.

And since my best friend and I knew we would share a mate, an instinct from the get-go, finding someone to meet those criteria was anything but easy.

This app was the answer.

Waiting for Adir to make a decision might take treasured moments away from what could be time with our mate.

Once again, I was going to dive in. It might be a mistake. I might eat my words and cause a rift between us.

But there was that chance. The chance to find her.

Ordering a mate by mail. Whoever invented this app was a genius. The name didn't exactly match the fact that we were ordering a mate by app, but I got the drift.

In the darkness, lit only by my desk lamp, I took the time to fill out the questionnaires for not only me but Adir as well. I chose pictures I thought were flattering and attractive and realized we didn't have many pictures together.

As opposed to me, Adir loved his job but hated what it did to him. I kind of loved the late nights. I never had to stop-go-stop in traffic. My lattes and espressos were made in my own kitchen, often without a shirt on at all hours of the day. There was no one to report to except my publisher, and he knew I always had at least four manuscripts going at one time.

I wrote about romance and love and finding the one who added joy to life and yet, I was lonely as I'd ever been. I hadn't had sex in...well, my dick knew how long. That much was for sure.

I'd poured all of my want into my writing.

No one knew my pen names. Hell, there were only a handful of people

who knew I wrote books for a living. Neighbors asked Adir if I was unemployed or if we were partners. He laughed it off. His stance on everything was privacy. If they weren't close enough to know us, they had no business asking. It wasn't like we were the kind of neighbors that had barbeques or went swimming in each other's pools.

He wasn't wrong about keeping our privacy, but it irked me that people thought I was some kind of slacker when, in fact, I made damned good money.

Once the questionnaire was finished and I'd filled out all of their forms and legalities, I sat back in my chair. The first step had been completed. Adir probably should've looked over the legal stuff, but I was doing this without him, without his permission.

If he didn't like it, well, we could always cancel the plan and forget it. The bucks I was spending was nothing if it meant a sliver of a chance to find our mate.

Once I paid by credit card, the real questions came in. They were detailed and very intimate. They were things I didn't want to answer on my own. Adir and I needed to discuss them. Still, I scrolled through, bracing myself for them.

All subjects were broached. Financial aspects. Physical things. They wanted the measurements of everything and I meant everything. In the intimacy sections, they wanted to know about kinks, positions, preferences, including whether or not we preferred a virgin.

Hell yeah, we did. It wasn't necessary for her to be, but my bear yearned to know that we would be the only ones who'd ever touched her—tasted her.

Still, I wanted to wait on those questions. We could register and have an account without completing everything.

Now to get Adir on board. He was extra grumpy about these things

which was serious, considering he was the grizzliest, grizzly bear I'd ever known.

Chapter Five

Evangeline

Mail-Order Mates app.

I studied the ad for a long time before downloading. I wanted to know more, and I'd have to take the next step to find out anything much. To get an account I'd need to pay, but I could download the app for free, and so I did.

My used phone was as crappy as the fact that it was several versions in the past would imply. So of course, it took a ridiculous time to get the app on my phone. For a while there, I was starting to think it wasn't going to work at all. A lot of the better or more complex apps just wouldn't work on this thing. I might be a lot more of a gamer if I had anything to play them on, but that wasn't going to happen in the near future. I like my job just fine. But it didn't pay enough for many extras. And I was saving what little I could for a rainy day.

When it finally downloaded and moved on to "install," I began to have hope that I could see what the app had to offer. Not that I was looking for a mate. Not after what I went through. I'd never let anyone tell me who to be with again.

My apartment was small and it came furnished, so I didn't have many possessions that would follow me if I ever left. But the old couch and coffee table were just right, comfy and broken in. The kitchenette had a mini refrigerator and a two-burner stovetop. The bathroom had everything I needed to keep clean and comfortable, as long as I didn't want to take a bath. But the shower was private, and nobody was going to come in and demand to see me naked.

I'd tried to tell myself that I was over the whole thing, that day when I

was almost mated. After all, shifters didn't care about nudity. No biggie at all. When we shifted, we generally took our clothes off, so that was not at all outside the norm. But what was being done to young women in the pack I no longer considered mine? That was nothing like shifter behavior. I didn't even know any other shifters but I knew that.

Or if it was the way they behaved, I'd never regret walking away. If I did find my cousin or one of the others, maybe they could help me to figure out what to do because living alone and having no friends was not ideal. Despite the patriarchy that caused the awful ceremonies and made females into objects, I had friends and family I loved. I wondered how my mother was doing but had no way to find out. If only I had the power to do something about the way things were, but how could I?

When the install of the app finally finished, I was directed to register if I wanted to see anything more. They weren't asking for money at this point at least, so I changed into my nightgown and crawled into bed with my phone to see what sorts of people were signed up for it.

There were quite a few, and their profiles were interesting to read. There were a bunch of acronyms that didn't mean anything to me, like when you look for an apartment and it says 2BR or something like that. Not that specifically, but when I found this place, I'd had no idea what a studio even was. I guess you don't know until you know, but it didn't matter. I wasn't planning to do anything about this. It was just something entertaining.

One guy was looking for an SBS...what the heck was that? But he himself was SBS. And a plumber. That I understood. Good job, too, if the bills my boss kept getting for repairs offered any indication.

A pair of women with a string of letters behind their name seemed to be friends who hoped to find two guys who were also friends. They were beautiful, and I wondered why they needed to use a dating service or

whatever this was. They wanted to “share,” and that sounded nice. I wished I had a friend who was looking for a mate at the same time as me. We could double date and have each other’s backs.

Each one was more interesting than the last and so specific. I scanned around the app looking for a key to all those letters but found none.

Apparently, I was the only one who didn’t know what they were.

I fell asleep wondering if SBS meant senior boy single or sweet big sister or...

Chapter Six

Evangeline

My dreams were filled with the images of the dating app people and what it might be like to go out with some of them. Considering I'd never been on a date in my life and the closest I came to dating was the hideous travesty of a failed mating, the dreams were quite realistic.

Of course, I'd heard the people who came in to work talking about all their adventures in the dating world. We had the best selection of makeup in town—not that that was saying much to listen to the complaints—so all the girls my age came in at some point to buy fake eyelashes and concealer and blush and a plethora of lip products. And while they played with the samples and talked about what kind of lashes they wanted, they also discussed dating.

It sure was different than what I grew up with. They got to go out with anyone who asked them or who they asked. As long as both of the parties agreed, it seemed their families didn't step in and decide if that was all right. Dating just didn't happen in my former pack. Ever, so far as I knew. So, I listened, and I learned. But I was still very nervous about the idea of committing myself to any male.

I was walking down the sidewalk outside a dreamscape version of the store with brighter colors and an animatronic bear in the window, but each time I passed, I was with a different person from the app. They weren't all even guys. Apparently my imagination was willing to embrace a broad variety of experiences. Just as one of my "dates" became a scarecrow, the chime of an incoming message woke me.

I couldn't say I was sorry, either, since the hand holding mine was prickly and scratching me.

Digging in the covers, I found my phone and brought it up to look at the screen. A notification from my new app. I was intrigued, but my alarm would be going off in just a couple of minutes, so I rolled out of bed and headed for the shower. I was still shaking off the effects of the dreams as I dressed and brewed a cup of coffee. When I was seated at my little table with my steaming cup, I brought up the notice and saw it was asking me to fill out a questionnaire. It was very detailed and extremely personal, but once I recognized that, I was already halfway through and intrigued.

I tried to be honest as best I could, even answering questions that didn't seem to relate to dating, like favorite color and season, but they were probably just related to compatibility or something. I glanced at the clock and saw I had a few minutes left, so I brewed a second cup and plowed on. A whole section on dating experience I just left blank. I wasn't about to share that ceremony, and I didn't believe it qualified anyway.

I still looked those questions over before typing N/A on line one of the section. I was probably the only person who ever had to type that for a dating app, but it was what it was. *Virgin Y/N* startled me, but I supposed it was all just part of the setup. Some people might not be comfortable with a woman with no experience, and they were trying to save me possible embarrassment. Most of those who signed up for a dating site probably had a lot of dating behind them, I reasoned. Not that the questions about what I liked in bed were any easier. I didn't know because I'd never been to bed with anyone. The virgin question should have resolved that. Or maybe some women who hadn't had intercourse did have an idea of what turned them on.

Once I'd filled in what I could about myself, they wanted to know what I looked for in a partner. That was even harder. I knew what I didn't want...I didn't want someone who would run my life. Make all my decisions for me. Treat me like property. So, I put down the opposites of all those things. And

in doing so, I learned some things that made me a bit proud.

I noted that I wanted a male who would respect my decisions. Encourage me to follow my dreams...once I figured out what they were. Would accept me as an equal in the relationship. Who would hold me when I was sad and cheer me on when I succeeded at something, even if it was small or might seem small to someone else.

There were places to indicate physical preferences, like whether the guy should be tall or short, dark haired or light, eye color, hairy or smooth—I thought that one was interesting. My answers went far beyond the check boxes and filled the additional notes sections as well. Apparently, I had opinions.

Who knew?

If I did date someone, I would have to feel confident that they would respect my independence. And that confidence was by no means a guarantee because the only male I'd ever trusted was my dad. Oh, and my little brothers. I'd been very worried about Mom and my sisters but my brothers, those sweet adorable boys, would be groomed to be like the adult males who were running the pack.

I set my phone down, lost again in worries for everyone back in the pack who I cared about and really wishing I had any way to find out what they were doing, if they were okay. I promised myself that when I got home, I'd make a real effort to find my cousin. I wasn't sure how, but those girls who came into the shop really did seem to be able to find anything and anyone online whether they wanted to be found or not. I could ask them for tips maybe?

Oh, next question. Related to distance. Would I be willing to move for the right partner. Sure, why not? It wasn't as if I had a perfect life here with my tiny apartment and minimum wage job. But it was time for work, so I

tucked my phone in my purse and grabbed my jacket.

Chapter Seven

Adir

An ad popped up on my screen showing a packaged getaway in Bermuda. The ocean was clear and yet blue. The sands, white. I could almost feel the hardness of the hot sand against the bottoms of my feet.

I needed a vacation.

Probably not. But I did need to get laid. It had been months since I picked up that cute waitress from the bar downtown. Too bad she was a ten on looks and a three in the sack. I'd never been so disappointed. It was like ordering a sugary lemonade and getting tepid milk. Wasn't her fault, though, and I never led her to believe anything was wrong. I was an asshole, but not to the point I'd make a female upset.

The thing was, no one was good anymore. Mostly because my bear roared against it. If he had his grizzly-ass way, I wouldn't mount anyone who wasn't my mate. I'd take off the suit, quit the job, and roam the country, hell, maybe the world, and hunt her down. He didn't think about the chances that she was already taken—mated—married—gods forbid, dead.

He roared inside me at the notion. Didn't appreciate my humanity stepping into his plans.

"You have a call, Mr. Lourde." Teresa said my name with a lilt. She always teetered on the edge of flirting but never quite crossed over. It wasn't just me, either. I'd overheard the other partners say that she got around. I didn't like to talk about females in that manner but I also wasn't blind. She shook that pencil-skirt-contained ass as much as possible, which was saying a lot, considering she only walked to my office, to the meeting room, and to the break room, which were all within twenty feet of my corner office.

“Who is it?” I barked with a little more force than necessary. I hadn’t been sleeping well. Truth was, I had never slept well in my life. My bear was always at the ready.

“It’s about the Matthews case.”

The call was over in two minutes, and I was being generous. Just another lawyer trying to bullshit about some settlement out of court when they knew better. My client was going before a jury. Period. They wanted to accuse him of some bogus crime with no evidence, I’d scrape the sidewalk with them.

Teresa appeared again, this time biting on her bottom lip. She was too obvious. I liked a little sass, a bit of a fight in my women.

Teresa opened up the can, spread it all out on the table, and put a neon sign up. Plus, I didn’t screw where I ate. “I’m going out for lunch today. With a friend. He wants steak. Can I bring you back anything?” She wafted that suspicious *he* in front of my face on a regular basis. He could have her.

“I’m good. Thank you. Enjoy.” I heard the dismissive tone in my own voice. I should be nice to her, or nicer, but I didn’t want to lure her in. She wasn’t getting in my pants, and I didn’t want to be in hers—or her skirt.

What I fucking wanted was to be next to my mate. Watching as she slipped her clothes off before a shower. Hearing the moans from her mouth as she ate my cooking. Feeding her. Buying her whatever girl shit she wanted. Wake up with a hard-on that could and would be taken care of by more than my own right hand.

Staring at her bouncing tits while she rode me. My hands gripping her hips, helping her with the rhythm.

She’d give me a little sass and a smart mouth while doing it.

My cock punched against my slate-gray work pants and I jumped at the ping of my phone in the drawer. No one texted or called me. If they wanted something, they called the office. I called Byron on the way home if I wanted

to go out for dinner or to see if he wanted something from the grocery.

Wasn't really a phone-duct-taped-to-my-face kind of guy.

"What?" I asked the phone as I reached to pluck it from the drawer. The notification was an email. My personal email.

Invitation. Byron wants you to join him on Mail-Order Mating.

Typical Byron, jumping into the ocean before checking for sharks. He'd always been this way. Joined the debate club because of a girl and then realized they talked about current events and spoke as fast as possible in the process. One meeting, and he was done.

After he'd bought all the matching shirts.

He'd told me about this app, but we concluded that we would think about it. Rather, I would think about it.

Byron had already made up his mind.

With a low growl, I clicked on the link. It took me to the app store where I downloaded the app and logged in. The email said we would share a login since we were two males searching for one female. A female who would take on two grizzlies.

Usually, if a female wanted a harem, it wasn't because she was searching for one. She would find one mate or one mate would find her and then another would show up, take her by surprise.

Females were always aggravated and complaining about one male, much less two growly beasts demanding to be fucked all the time.

Except me. My mate would be begging for it. I'd make damned sure she was satisfied.

Whoever she was.

Another bubble popped up on the screen. *Oh no. You didn't answer all the questions.*

Byron didn't answer all the questions? At least if he was going to go

ahead with this behind my back, he would do it right.

Before long, I was eyeball deep in questions. This damned thing went deep—literally balls deep. Questions about hygiene, rules, positions, financials, all of it. And the most poignant one of all.

Virgin or not.

Hell yeah, a virgin. By the time I was finished, Teresa was back from lunch, and I asked her to close my door. Not so I could work. So I could scroll.

Byron and I needed to talk.

Chapter Eight

Evangeline

I wasn't allowed to use my phone during my shift, and usually I didn't care. Who would I call? I had gotten it because it seemed like everyone had one and it was my only source of internet access as well. I didn't have the money to have internet plus cable TV plus all the streaming services that the rest of the town babbled on about while they were in the store. But cat videos and Karen shorts only held so much entertainment value. It was more background noise to keep me from feeling lonely than anything else.

But the day after I downloaded the Mail-Order Mates app, my phone became much more important to me. I was probably pathetic, since all it had done was enhance my loneliness. My only friends were semi-anonymous photographs on an app where I hadn't even fully committed to participating. Since I hadn't paid any money, I had to assume nobody would be able to contact me, even if they wanted to, but it didn't stop my imagination from flowing. Every face was someone who was looking for their special person.

They had all their preferences laid out, some of which were pretty out there. Who knew that feet were so popular among some guys. Or that they had such specific needs to be met from their partner in life. Maybe that's why so many really attractive, successful men did need to use a dating app. They needed a larger pool to draw from to find someone who liked to be tied up and tickled. Or whatever.

But there were many who I thought I could happily get to know. If I were planning to use the paid function and set up a date. In a small town like this, it seemed like most of the singles were already taken. The makeup counter visitors seemed to all be dating the same guys in almost a rotation,

from what I overheard.

If I did want to meet someone, not saying I did...I would probably have to use an app or some other online dating situation because none of the boys who those girls giggled over sounded remotely interesting to me, and I had not yet run across anyone who did.

While stocking the adult diaper shelf, my mind ran to one of the pictures I'd seen last night. He was twenty-four, six foot three, and a lawyer with his own practice in a smallish city across the country. He was looking for a woman who loved animals, walks on the beach, and wanted a big family.

I tried to put myself into the picture he painted. Apparently he lived right on the beach, making those walks easy to accomplish, and I pictured us strolling hand in hand with the ocean crashing in the background. In this scenario, I had just arrived, but it was love at first sight and we'd just finished a romantic seafood dinner.

"I can't believe you picked me out of all the possibilities on the app. What made you like me best?"

He grins down at me from his very tall height, squeezing my hand tighter. "The moment I saw your face, I knew you were the one for me."

"Really?" My heart filled at his words. "Because I knew, too!"

"Well you did move all the way across the country just to meet me." He grinned and reached into his pocket. "It's lucky I was ready for you." While I watched in giddy anticipation, he withdrew a box and opened it. It faced away from me, but I didn't need to see to guess the contents.

"Is that something for me?" I asked in a teasing tone that the makeup counter girls would be proud of.

"It might be." Then, right there in the sand, he dropped to one knee and held up the box. It held a gold ring with a diamond that anyone in any of the shows I'd been watching on my phone would have been thrilled with. "Will

you marry me?”

“I will.” The sun sank into the Pacific and sent reds and oranges and golden streaks into the sky as I held out my finger and watched him slide it on. Music played in the background, and a spattering of applause came from other beach strollers who I hadn’t even realized were there. It made sense, since my focus was entirely on the man of my dreams who was asking me to share his for the rest of our lives.

He stood up and gathered me into his arms, whispering to me that we’d always be happy, living here in our beach castle—it might as well be a castle—with our large brood of smart, beautiful, talented children and lots of friends to celebrate all their achievements. We would live the best of wolf and human, accepted by all.

“Excuse me?” The voice cut through the daydream of what it could mean to have the kind of marriage the humans did. A special proposal and a sparkly ring offered as a key to a glowing future. “Can you tell me which of these salves is better for heat rash? Every time I get the least bit sweaty, my”—she lowered her voice—“lady parts get all red and itchy.”

Well, if ever there was something to chase away the last of my pretty thoughts, this was it. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I think you need to talk to the pharmacist. I’ll go get him for you.”

Chapter Nine

Byron

I peeked out the blinds of my office to see the smoker still going. I'd hooked it up early in the afternoon to smoke a whole roast and, about an hour before Adir got home, I would throw in some veggies and let them cook along with it. Bread was in the oven, and I'd baked his favorite almond-lemon cake.

Any minute now, he would be barging in, pissed off, and give me the lecture, the same one he had many times, about jumping the gun.

I hated that assumption, for the record. I let him get away with it but the truth was, by the time I wanted to move on an issue, or in this case, a mate, I had wrung my brains dry of all pros and cons, finally coming to a decision.

But I saw where he would think that. Sometimes, my ideas were whacky at best.

How did I know what to expect? He had accepted the invitation to join the app.

Which was good and bad. Good because it was about time we were on the offensive about seeking a mate—bad because his bear wasn't the kindest or the most communicative. When he shifted, his bear growled and rumbled and stomped so hard the earth beneath us gave.

Downstairs, I heard the front door shut. Stomping up the stairs.

"I can't believe you. I'm coming in," he shouted from the other side of the door.

"Fine," I murmured, knowing his shifter hearing would be able to pick it up, no problem. "Let's get this over with so we can move on."

He came in and sat on the chair near the window, already undoing his tie.

He hated ties. He chose the wrong profession for hating ties, but he knew that going in. “We said we were going to discuss this.”

I shut my laptop and leaned back. “You didn’t have to accept the invitation.”

“You didn’t have to go behind my back and sign us up.”

“Adir, it’s time, don’t you think? Half of the neighborhood thinks I’m your secret boyfriend. The other thinks I’m some bum mooching off of you. We’re not going to find our mate here, cooped up, caged in, in our careers. That’s why these apps were made. For people like us. Especially those of us who don’t follow traditional scenarios.”

He grunted. “Maybe you’re right. It seems so technical. Like an exchange. No feelings. No dating. Just click and order. Like a couch.”

Clearing my throat, I got up and went to sit in the opposite chair. “Yes, it’s transactional.”

“That’s the word,” he snapped.

“You’re right. Some of this initial stuff seems robotic but, after that, she will be here. We will find out if we’re compatible, and we’ll have our mate. At least this way, we’re not meeting someone in a bar or mini golf only to run them off when they find out we want to share her. Whoever we pick, they will know what they are getting themselves into and we will know, well...” I snorted. “We’ll know who we’re getting into.”

He tugged his tie more and kicked off his shoes. He would pick them up and set them meticulously in his shoe rack later. If Adir was anything, it was neat. “I filled out the rest of the questionnaire.”

“No shit. They dug deep, huh?”

He nodded. “Yeah. But this way she’s not surprised. She knows. Who we are and what we expect. What we want.”

If Adir was trying to convince me, he was beating a dead horse. I knew

all the pros. “This is the chance. We could finally have our family. We could finally have a mate to call ours and fill this big house with laughter and cubs.”

He nodded. “And what if we don’t? What if no one wants us.” He choked on the words. Despite his alphahole attitude, sometimes, the man was a big softy. And even grizzlies got disappointed, especially when it came to mating.

“If no one wants us, then nothing changes, and I lost some money. It’s worth the shot.”

“Yeah. What else do we need to do?”

“I think take pictures and make the profile as complete as possible. But, right now, let’s have some dinner. No making decisions about mates with our bellies empty.”

While I finished making dinner, Adir showered and changed. A new plot came to my head right in the middle of seasoning the vegetables, so I washed up quickly and jotted it down on the paper on the fridge. Many of my best ideas came at the weirdest times.

Little did I know that Adir would come down more confused than ever. He had ideas of his own. He walked into the kitchen and paused. “What if she ends up liking only one of us?”

“I guess that’s something we need to talk about,” I said, putting the rolls in the oven.

“If she likes one of us, at least, my opinion is that it’s a no go. Our bears know. They will share a mate. If she doesn’t like both of us, we’re out.”

“I would agree with that. Besides, who wouldn’t like me?”

He snorted. “Jamie Winsbury.”

“Jamie Wins...I swear, Adir, if you don’t stop bringing her up...Why do you have to stir up old shit?” By the time I was done fussing, we were both

laughing.

“She played us hard,” he said, picking up the icing for the cake and taking over a job for me.

“She did.” Jamie Winsbury cheated on me with Adir and Adir with me. In the end, she didn’t want either of us, but Adir would swear to the grave that I was the problem. I was too poetic for her.

It was him, for the record. He was too brutish. She said so. In my ear. After she had left him. Again.

We were played so hard.

Chapter Ten

Evangeline

This app thing had become an obsession. I had stopped following the rules and was sneaking peaks at my phone whenever my boss was busy filling a prescription or consulting with a patient who didn't understand something. I was being nudged to add a photo and, despite being nervous about it, spent my whole afternoon off taking and rejecting selfies.

Who knew that would be so hard? None of them seemed right. The little town where I'd settled was not exactly scenic, but I was determined. I'd never spent a lot of time on primping, but if there was going to be a picture of me on the app for anyone to see, I wanted to look my best. Not that I was interested in finding someone, but just as I had been looking at all the pictures of everyone else, so would anyone else on the app be looking at me.

In the interest of fitting in, I spent the hours before I planned to take the picture, surveying the female side of the app. Sometimes I felt as if I'd dropped from another planet, with no idea how to belong in the wider world I'd landed in. And what I saw didn't bolster my confidence at all. They all sported wide smiles and makeup that could have been professionally applied. Their hair was styled in soft curls or complicated up-dos as if they were going to some kind of formal dance—something else I'd learned about by listening in to the conversations between the town girls when they were buying makeup at the store. Some wore it short and sassy, a few cascading to their waists or even longer. So many colors. Vivid, bright colors like purple or blue or green. Mine was long, too, but an ordinary dark brown.

I'd used my employee discount to buy some damaged makeup that the company had told us not to bother to return and after my shower, I wrapped

my hair in a towel and settled in front of the mirror to apply all the mysterious substances that seemed so easy for every other woman. It took a while, and several reapplications, before I looked halfway all right. Then I dried my hair and curled it, wishing I had time to color it. I thought I'd like to have it shades of purple and teal like one of the women on the site.

They were all wearing jewelry, too. Lots of piercings and even tattoos. And then there was plain-Jane me.

But finally, I looked in the mirror and decided I'd done everything I could. The liner made my eyes look nice, at least. And the gloss gave my lips shine and a hint of fullness. I didn't have any jewelry at all, but my sundress was decent, a deep-blue scoop neck that showed the top of my cleavage. I pulled my hair into a high ponytail and called it good enough. Then my phone and I went out on the town to find the best backdrop for my picture.

I walked along Main Street, looking for something that would make it appear I was somewhere having a great time. But the run-down storefronts offered little inspiration. In the end, I came right back to the pharmacy where I worked and posed in front of the window with all its antique drugstore paraphernalia. The business had been there for over a hundred years, and my boss was third generation, or maybe fourth. A lot of families in this town had been here that long or longer, a lot like a pack in a way.

I held the camera out and snapped a few selfies then stepped into the shade where I could see the screen better. The background was great but the rest, not so much. The rest being me. I was smiling so wide I looked like I was about to eat the camera, jaw gritted in place. I also had my eyes nearly closed from staring toward the sun.

How did all those other people do such a great job? Sure, some of them were probably professional models...a few. But I was convinced that if I tried hard enough, I might get a picture that at least looked as if I belonged there.

And, after too many attempts to count, a passing teenager who recognized me as the woman who rang up all her mascara stopped to help.

“What are you trying to do?” Her words startled me from my intense focus on not looking too intense. Or scary. “Profile pic?”

“How did you guess?” I slumped against the tree I’d been trying my latest shots in front of. “But I’m about to give up.”

“Can I see?” She held out her hand for my phone, and I passed it over. “Wow, this is an antique. But still...maybe...” She had the tip of her tongue stuck out of the corner of her mouth while she scanned through the photos. “Ohhhkay. You don’t want any of these anywhere.”

“Yeah, I sensed that. I’m Evangeline, by the way.”

“Right. I’ve seen your name tag. I’m Cara.” With a sigh, she handed my phone back. “Even if you knew what you were doing”—which she didn’t need to clarify I did not— “you’re never going to get a decent selfie with this thing. How about I take one of you with my phone and send it to you.”

“Really?” These girls had never been particularly friendly to me when shopping beyond the usual, “thanks,” and “have a good day,” sorts of comments. “That’s so nice of you.”

“Honestly, I’ve been watching you for a while and I couldn’t stand it anymore.” She smirked. “You looked like it was the first selfie you ever took.”

“Oh well. I suppose it probably did.”

“Can I guess what site it’s for?”

She was being so helpful I said, “Sure.”

“A dating site?”

I was so grateful she hadn’t been more specific in her guess. “You got it.”

“So smart. I should do that. I’m so tired of dating the same guys in this

town.”

She pulled my hair out of the ponytail and fluffed and fussed with it, pulled a lock over my shoulder. Then she posed me in dappled shade and tipped my face to catch the light just right. “Okay, hold just like that. Don’t move.” She moved back, stepping around me and catching different angles, checking the phone after each one and muttering to herself. Then, a smile broke over her face. “That’s it! Perfect. Look.”

I scooted over to get a peek and stumbled back, stunned. “That’s me?”
“Better, right?”

“I can never thank you enough.” It was so much better, I barely recognized myself. “I have to do something for you in return.”

“Just let me know if you get lucky so I can sign up, too.” She wasn’t a shifter, so that couldn’t happen, but I was grateful.

She sent me the pic and wandered off to do whatever the cool kids in this town did while I hurried home to load it up before it somehow disappeared.

Chapter Eleven

Adir

We made sure all of our Ts were crossed before making our profile officially public. Our real names were there. Our real faces, too. I'd read through the legal agreements and made sure everything was legit. Unbeknownst to Byron, in my office, I'd gone through more than that. I'd researched the owner of the app and made sure we weren't getting ourselves into a scheme. Gods knew there was catfishing, and internet phonies as deep as graves popped up everywhere. It was too late to recover the payment if I found a problem, but I didn't want our information out there if this all went awry.

Turned out, everything was on the up-and-up. The owner of the app was a shifter. He was young and ambitious and, instead of selling his idea, he had a large share in it. Enough he'd never have to work again.

Byron was at the gym working off some frustration and, when he got back, I would take a run. Not in shorts at a gym on a treadmill like him. I would change into my bear and traipse through the woods, maybe pull a buck down for dinner. It was deer season after all.

I wondered if there was someone out there for us. It entailed a whole lot more than just coming here and fucking us. She would be our mate, our wife, for all human intents and purposes. We would take care of her. Physically, emotionally, and financially. She could work if she wanted to, but she wouldn't have to.

Once she was plump with our cub, I hoped she wouldn't but wouldn't stand in her way, either.

We'd made this den for her, whoever she was. Put in silly things like a

huge walk-in closet, a bedroom-sized bathroom with one of those showers with fourteen-thousand showerheads. The kitchen had anything and everything a person could want to cook with and clean with for that matter.

Not that she would have to do any of it. Byron and I had a system, and there was no reason we wouldn't with her—for her.

Now to wait. That was the hardest part. Wait for someone to click on our profile. Be interested. Give two getting-older-by-the-minute grizzlies a chance.

In the short amount of time since finishing the questionnaires, I had become semi-obsessed with the app. Not only did I do a regular check-in of our profile, but I scrolled around, seeing what others were asking for. Some were ridiculous. One guy wanted six females, and he had listed the parameters on weight, height, cup size, and all of them had to be natural blondes.

Good luck, buddy.

Truth was, it gave me hope. We were just two grizzlies wanting a virgin. She could be blonde, or a redhead...

Truth be told, I wouldn't require the virgin part. It would be nice, and my bear would relish the thought of us being the only ones inside her but, if she was right, and we would know once we scented her, then it didn't matter.

Wait a damned minute. "Byron!" I called out since he had taken another cup of coffee to his office. I knew he had a deadline, but he had pushed it since we both were preoccupied with this app business.

"What? What's on fire?" he asked, faking shock. He came to the banister, slow as fuck, coffee in hand, and cocked one eyebrow. If there really was an emergency, I would've just handled it. Or he would smell blood.

"I can tell you one thing—this damned picture of me isn't fire. I look like

I'm posing for a driver's license while a bee's stinging my ass."

He ran a hand through his hair. "It was the only one I could find of you. It's not like I had pictures ready for a dating app."

A growl rose from my chest. "You found a decent one of yourself."

He rolled his eyes. "Go out back and take a selfie."

"That's going to look stupid. Who wants a mate who takes pictures of himself?"

His eyes darted down to his coffee. I knew my best friend. He was considering chucking the damned thing at me. He was a good shot, too. "I did. You can, too. Try not to look like you're angry at the entire world. Might help."

"I look angry all the time?" I knew I did. A guy at work, a fox shifter, called it the RGF. The Resting Grizzly Face. He said everyone was scared of me. Except Teresa. She wanted to jump my bones.

Grizzly scowl and all.

"Try to think about something you like while you're taking it. Salmon or the lake or pussy."

I almost choked on my whiskey. "Go back to writing. You're not helping."

"Gladly."

As soon as Byron was in his office, I did what I said I wouldn't. Outside, in the side yard, so Byron couldn't dare see what I was doing, I snapped a few pictures. Gods, I did look angry as fuck. I wasn't, but I sure as hell looked it. I relaxed my eyebrows and tried to think of something happy.

Byron's idea worked.

I would never tell him.

I updated the picture on the app and went back inside. Work called me but, as I looked in the direction of my home office, all I could do was avoid

it. There had to be more to life than working and running yourself ragged.
There had to be more.

Chapter Twelve

Evangeline

I sat against what should've been a headboard on my bed but instead was simply a wall with my pillows positioned in front of it. I had scrolled through videos until I got frustrated. So many videos on that damned site, but they kept showing me the same ones over and over.

I could go back to reading a book in a series I had grown to like but had decided to delay my gratification. Plus, the next one didn't come out for a week. We had a rack of books for sale at work and I was allowed to take any one I liked home as long as I didn't do anything to make it unsalable.

Tired but not yet sleepy, I got back on the damned app. It had become my guilty pleasure. My wolf was so lonely. She had crept into the deepest parts of me, solitary and crying out for someone to love her. Care for her.

And me? Yeah. If a stranger hugged me, I'd probably marry them. I was that starved for affection. We shifters thrived not only on community but on touch. The touch from a mate is supposed to rival all others. Calm us. Secure us. Anchor our souls in a way that no other could.

The only thing I had felt when my "mate" touched me was revolt and disgust.

When I opened the app, it told me there were new profiles to be seen. It seemed like every day there were new ones. Clearly, this app was becoming popular among shifters. Good for me. More choices.

I clicked on the RH section and was instantly drawn to a combined profile. Most of the RH section was filled with shifters who wanted to be in a reverse harem. This profile was two men, friends, it said, that wanted a female for their own pre-made harem.

Interesting.

Intrigued by the possibility, I tapped on their profile. They had separate pictures. Byron had long hair and boyish features. Adir had a haircut straight out of a magazine and a neatly trimmed beard. Light-brown eyes.

Damn, they were each gorgeous in their own way.

There had to be a catch.

No one was that good-looking and nice. At least, not in my limited experience. The alpha's heir was the furthest thing from kind, and he was hot as hell. These two had to like torture or had priors for domestic abuse. No one was perfect.

Including me.

Except when I clicked on the information portion of their profile, I found nothing to be afraid of. The app did background checks on behalf of the members. The people who were looking for someone had to pay a fee, and in that fee included criminal background checks. Everything was disclosed.

I had the free account but it let me see some limited information.

They were clearly well off. Byron was a writer. Adir was a lawyer. The background pictures of their home made it look like a mansion.

They wanted a virgin. I certainly checked off that desire.

Wait a damned minute. I looked to the side of the info sheet and saw that these two had already checked out *my* profile. I had no clue that I was able to see who had looked at my profile.

But these two had.

It was a small harem and, for me, that was better. Two males. It would take one hell of a female to handle more than that.

I didn't even know if I could handle one male. The alpha's son didn't think I could handle being a mate at all.

Fuck him. Or not, as the case was.

My wolf had gotten over it since we left. She went from heartbroken to remorseful, and now she was downright pissed and ready to move on. He didn't want us? Fuck him and that entire pack.

My eyes burned from the light of my phone as I scrolled, needing and wanting more information about these two. They said they would provide for the female. She could work or not. I would totally work. No way I would be 100 percent reliant on a male in my life. I found out the hard way that putting all my money on one color was the wrong plan.

They wanted a virgin.

They wanted the female to be ready to have children.

They preferred a curvy female.

Huh. That was me. I was a virgin. I was curvy. Not the way the alpha's son would've characterized my body, but there it was. I had hips, and I carried them with pride.

Oh, what the hell?

They had already checked me out.

After a long breath, I pressed my thumb over the wink button. *Hey, boys, I'm winking at you. Ball's in your court.*

Something settled with my wolf as I put the phone down for the night. I fell immediately asleep, but she didn't. She was awake inside me, thinking, plotting, hoping.

We needed a mate to be whole, as much as I hated to admit it.

Chapter Thirteen

Byron

There was nothing like my sheer relief when a project was done. A book was never done but there was a definite weight lifted as that polished draft was sent into editing.

Also, my brains hurt. They were mush. The only thing I wanted to do was to lie on the floor and not be writing or thinking about plots or questioning whether I made a character loveable enough.

Just nothingness.

I heard my phone ping, but now that I was on the floor, I ignored it. I did this sometimes; laid on the floor, under my desk, basking in the slowdown.

The ping was probably my editor giving me the time frame for when they would return it.

Honestly, I didn't give a shit at this point.

The story was out of my head. Of course, that made room for countless others to take its place, probably by the end of the day.

Another ping. I groaned but instantly the thought of the app came to mind. Shit! We might have a match. It wasn't that easy, of course. You didn't join one week and the next automatically have a mate. Plus, this was a new app. Or new to us, and probably new to others. There was no way.

I grabbed my phone and, of course, as phones do, it wouldn't open the app fast enough.

But when it did...

"Ad!" I yelled and ran down the stairs, nearly busting my ass since I was currently in my deadline outfit. Pajama pants, socks. Nothing else. I also wore some coffee down the front of my chest but a shower would clean that

up. I showered after deadlines, not before.

Huh. I stopped in my tracks. That might be something I needed to change when there was a female around.

“What?” Adir yelled from his office. He wasn’t like me. He didn’t put his headphones on and shut off the world when he worked. He could balance things like picking up the packages and the mail and go right back into his flow of work.

Me. No damned way. I had to be uninterrupted and caffeinated.

“Something happened.”

“What?” He came out of his office and despite the fact that he was home, he was still in his button down and slacks. No shoes. No tie. That was as casual as he got during working hours.

“We got a wink from a girl. A woman. We got a wink from a woman.”

Gods, I needed more cardio. One sprint down the stairs, and I was winded. Maybe it was the excitement. Had to be. My bear and I were in good shape.

“What the hell does a wink mean?”

“Um...I think it’s just a hat tip of sorts. A *hey, I see you* kind of thing.”

He tamped it down, but I knew Adir. Hope flashed in his eyes. So did his bear. “What do we do? Wink back? Is that a thing? Send her a message? Go pick her up? Tell me what to do.”

Go pick her up. That was his grizzly talking. The animal.

Mine thought it was a great idea.

“Um, I don’t know.”

“Who is it?” He was on his phone in an instant. Searching up what to do when someone winked at us. “It means they have looked at our picture, video, and/or profile and are letting us know they saw us and are maybe interested. Wait. We can click on it.”

“Click on her picture,” I said, but Adir didn’t listen. He had to figure shit out on his own. Stubborn ass.

“Watch.” He was damned puffed up as he showed me what he was doing. “Look. There she is. Evangeline. Her name is Evangeline.”

I pushed next to him and looked over. “Gods, she’s gorgeous, right?”

“Fuck yeah, she is. Tiny freckles along her cheekbones. Long brown hair.” The picture was a candid. Someone had taken it for her and, I had to admit, a shot of jealousy ran through me thinking that a male had been behind the camera. She wore a sundress with little flip-flops. A soft-pink blush graced her face. Her teal eyes shone. I hadn’t realized someone could have teal eyes.

I asked, “What is she? Wolf? Fox? She’s short but curvy. Damn, look at those hips.”

Adir grunted beside me. “You think I don’t see them? She’s a beauty. Why someone hasn’t already scooped her up is beyond me. Says she’s a wolf.”

Damn. Wolves and bears didn’t generally mate but she’d winked. Maybe she was down.

I slid to the next picture and Adir gasped. Another one in a pair of cut-offs and a pink tank top. Same sandals. “Maybe she’s picky. Or maybe someone did her wrong.”

“Who would do that angel wrong?” Adir asked, his voice caught up in awe.

“Fucking idiot. That’s who. Can we see about her? More than her pic?”

We moved to the kitchen. It was lunchtime anyway. While Adir read me lines from her profile, I made us huge Swiss and roast beef subs.

“She likes daffodils. Flowers. Says she likes to journal.”

I made a noise. “A writer like me.”

“Loves smashburgers and hates all forms of turkey. Like me.”

I hated turkey. Whole. Roasted. Fried. Baked. The ground stuff was the worst. How anyone thought that was an acceptable substitution for ground beef was beyond me. It looked like strings of pink goo. That wasn't food.

“What else?”

I sucked in a breath as he read off the next one. “She's a virgin.”

Chapter Fourteen

Evangeline

I checked the app even more often once I dared to send the wink. I expected to be asked to pay something, but I guess it didn't work that way. Then I wondered if maybe the fact that I didn't have a paid membership meant that the two I'd messaged never saw it at all.

And maybe that was all right. Two males were a lot for one female who had decided she wasn't going to have one at all. It was fine. No worries. But if so, my constant peeking at my account to see if I'd gotten a response belied my cavalier attitude.

My wolf was worse. She had been more present than ever before, since I saw those two. When my arranged mating approached, she'd sunk deep inside me, as if she could hide from what was going to happen. Since I left the pack, she'd been subtly there, glad for the runs we managed to sneak in outside of town once in a while, but other than that not really expressing any opinions about anything much. It was hard to experience. My wolf was a part of me, and that part had expressed nothing like joy for such a long time.

She wanted those two big guys.

And I couldn't blame her.

After a day, I still had hope. Anyone could be busy for that long, and not everyone had as boring a life as mine where they had absolutely nothing else interesting going on to occupy their minds. My job was helping me scrape by, but I could stock shelves and check people out at the register in my sleep.

Cara popped in at the end of the day and asked me if I'd found my dream man yet, and I said something along the lines of no, still single. Then I went home and tried not to stare at the phone all night.

Day two, more of the same. I kept my phone in my pocket and checked it so often, my boss actually caught me and reminded me of the policy regarding cell phones. I'd been here long enough he wasn't going to fire me for one offense, but I couldn't afford to lose my job, so I locked my phone in the drawer under the register to keep it out of sight and mind.

It didn't stop my mind from working though, wondering if they'd responded yet. I was probably putting too much into a first contact. Human dating apps, from my current research, were filled with people who often took years to find their perfect match, if they ever did. Hoping for an instant response, no matter how excited my wolf was, was just looking for trouble.

Cara came in again, but I was in the back room on my break and didn't have to admit that I'd approached not one but two guys—which I wasn't sure she'd even understand—and that they hadn't been interested enough to respond.

By the time I got home, I was convinced that nothing was going to happen. They'd either seen my wink and decided they didn't like me, or maybe they'd already found someone else. I heated up a bowl of rice and beans for my dinner. Inexpensive and full of nutrition. My wolf complained some, preferring more meat in our diet, but the budget only allowed what it allowed, and I promised her we'd spend our next day off on a run where she could hunt. Instead of trying to take selfies. Or do something else to set myself up for failure. I brought up the pic that Cara had taken for me, and it was by far the most flattering possible image of me. If that one couldn't catch the guys' interest, nothing would. Nothing I could do. I tossed the phone across the room in utter disgust. It landed on the rug.

I forced myself to finish eating because waste was also not in the budget, but I had no appetite. And when I thought I might like to watch something on YouTube or one of the other free streaming sites, I sure hoped I hadn't

broken my poor old phone.

After rinsing out my dish and spoon, I tiptoed over to the rug and scooped up the phone. “Please don’t be broken. Please don’t be broken.”

A chime answered my prayers, and with trembling fingers, I plopped down on the side of the bed and opened the app. Sure enough, I’d gotten a response to my indication of interest.

They wanted to video chat.

Oh my gods.

Chapter Fifteen

Adir

The best time for Evangeline to video chat was early in the morning for us. Before six. She worked later in the day and, with the time difference, it was hard for her. Plus, she had to get to a library to use their computer. She had a phone but claimed it was too beat up to actually take video chatting.

What had this girl been through? Where was her pack? Wolves kept to packs. Girls running around rogue were open season for bastards and all kinds of males, none of them up to any good.

She had no family listed. It was part of the questionnaire process.

We had listed our parents, all of whom had no idea about this app thing but wanted grandchildren. They were fine with the reverse harem. It wasn't uncommon amongst bears in the modern age.

Before we'd even seen her in person, my bear yearned for her. This young, beautiful woman displaced by her pack. I didn't care about the reason. An alpha should've taken her in. Someone.

That someone would be us. Byron and I. He needed the video chat as some kind of confirmation, but I didn't. Even if we simply got her here to give her a head start in a better direction and she decided to tell us to go to hell about the mating, that would be fine.

"It's time," I said as I sat in the kitchen next to Byron. His knee was bouncing. He had decided the kitchen would be the least intimidating background. Spent an hour the day before cleaning it up and then checking it on the computer to make sure everything was spotless.

"Hey," we heard, but the picture was scrambled. It cuts out and in. For the next hour, we tried to get the video working but, at some point, she sent a

text. The signal was no good. The internet in the library wasn't meant for video-chatting, and some old woman fussed at her for trying.

It's that one word for me. Her strong and feminine voice through the chat made my damned bear go nuts. He wanted me to shift right then and there and run cross country, pick her up in my mouth, and run her back to the den whether she liked it or not.

Brutish bastard.

And yet, he had a point.

Byron was texting her and not through the app anymore. She was a bit sassy and, while I was looking over his shoulder, we both soaked it up. She was just our type.

"What do you think?" I asked Byron in between waiting for replies. She had to go to work soon and before that, to get some groceries. Gods, I wanted to be the one providing her food.

"My bear wants to shift through the damned phone and go get her. Right now. He clearly doesn't understand phones or technology but he wants her." Byron turned around to look at me. "You? What's the beast saying?"

"She's ours. That's what he says."

"We still have to go through the app. At least to confirm everything."

I slapped my hands on my thighs. "Do it. Order her or buy her or, gods, that sounds awful. Can we have her come today?"

Byron snorted. "Calm down. First, yes, we have to confirm on the app that we want her and then she has to accept. After that, we have to make arrangements for her to get here." He scrubbed a hand down his face. "We don't even know if she has a ride to the airport. Clothes or food. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Byron and I had similar hearts when it came down to it. We helped people. Didn't flash it around or take selfies with homeless people, but we

helped when we could, where we could. “She needs help. Even if she’s not ours.”

He nodded. “But I want her. He wants her. My bear.”

“Click the damned button already.” We did. Clicked the button to order our virgin mate. The mate we’d been searching for. The possible mother to our cubs.

“Now we wait.”

“What are we waiting for? Call her. Book the ticket.”

He chuckled. “Adir, she has to...” Ping. “She accepted. She accepted us as a harem. She’s ours.”

Not soon after, Evangeline texted us both at the same time. “Sounds like we have an arrangement. Should I hitchhike or...”

Soon, both of us were typing. We shared a look before Byron put his phone down. “Go ahead. Let’s get our girl here.”

So, I typed back to her: *We need your full name and social. We are getting you tickets and a car to take you to the airport. Is there anything else you need? Money for food?*

She sent us another picture. Smiling. *I’ve got that covered. I have some money. Get paid this week. But now I get to go quit. Can’t wait to see the look on my manager’s face.*

I texted back. *We will take care of everything.*

She texted back. *You’d better. ;)*

Chapter Sixteen

Evangeline

My boss's face went white as a snowflake as I told him I was quitting. He stammered on about how I needed to give two weeks' notice and there was no one else in town hiring.

I walked off somewhere in between him complaining about needing another stocker and helping a customer get her inhaler.

I had a chance, and I was going to grasp it with both fists.

There were some logistical things to take care of. Forwarding my mail, which consisted of nothing but credit card offers and, for some reason, AARP invitations. I was a little young for that. My last paycheck had already been deposited in my account. Since my account was at a tiny bank only local to the area, I stopped by and closed it out, stuffing the little amount of cash into the side zipper pocket inside my purse. It would be enough to get me to the airport and buy something to eat between flights.

I didn't have enough stuff to be charged a baggage fee. Byron had said he paid for one anyway, but I was sure I wouldn't need it. Over the text messages, Byron had been the most vocal, so to speak, but Adir was still a bit of a mystery. Byron spoke for him on some occasions.

Things were taken care of, but the closer the time got to the ride service picking me up, the more nervous I became. I hadn't talked to anyone about what I was doing, but my own subconscious was giving me lectures left and right. They could be serial killers, waiting in the wings with a perfect background check. They could use me and kill me. It wasn't like anyone would be looking for a missing girl, a rogue who had been kicked out of her pack. I would disappear like vapor, and no one would be the wiser.

My wolf was excited. Preened inside me at the thought that not only one but two males wanted us. Would keep us safe and secure. Protected. Yeah, they'd said everything would be taken care of for me, money-wise. That little negative voice inside told me I was a gold digger of some sort. But it wasn't the money I wanted. It was the safety and freedom that came with being secure. If I wanted pizza, I wouldn't have to calculate bills and see if I had enough to buy myself one.

If I had a need, I wouldn't have to decide between providing for that need and eating.

And then there was the human voice. Nasty little thing, she was. She said I was selling myself. Promising my body and my virginity in exchange for food, home, shelter.

Bitch.

My stomach knotted as I zipped my bag for the last time. Everything was ready. I had skipped lunch because of said nervousness, but my wolf knew. She knew it would be the last time I was on my own. She knew that no matter what, this was my chance at a new life.

Byron and Adir had both texted me good morning and asked if I needed anything last minute. We had a group text message and then individual text conversations going on. I sat back and wondered about the intimacy portion of this deal. They said they wouldn't push me to do anything, but it was clear the reason they had gotten on an app was for a mate and to have a family. That involved sex.

Would they expect me to have sex with both of them? One at a time? Who would be the first? Did it matter to them?

Of course, I'd signed all the documents online without reading the fine print or thinking about these details.

Worse came to worst, I could run for the hills. Pack up my shit and get

out of there. I'd be in a new place but, just like being put out by my pack, I would figure it out one step at a time.

I'd done it before. I could do it again.

One thing my pack had taught me was that if necessary, I could take care of my own damned self.

It actually might be hard to let Byron and Adir take care of me. I'd put up these walls and shielded myself so well. Taking them down would be three times more difficult than putting them up.

I revisited the text messages. The town they lived in was called Ursine. It was all the way on the West Coast. In the Pacific Northwest. They said it rained a lot. I'd never lived in a place that wasn't humid, winter one day and blazing hot the next.

A text message told me the driver was here.

Here went nothing.

Chapter Seventeen

Byron

Thank goodness my deadline had been met before we got the confirmation from Evangeline. I needed to prep our den, and my bear was all in. We already had the separate bedroom with an en suite. It was on the bottom floor of the house, in a wing of its own. That way, she had her own space when we were being overbearing and cavemanish, which we probably would be from time to time. Plus, every person should have some independence. Adir and I had learned to value ours, and she could have some, too.

“What did you buy this time?” Adir asked, holding the door open for me.

“Stuff for the bathroom and the bedroom.”

He chuckled. “What kind of things? There are already towels and all that. Everything she needs is in there.”

I sighed and dropped everything at the bottom of the stairs. “We saw where she’s living.” Since everything was settled, we’d sent Evangeline a new phone and had video-chatted a few times when she had signal. Once, she was in her apartment and, as soon as the call ended, Adir and I decided to spoil her rotten, no matter the ending. Her apartment was the size of our pantry. The walls were cracked. But she never complained. Not once.

And she was gorgeous. A stunning goddess if there ever was one.

My bear needed to make his den perfect for her.

“And?”

“It’s clear she might not have even the necessities, Adir. I bought everything. Called Amanda. She came with me.”

Amanda was my cousin. She and our parents were the only ones we’d

told about the app and about Evangeline. I towed her along all day and she picked out the things she would like to have. Shampoo, conditioner, soap, everything down to lip balm. I also picked up snacks that she said she liked and some she said she didn't. Adir and I were meat guys and generally ate one large meal a day, but in her words, females picked all day.

“You're gonna overwhelm her, By.”

I blew out a breath. “I'm scared to blow this.”

He clapped me on the shoulder. “If it's meant to be, it will. She'll be here tonight.”

My stomach rolled at the prospect. She would. By that night, she would be here, under our roof. Safe. Fed. Well. My bear couldn't have been more delighted.

“Are you sure we don't want to go get her?”

We had paid a car service to pick her up from the airport, mostly to avoid the awkward hour-long ride from the airport to our home. But now, it didn't seem like such a great idea. In fact, it came off as cold and callous.

Hopefully, not to her.

“When should I get cooking?” Adir asked, helping me get the bags to her room. Evangeline's room. Our mate's room—one could wish.

“Her plane arrives at five on the dot. About a half hour to get her bags and then to the car. An hour to get back here, give or take. Have everything ready for...seven?”

“Yeah. Sounds good.”

Contrary to his fussing, Adir put the bathroom things away while I lit some candles and made sure everything in the room worked. The fan. The heater. The light switches. I may or may not have sprayed her sheets with a vanilla linen spray.

But seven came and went. Eight came and went. Nine. Ten. Even eleven.

No Evangeline. Finally, a few minutes after, the taxi service texted to say that she had been picked up. She hadn't texted. Maybe she didn't charge her phone. Who knew.

For a while, the thought crossed my mind that she had taken the ticket and run. Not intending to be our mate at all.

"An hour," I said, looking over my shoulder. Adir's perfect meal was already cold, but neither of us had touched a bite.

We were too anxious for her to get here.

Another notification from the taxi service. Flat tire. Delay.

The night went on and on until at nearly eleven, headlights flashed into the living room windows. She was here. Finally.

Chapter Eighteen

Evangeline

My flight was late. I'd been ready in plenty of time, and the driver had been on time. Traffic was great, even when we got into the city. The driver warned me that we might run into some slowing, but just the opposite seemed to be true. He was delighted, and said this almost never happened, but since it was my very first experience with anything but country highways and roads, it was plenty overwhelming for me.

Security went smoothly, another area of concern for me. My new phone was brand new and had incredible speed, and I'd watched videos on everything new to me so I would be prepared. And when I lined up for the TSA experience, I was glad I had. It seemed many of my fellow travelers had not watched the how-tos because the uniformed officers had to keep telling them things over and over like, "Laptop out of the bag, ma'am," and "Please remove your shoes." Right next to us was a line where people weren't doing half that, something called TSA Pre, and I swore if I flew again, I'd figure out how to get in that line. Probably my future mates already did. They seemed to have plenty of money, and money could buy just about anything.

But that wasn't at all why I had chosen them. My wolf and I agreed that they seemed kind, caring, and not half bad to look at. Having little experience with fated or true mates, I believed it was highly against the odds that I would have one. No, I had to pick someone or someones who I thought I could live with long-term in contentment.

It would be a huge improvement over the life that had been chosen for me. And much better than the hand-to-mouth existence of the past two years. Maybe it wasn't going to be love at first sight or anything like my parents

had, but it could be good.

It would be good.

But my pep talk as I headed for the gate wasn't holding up when the flight was delayed. Or when my seatmate in my fantastic first-class accommodations on flight number one spilled a Bloody Mary on me. The flight attendant rushed over to help me, but it wasn't an easily hidden stain. And my bag with my other clothes had somehow been checked at the gate.

The delay caused me to miss my connecting flight. And the only one they were able to put me on was a full flight with no available first class. The ticketing agent assured me that a credit would be issued for the difference, but that did me no good in my middle seat with a lady and squalling baby on one side and a salesman who wanted nothing more than to tell me all about his product line on the other. I preferred the baby to the guy who actually seemed to think I'd want to buy a case of bathroom cleansers. Finally I pretended to be asleep, but that failed when the baby spit up on me.

The restroom offered limited relief from the mess on my shoulder and in my hair. I just wanted to cry. When I returned to my seat, everyone else was asleep, meaning, I'd have had to step over the mom holding the baby...and no, just no. So I stood there in the aisle, a disheveled tear-stained disaster until a flight attendant had mercy on me and settled me in an aisle seat toward the back. If it was vacant, why had a downgraded first-class passenger not been seated there?

First-world problems.

By the time I got into the car, I was exhausted and not in any mood to meet anyone, not even the two guys who were the reason I had flown here. Rather, especially not them because they were going to take one look at me and put me on a bus back to where I came from. Or maybe just throw me out in the street. At least I'd retrieved my bag and been able to change my shirt in

the single tiny restroom. The other shirt, the one that reeked of sour milk, I tossed in the trash.

“Have a nice flight, ma’am?” asked the driver, and, reminding myself it was not his fault that I was in this state, I did not regale him with all the details of my “nice flight.” Actually, the first one had been really nice. Bloody Mary excepted.

“It was okay. I’m sorry you had to wait so long.” My delay had probably really cut into his earning for the day.

“Oh, I just got here. We are copied into your itinerary and get updates, so we know when to arrive.” He gave me a sympathetic smile in the rearview mirror. “If it helps, I have seen people having much worse travel experiences. I mean...then the delays.” He narrowed his gaze. “But I am guessing more stuff happened.”

I let out a sigh. “Yes, but you don’t need to know my troubles.”

“Hey, I’m just driving here. Either I can listen to you or one of the three country music stations we can bring in, in this area.”

“No satellite?”

“Not right now. Not sure why.”

“Well, then if you insist...” I launched into a tale that began with the Bloody Mary and ended with me sitting in his very nice car and hoping I wasn’t stinking it up.

He shook his head and turned onto a two-lane highway. “Well, now, that’s pretty bad. Still not the worst but top fifteen.” He spent the rest of the trip sharing the others in that top group with me, and while I supposed I was lucky not to find an outraged opossum in my luggage or a flight turned around due to someone who thought following the flight attendant’s directions was optional, I couldn’t help but wish I looked a little better when meeting my possible future mates.

I fell asleep during a story about the airline accidentally filling the bathrooms with diesel instead of water so nobody could use the facilities on a commuter flight. When I woke, he was talking about a passenger who somehow ended up with an allergen in their lunch and swelled up like a balloon in front of their new mother-in-law who freaked out and wanted the marriage annulled so she didn't pass on the defect to her precious son's children.

I hid a yawn behind my hand. "That's pretty bad."

The car slowed to a stop. "I hope I managed to entertain you on this long drive."

"Oh, you did."

"Even while you were napping?"

My cheeks burned. "Just a few minutes I think."

"It's all right. I don't mind the sound of my own voice." He opened the door and came around for mine. "It's been a pleasure."

I fumbled in my purse for a tip, but he waved it off. "It's been taken care of. But thank you. I hope you have a nice stay here. You didn't mention why you were visiting."

I opened my mouth, unsure what to say. He'd told me a lot about other people but nothing about himself really, so I didn't feel bad about not sharing more than what I had about the flights. But then I heard footfalls and was saved from telling him anything at all. "Oh, there's my...friends." I climbed out of the car and shook his hand. "Thank you for a pleasant drive and the entertainment."

He was still chuckling when I turned to face guys whose profile pics had somehow not fully prepared me for their actual size. My wolf woke up from her version of napping, excited to meet our mates. But when I inhaled to speak, their scent filled my nostrils.

Bears? Bear shifter males are mean, domineering, and generally awful. Everyone in the pack knows that... They had seemed so nice. Could I be wrong? I'd never actually met a bear in person before. So how did I know they smelled like honey and pine?

They were right in front of me now, only a couple of feet away.

“Y-you are bears?”

Chapter Nineteen

Adir

Her question hung in the air but I was the first to give an answer. “Yes. We are bears. You didn’t know?” I took a long drag of air through my nose to confirm what the app had already told us. She was wolf. An untouched female wolf. What the app hadn’t told me was that she smelled like amber and oak, something right out of a cigar shop, which was one of my favorite scents, though I refrained from smoking them.

I shrugged. “Clearly, I’m bad at details, and traveling and flying and just about everything that happened today.”

Byron rushed to take her bag from her, receiving a soft smile in return, and we guided her into the house. There was no reason to share our meeting with anyone who drove by.

“Come into the kitchen,” I urged. “You smell hungry and thirsty and... exhausted.” Underneath, there was a tidal wave of trepidation, but I chose to ignore those. And the fact that she didn’t know we were bears.

“Oh. Thank you, Adir.” My bear rumbled a bit at hearing her say my name. She followed me to the kitchen while Byron put her bags in her room. We would give her the tour later.

“This is obviously the kitchen. Here, let me.” I pulled a chair out for her, and she plopped down on it. As I filled a plate, she tried to make sense of all that brown, shiny, thick hair, pulling it up into some kind of messy thing on top of her head.

“Wanna tell us what happened?” I asked as Byron came back into the room. He handed her the plate I had prepared while I debated giving her wine. Didn’t want her to think we were trying to get her drunk on the first

night.

Maybe I was overthinking this.

She eyed the food in front of her. “Thank you. Wow. You cook?”

I thought Byron would answer but, to my ego’s delight, when I turned, she was looking at me. So I answered. “We both cook. What would you like to drink?”

A blush crept up her face. I wondered why? “Water, please. I can’t make anything beyond scrambled eggs. I tried rice once and burned it.” She took a bite of food and then stopped with her fork still in the air. “This is incredible.”

A low, growl of satisfaction came from Byron and me at the same time. Evangeline’s eyes widened, but nothing was said.

We let her eat in peace, both of us trying not to stare like weirdos. But I loved it. She was eating. The food we made. In our den. And, soon she would be tucked in, safe and warm in her bed.

When half the food was gone, she sat back. “Everything was fine until we got to the airport. Everything. Oh, by the way, they said you’re getting some kind of credit since I didn’t have heavy bags. Or get seated in first class on the second flight. It must’ve been idiot day because the security line took hours. I mean, there are signs. Take your shoes off. Put your electronics in the plastic bins. Once I got through, there was barely enough time to get to the gate.”

We were laughing already. She was animated. Moving her hands and making faces. When she spoke about the man in the seat next to hers, one of her eyes twitched a bit, showing her frustration.

“He didn’t even apologize. Instead, he grabbed a few napkins, you know, those *not big enough to wipe your pinkie* square napkins that they put under your cup, and tried to wipe the Bloody Mary off my boobs.”

“He touched you?” Byron said, and I heard his bear underneath his human voice.

“Well, yeah. But then I *accidentally* knocked over my soda and ice on his crotch.” She’d gotten him back. “You should’ve seen him. He jumped up like his dick was on fire. I’ve seen mothers give birth who didn’t kick up such a fuss.”

At the end, she sucked in a breath. Almost as if she’d forgotten herself. Her shoulders squared and her posture went stiff.

“You’re full?” I asked, nodding to her plate.

“Yes. Thank you. Um, the day just kind of slammed into me. Would it be okay if I went to bed?”

I stood and took her plate. Byron and I had given up sometime around nine and eaten despite her absence. “This is your home for the meantime, Evangeline. Do as you please. Byron, can you show her to her room?”

“Of course.” Byron wasn’t his chatty self. Maybe it was late. Maybe it was the newness of having someone here. Who knew. I would have to talk to him about it later. But when they left the kitchen, he began to talk, tension in his voice.

After cleaning up the kitchen and loading the dishwasher, I went to bed. Byron had already done the same. I’d heard him padding up the stairs. I wanted to go to her room, listen in, hear her breaths as she slept, but I knew better.

I didn’t want to scare her.

How in the hell she hadn’t known we were bears was beyond me. When she asked, she did not sound thrilled.

Maybe she was scared of bears. Was it bears who had thrown her out of the pack? But why would there have been bears in a wolf pack? Gosh, we needed to know everything so we could treat her right. Treat her as she

deserved.

Gods, I was jumping ahead of myself. After accusing Byron of doing the same thing.

I knocked on his door despite hearing his fingers clicking the keys of his computer like a madman's.

"Yeah?" he said.

I opened the door to see his expression eager. He likely hoped it was Evangeline. *Sorry to disappoint you, friend.*

"Adir, what's up?"

"What do you think?" I shut his door behind me.

"She's scared."

"And feisty and funny."

"Didn't know we were bears," he added. "I asked why she didn't know. She said maybe it was because she had the free account."

"There is a free account?" I said, sitting in the chair by the window.

"Yeah. For females, apparently."

My eyebrows went up. There was a long pause between us. It was late for me but not for him. "She's gorgeous," I finally said.

"The freckles." He chuckled a bit. "And the ass."

My bear rumbled. "Million-dollar ass if I've ever seen one."

We both laughed, cutting through some of the tension.

"I'm going to bed," I said, finally. "It's Saturday tomorrow."

He nodded, his attention already back on his work. "I'll be up. Big breakfast?"

"The biggest."

Chapter Twenty

Evangeline

My wolf woke me, alert but not on edge. Rattling pots and pans and cracking eggs piqued her interest and mine. Byron showed me the shower and how it worked. I had a bathroom all to myself. The damned shower had ten different showerheads. Ten. My old shower barely spit out water from one.

As I stepped out of my nightgown and let it fall to the bathroom floor, reality slammed me in the chest. They were bears. Last night, they were polite and refined, but that was probably a show to get me to not run off into the night. Bears, especially grizzlies like them, were notorious in the shifter world for being bastards. Not bastards like not knowing their father— bastards like jerk-faced dickheads. They treated their women like slaves. They demanded to get their way. Females were made for cleaning, cooking, and breeding.

My eyebrows bunched as the hot water hit my face. While my human mind was abuzz with negative thoughts, my wolf wasn't. It wasn't bears who ridiculed and humiliated me in front of an entire pack. It was wolves. It wasn't bears who treated my mating as a joke to others. It was wolves. It wasn't bears who called me fat and ugly. It was a wolf.

Still, growing up knowing that bears were awful mates made up my mind for me. One day. That's all they would get. I still had most of the money from my paycheck and a tiny bit in savings. I could split and start new. They had gotten me far away from my other pack, so, now, I could really have a new life.

One day. That's all these grizzlies were getting from me.

The shower was filled with all new products and nothing was cheap, either. Top-of-the-line shampoo and conditioner, along with body wash. New back brush and a sponge. The bottom of the shower had one of those soft, prickly mats you could clean your feet on.

After dressing in some jeans and a soft cream sweater, along with socks since this place was cold, I took a long breath and mentally steeled myself. *Here we go.* One day with the grizzlies.

“Good morning,” I said as I entered the kitchen. Byron and Adir were both there, cooking on pans atop a stove with eight burners. Eight.

They both turned and greeted me. Neither of them wore shirts. Both in pajama pants. Byron in gray and Adir in blue. Their hair was mussed and, I had to admit, if they weren't bears, they would be adorable.

Gods above. Adir's nipples were pierced. I saw the barbells inside them, making them prominent. He caught my stare and winked.

“Can I help? Um, is there coffee?”

“Sit down,” he said. “Tell me how you like your coffee.”

“No sugar. Just cream, please. I can help with something. Dishes?”

Byron chuckled and prepared my coffee. He put it in a large coffee cup—a pink one. A shot of jealousy bolted down my spine. Was there someone else here who had warranted her own cup?

But when he handed me the cup, I noticed a sticker on the bottom. It had been washed, but it was still there. They forgot to take it off. New things. Like the fragrant shampoo and conditioner in the shower. “Here you go.” He winked at me, too. “I hope you like pancakes.”

I took a long sip of the coffee. “Nope. No pancakes. Deal breaker.” They both blanched. They should really get used to my sarcasm. Or not, since they only had this one day. “What kind of person doesn't like pancakes? Whoever they are, they aren't allowed around me. They're cake for breakfast.”

“But no turkey sausage,” Adir grumped. “That shit is nasty.”

“Right,” I said, remembering that I had been firm on my dislike of turkey. “But don’t let that change your breakfast. I…”

“Adir hates it. All forms of turkey. On Thanksgiving, we make pork roast, ham, and meatloaf instead. We have pork sausage and bacon.”

Thank the gods.

“How was your shower?” Adir asked, turning around and putting a huge pancake on a stack. I watched both of them move. Their back muscles had back muscles. Adir was broader, but Byron had that swimmer leanness going on. Still, I wouldn’t doubt they could lift an oak tree straight out of the ground.

It thrilled me and frightened the hell out of me at the same time.

“There was actual hot water from showerheads that sprayed and not dribbled, so a twenty out of ten.”

They brought a feast to the table and I gasped. “Are we expecting an army?”

Byron stacked a plate high. “We didn’t know what you liked, so we made a bit of everything. Besides, it’s Saturday. On Saturdays, we eat a huge breakfast.”

Huge didn’t really cover it.

“After breakfast, we’ll give you the tour of the house. We don’t have anything planned. We thought you might be tired, and the time change must be weird.”

He handed me the plate, and I shook my head. “That’s enough for a whale.”

“Eat what you like. We’ll learn your hunger after a while.”

“Thanks.” *But no, you won’t.*

“How long have you lived here?” I asked around a bite of scrumptious

blueberry pancakes. Gods, I couldn't remember the last time my stomach was actually full. It was getting there, but I kept eating. Everything was so delicious.

"We bought this place when we were in our early twenties," Adir said. He was more reserved than Byron, and I wanted to get to the bottom of why.

I nodded. "Our pack had a big house like this. Alpha house."

"Bears don't do that. We belong to a sleuth, our version of pack, but we don't have to live together or run together, things like that. Bears keep to their own lives, mostly. We like privacy." Adir again. He had already finished his breakfast, nearly twice what I had eaten. He sat back, assessing me. Watching me. I hated to admit how much I loved his eyes roaming me, taking me in. It might've been the first time a person, a male, saw me. Not like a piece of meat or someone to fuck but as a person.

After eating entirely too much, I patted my stomach. "I'm not sure I can walk."

They both chuckled, but a flash of something in their eyes told me they were pleased. Byron's eyes were so gray they were almost silver, Adir's a light brown, almost gold. Their eyes were precious metals. "Come on," Byron said. "A walk will do you good. Besides, we don't want you getting lost."

Their house was immaculate. Modern and yet comfortable. Clean and still lived in. Blankets folded in a neat way over the back of the couches and chairs. Rugs to make the hardwood floors warm. Light came in through the windows, but blinds could be lowered in case privacy was needed.

A rush of lust shot through me. Would they want me to fuck them with the windows open like this? No. I couldn't get comfortable here. No thoughts of screwing or anything else. Not even one more night in that plushy bed surrounded by clouds of blankets.

Well, maybe one night, and I could leave first thing in the morning.

The floor plan was mostly open. Upstairs was Byron's office, Adir's office, and both of their bedrooms. Each one had its own bathroom. Byron happily showed me his bedroom and office. Both were neat and tidy. Everything in its place.

"Now to Adir's..." Byron's eyes met Adir's and something was exchanged, some non-verbal communication.

"Not yet," Adir said, his voice low and bass. "Not my den yet."

Big, massive, grump. "Why? Is it messy? Underwear and porn everywhere?"

He chuckled. "Hardly."

He put his large hand to the small of my back as we walked back downstairs. My wolf was not happy inside me. She wanted inside his den. To be in his space, surrounded by his leather and bourbon scent. Just like she wanted to be in Byron's. He scented like books and cherries to her. But this house was a nearly debilitating mix of them both. We wanted to wallow in it. Succumb to the pressure of it, the warmth of the security.

I knew I had my walls when it came to males, but so did Adir. We wanted to break them.

"Let's talk while we clean up," Adir suggested.

"I can help. I'm not useless."

"No, sweetheart," he said. "You're far from useless."

Chapter Twenty-One

Byron

Evangeline. Gods, even her name was beautiful. I knew it already, before she got here, but pictures didn't do her justice. Not even close.

She walked through our home, our den with a grace no bear could have. Her hair fell in waves over her cream sweater. Was it cold in here for her? While Adir started cleaning, I excused myself to get dressed and, when I was done, he did the same. He had surprised me by not letting her in his bedroom. Then again, he had never brought a woman in there. When he had picked up women before, he had gone to their home or a motel.

It never clicked before.

"Sit, please," I said as we went into the living room. There was a TV, but I couldn't remember the last time it was turned on.

"Where do you two sit?" she asked, scanning the room.

"We can sit anywhere. Pick where you like," Adir said softly. He was trying to be not so gruff.

"Okay." She sat down and pulled her legs up under her. She wasted no time unfolding a blanket and covering up.

"Are you cold?" I asked. "I can turn the heat on or light up the fireplace. It's no problem."

"No. This is just comfortable. I like having a blanket over my lap."

Security, I would bet. She was more secure that way. Adir and I took seats on either side of her, but she didn't flinch.

"Tell us about yourself," I started. "More than what the app says."

"What do you want to know?" Her ears pinked at the edges. Gods, I wanted my lips on her earlobes, to see if that made her moan. Her amber-and-

oak scent was driving my beast crazy.

“What did your pack do to you?” Adir asked. He wasn’t the beat-around-the-bush type. He spoke straight as an arrow. Sometimes, I admired him for it. Times like now, it made me cringe a bit. We didn’t want to scare her. “Why did they throw you out?” he went on, implacable and ignoring the side-eye I was sending his way.

“It’s complicated,” she said, picking at some fuzz on the blanket.

He put his hand on hers. “We’re pretty smart. I think we can keep up.”

She swallowed. I watched the motion of her neck. She was hiding her curves but I knew they were under there, waiting for us to explore them, inch by inch. The scent of anxiety, tangy and sour, mixed with her own. Her walls were up. Didn’t really blame her but, if this was going to happen, we all needed to throw everything out there.

“You can trust us, Evangeline. We just want to know you. No judgment. You don’t have to be scared. We would never hurt you.”

She nodded but paused a long time before speaking. “It was my eighteenth birthday. In our pack, on your eighteenth, you are mated.” We both growled at the thought of another male calling himself her mate, but she went on. Maybe she expected it from us.

“Who was your mate? *Was,*” Adir reiterated.

Her chin quivered. This was traumatic for her, and she was choosing to reveal it to us. We had bonded a bit already. Trust flowed between us. “He was the alpha’s son. You’re supposed to undress in front—”

She had to stop. Her words caught in her throat a few times as she tried to begin again. What came next couldn’t be stopped. She was hurting. And I was hurting with her. I wrapped her in my arms. She didn’t stiffen or push me away. Instead, she melted into my embrace. Adir unfolded her legs and draped them across his lap. She was safe with us, and we wanted her to know

it. “Baby, you don’t have to continue.”

“No. I do. I feel like you need to know. Both of you. It’s just been so long since someone cared. So long since I’ve been held.”

I hugged her tighter as Adir scooted close to her and rubbed her feet. After a while, she began again. “Usually, the female takes off her clothes and she’s...taken right there in front of the pack. But the alpha told him to unwrap his package. He tore my dress open.” She put her hands to her chest as though the act were happening all over again. She was shielding her body from the pain, the reliving of it all. “He said I was fat, and it was better when I was covered. He told me to get on my hands and knees so he didn’t have to look at my face when he fucked me. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t. My self-respect kicked in, or my wolf’s survival instinct, something.”

Adir growled, loud and menacing. I felt the same way. “Please tell me you ripped his balls off.”

She laughed. “I wish. I told him he should get on his hands and knees like the fucking pig he was.”

She and Adir fist-bumped, but she nestled into my hold deeper.

“What happened then? They kicked you out?”

She cleared her throat. “First, he beat me. Hard. I’d never been punched before. Not exactly the first time I was hoping for. The alpha tore up the contract. I was done. They were done with me. It was mutual. I haven’t spoken to anyone from the pack since. I’ve sent some letters to my mother, but I don’t think she’s gotten them... I was alone, but at least I was free and still a virgin.”

I swallowed. I would never ask her where her pack was because, if I knew, I would go there and slaughter the alpha and his prick of a son, consequences be damned.

Adir shook with anger. Evangeline reached out and took his hand in hers.

“It’s been two years.”

“The pain remains,” he said and reached out to swipe a tear from her face.

“It comes and goes.”

“We’ll help it go away for good,” I swore.

“Okay,” she said, but before I could think of anything more to say, she drifted off. It must’ve been cathartic for her to tell someone, to get it off her chest. Her breaths were even, and peace was written all over her face. I wanted to take her to my bedroom and make all the pain go away. I wanted to make her shake with need and forget even her name. Bed her thoroughly to the point where she never wanted to get up again.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Evangeline

They let me sleep on them for at least an hour. Maybe more. I hadn't exactly checked the time. When I woke, they suggested I go wash my face. While I did, they made lunch.

We ate together. They told me stories of how they met and their college days. They were a mess. They got into fights and had wild parties. All of it.

"Did you want to go to school or trade school?" Byron asked. He made me a huge roast beef and Swiss sandwich on a bagel, along with sweet potato fries. I wasn't hungry after breakfast but, when the food was placed in front of me, I ate the whole damned thing. I tried to convince myself it was just out of courtesy, but it tasted so good!

"I hadn't thought about it." I stopped eating and took a moment to consider. My resolve to stay only one day was waning by the second. Maybe I could give them the ninety days. It was in the contract, after all, and I was sitting across the table from a big, burly bear lawyer. Might not be a good thing to renege. Still, what were they going to do? Sue me for my jeans? That was about the only thing I had to my name.

"You could. They have great online programs."

I sighed. "I need a job. School isn't really in the cards for me right now."

They shared another look. Adir reached across the table and touched my hand. "You don't have to work, Evangeline. You can if you like, but you don't have to. We would support you while you go to school or whatever you'd like to pursue. We meant it when we said we are financially solid."

I scoffed. "I don't even know what I'm good at. I was eighteen when I left the pack and have been working at an entry level job ever since."

“They have those online assessments to see what you might be good at,” Byron offered. “Or you could go in for a general education degree and see what calls to you. You have so many options.”

“And you two wouldn’t mind supporting me through school? You barely know me. I’ve been here one day. I might be some harlot who’s just using you for your money.”

Adir polished off his third sandwich. These boys could eat. “I think we can agree that our bears know what they want and that you are not a harlot. And if you are to be here and be our mate then, yes, we would take care of *everything* you need.” His voice went down as he said everything, and the entire atmosphere changed with that one word. “What is your wolf saying, little one?”

“She’s...intrigued.”

“She’s not scared of us?” Byron asked. He already knew. Both of them did. I was well aware they could scent the trepidation inside me. I wondered if they could smell the lust as well.

“She’s scared of all males—somewhat. More like cautious,” Adir mused. They both nodded.

I’d never had such fluid conversation with anyone before. There were no lulls or breaks of awkwardness. Just a constant flow. Sometimes serious, sometimes funny.

We bid each other good night later on. I couldn’t believe how relaxed and calm I was. Instead of going to sleep, I took a second tour around the house, by myself. When I reached Adir’s bedroom, I paused but turned the knob anyway despite his previous protests. The room was clean and perfect. It was probably the forbidden nature of this place, but it made me want to stay. I heard water running in the shower and him moving around inside.

Did I dare?

He would never know, and I would get a peek at what I was getting into or, rather, what would be getting into me.

Boy, how the tables had turned.

I stepped softly toward the bathroom. The door was open. Steam billowed out. It was all marble, white, and polished to a shine. He was in the shower, behind glass doors, washing his body with his eyes closed. I thought I could stay for a moment, but he switched the water off and turned in one smooth movement.

I was caught. He stared right at me but made no move to cover himself. A god in his own right. Tall and broad. His muscles had muscles. Rivers of water caressed his body, and droplets hung from his piercings. I swallowed hard, seeing his cock. It was semi-erect but lifting as I watched. And it was... gigantic was the word I came up with.

“What are you doing, little one? Shame on you.” He smiled and stepped out. “I like your eyes on me. Hand me a towel?”

Commanded, I walked over to the rack and handed him a white towel. He took it but, in the process, dragged me toward him. “You wanna touch, naughty girl?”

I reached out, nodding, and touched the piercings. He sucked in a breath.

“I should spank your ass red for sneaking in here after I told you no.”

A shudder passed through me. I’d never been spanked but the thought of standing in front of him, my ass bared while he slapped me, did things to my core. My wolf approved.

“Um...” I muttered. My mouth refused to form words.

“What was that?” His golden eyes glimmered with lust. “You like that?”

I nodded as my mouth went dry.

“Hmmm. Let’s see how much. Go over to the bed. Pull up that nightgown.”

“What? No.”

“No? Okay.” He wrapped the towel around his waist and chuckled.

“Your choice, Evangeline.”

Something about him saying my name opened a floodgate of want and hunger beyond anything food could satiate. “Okay. Do it.”

He growled a bit. “I have to hear the words, little one. What do you want me to do?”

“Spank me,” I said as my cheeks burned in response. Gods, this wasn’t happening. And yet, I wanted it so badly I could taste it.

“Yes, ma’am. Go on over. See what happens when you sneak in to watch me shower. I told you not to come into my den yet. Stubborn female.”

“I don’t know what to do,” I whimpered.

“Let me help you.” He walked over, towel tented by his hardness. He kissed the back of my neck and then bent me over, putting my hands on the footboard of the bed. He lifted my nightgown and pulled my panties down to my knees. “Not too hard this time, okay? Not yet. Gods, you are so damned sexy.”

“Not fat? Not ugly?” I had to know before this went further. That he thought I was beautiful. That he wasn’t repulsed by me.

He growled. “Not one inch of you is fat or ugly. I could rip that man apart for even telling you that. He should die for those words. Look at you. Ripe and ready for me. This rounded ass and hips that I want to bite. Those tits are driving me crazy. I can see you’re already wet. You are gorgeous, Evangeline, and I’ll be damned if anyone ever tells you otherwise. You know you’re beautiful to us, right, little one?”

I nodded.

“Tell me.”

“I’m beautiful to you.” Gods, I had gone from not wanting to stay to this

in one day? What the hell was happening? My brain was foggy, but I knew exactly what I wanted.

“That’s right. You are. Ready?” he asked, smoothing his hand over my ass with a low growl.

“Yes. Do it.”

“Words, little one.”

“Spank me, Adir.”

He chuckled again as he slapped my right cheek. Softly at first but, after I moaned, he continued, harder each time. It stung and there was some slight pain, but the satisfaction and pleasure was infinitely greater. Each time after his hand slapped me, he would rub the spot, taking away a bit of the sting.

“Let’s go to bed. You’ve been punished enough. You’re tired, and so am I.”

I whimpered as he pulled my panties up and straightened my gown. He picked me up as though I weighed nothing and placed me on his bed.

“I can go to my bed,” I offered.

“Not tonight. I need to hold you.”

His arms wound around me, and I knocked out in seconds.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Adir

“She’s not in her”—Byron froze in my bedroom doorway—“bed.”

I held a finger to my lips and shifted our mate in my arms. Well, not quite our mate yet, but after a night of holding her, I sure hoped she would be. The contract gave us ninety days, but I couldn’t see us waiting that long to claim her.

He took a step into my room, something I didn’t think he’d ever done before, but I waved him closer.

“What happened?” he mouthed. “Did you...”

I shook my head. I wouldn’t do that. When we made love to her, at least for the first time, it would be both of us. We’d never said it in so many words, but we didn’t need to. But I understood why he might ask. I’d gladly have plunged into her warm, tight body if I thought she was ready and if Byron had been with me. Not doing it had been the greatest challenge of my life so far. But it would have been wrong for several reasons. Reasons I’d counted on my fingers as I lay awake a good part of the night. One, it would have been dishonorable to do that with Byron not present, and she was not just my mate but both of ours. Two, she had signed the contract on the app, but that was different from agreeing in person. Three, she’d been exhausted still and in no shape to make this commitment. There were others, but those were the main ones.

The spanking had come close to crossing a line, especially since it left me hard as steel. Carefully slipping free of our beauty, I stood up and went to my dresser where I pulled out a pair of pajama pants.

Byron followed me out into the hallway and waited while I stepped into

the pants before asking, “So if you didn’t...what did happen last night? How did you end up with her in your bed? Was she scared alone?”

“No, not exactly.” All of a sudden, I wasn’t sure what I felt comfortable saying, which was ridiculous since we always shared everything with one another. But he was studying me with such a perplexed expression and no judgment that the ease between us came back. “She came into my room and I caught her peeking at me in the shower.”

He gaped. “Really? Why?”

I grinned at him. “I think she was just curious. And then she got really sassy and I suggested she might need a spanking.”

“What did she say?” He spoke in a hushed tone but with urgency. “Did you spank her?”

“Yes. And then I cuddled her all night, and did not have sex with her or claim her.”

“I’m so impressed.” He shook his head slowly side to side. “You held her all night and she’s still a virgin.”

“I’m not saying it was easy, but it was right.”

“What was right?” Evangeline stood in the doorway in her nightgown, hair adorably mussed and eyes heavy-lidded with sleep.

“Good morning.” Byron went over and kissed her on the lips, just a brush, but the sexual tension in the room amped up a notch. “My friend was saying he did not claim you last night. It wasn’t time, wouldn’t have been right.”

“I see.” But she probably didn’t. “I needed someone to be with me. But he never made a move even though, even though I could see he wanted to. Or mostly feel.”

“That’s why we’re here, Evangeline.” Byron reached over and pulled her in for a hug. “We want you so badly since we first spoke with you online.

Our bears are demanding we claim you, but we're not going to until we're sure you're ready."

I took her from him and hugged her, too. "And, just so you know, when you're ready, you won't have to ask twice."

Her cheeks flamed, something I was sure I'd never be tired of. "I don't know...I just met you, and it makes me a little nervous."

"That makes perfect sense." I patted her back in what I hoped was a comforting manner. She was so much smaller than us. "I know. Why don't we spend today doing fun things. We're both free." I never worked on Sunday, and Byron only did when he had a deadline coming up so it was the perfect day for it. "What shall we do?"

We knocked around ideas about where to spend the day. Our little town in the Pacific Northwest was hardly a tourist mecca, but we did have some pretty scenery. Talk led to breakfast where French toast and bacon was the order of the day. Our little mate put away a good amount of it before we loaded the dishwasher and filled a small backpack cooler with lunch for our day out. We weren't right on the beach, but we weren't far away, and I thought I knew just the place we should go.

We started out on a hike that led gradually through heavy green pine forest and along a cliff above the beach. When we stood on the overlook, Evangeline pointed down to the sand. "Can we go there? Sometime?"

"Sure," Byron agreed. "We can't get there without driving, so maybe next time?"

We ate right there, filling up on the thick sandwiches I'd prepared with hiking in mind. Then we lounged on the blanket we'd packed and ate chocolate chip cookies and apples. When it was all gone, the atmosphere was the most relaxed it had ever been between the three of us, so I took a chance.

"I know you didn't have the best impression of bears, but mine has been

clamoring to meet you, and to meet your wolf. This trail is so far off the beaten path we've never run into anyone up here."

"We sure haven't," Byron put in. "And I've had the same idea."

She was kneeling between us at this point and looked back and forth at us. "Are you saying we should shift together?"

"Are you up for it?" I really hoped she was. Our bears were big and probably as scary looking as she would fear, but if she couldn't shift and play with us, we had a huge problem. "You don't have to change unless you feel comfortable."

For a long moment, I wasn't sure what she'd say, but then she gave us a shaky smile. "I'd really like to meet your bears. But I can't promise how comfortable I'll feel."

"Fair enough," I told her. "Would you feel better if just one of us changed?"

"No, I think both is good," she said. "Just get it out there. And I will, too, but maybe after you guys?"

Chapter Twenty-Four

Evangeline

They were going to shift. Into bears. I didn't know how that was going to go because I'd never seen a bear shifter until I met them and never seen any kind of bear bear. At all. With the generally negative attitude of the pack toward any other shifters, we didn't see much of anyone, but they especially hated bears.

If bears were as they described, there would be a good reason, but so far, these bears were not remotely like that. They had been nothing but kind and warm and unbearably sexy, too. If Adir had made a move while we slept together last night, I'd have let him. But I understood that when the time came for that, they wanted it to be all of us.

Why did that scare me less than what we were about to do right here at the edge of the forest? But it was easy to be distracted by the sight of the two of them stripping off their clothes. I'd seen both shirtless and Adir nude in the shower, but out here in the sunshine they were undressing slowly.

Were they putting on a show for me?

If so, it was a great one.

Piece by piece, their clothing dropped to the ground until they both stood naked and unashamed. Not that they had a thing to be ashamed of. They were in no rush to shift, waiting until I'd had a good opportunity to view what my possible new mates had to offer in male form. The scamps even turned in a circle, giving me the full view.

"All right, you two, I've seen how gorgeous you are. I thought you were here to show me your bears, not your..." Words failed me at that point.

"Anyway, let's see those bears!"

And then, faster than I'd ever known a wolf to shift, the men were gone, replaced by two bears who were bigger than I'd expected. Probably bigger than natural grizzlies if they were anything like wolves. Their shoulders had a hump of muscle that made them appear even more powerful.

I waited for the fight or flight instinct to kick in, reminding myself that there was a cliff to my left, so if I wanted to run away, I'd need to go right to avoid a terrible accident. But no desire to flee came. I stood up slowly and approached Byron who was a darker mahogany shade than Adir. Neither moved while I explored the two of them. I buried my hands in their fur, stroked their muzzles, and even bent to touch the longest, thickest claws I could imagine.

"You're so beautiful, both of you." I couldn't get enough of the feel of them, but then Adir rose on his hind legs, towering over me, and I stumbled back in awe. "Ohhh. I don't know. I'm not afraid of you. You're huge and could wipe me out with one swipe of a paw. And those teeth...Red Riding Hood was afraid of a wolf! She'd obviously never run into a grizzly bear." I took a step back. "I suppose it's my turn now. Remember: when you see a wolf, it's still me."

A grunt from each made me shiver then laugh. "Okay, here goes."

I didn't do a striptease for them. Not only was I not ready for that, they were bears and I wasn't sure if it mattered in that form. But the moment I donned my fur, they were close up and sniffing me. Rubbing against me, gently. I held still and gave them the same chance they'd given me to get to know me in this form before I darted off into the trees, throwing a look over my shoulder. *Follow me, boys. Let's play.*

They did follow, and together we rambled around the woods over the sea, exploring in a way only our animals knew how to do. Sight became less important, scents and sounds taking precedent. Everything here was so

different than the woods I was used to. Or the countryside near my last home. Vivid scents of pine and other trees. Lots of animals had been here, including other bears and wolves, and I was glad to be running with two such impressive bears.

My wolf was beside herself with joy. She'd decided these were her mates, even if I was still wobbly on the issue. She danced around them and teased, running off and coming back, darting behind trees, overall having a better time than she ever had in all our years. It made my heart ache that she'd never had this before. But maybe nobody did until they found their mate.

We ran and gamboled and loped and did anything our animals wanted, finally flopping down side by side next to a stream after a deep splashing drink. It was not a cool day, but their big, warm furry bodies still felt amazing bracketing me. I fell asleep for a bit, something I seemed to be doing with them a lot. It was as if I could finally relax and feel safe. I'd never slept so well, not since I could remember at least.

When I woke up again, as did two bears who, at least in this form, snored a bit, we made our way back to our picnic site and shifted back. We dressed and packed up the blanket and the cooler with the empties and started for the car.

"Did you have a nice time, Evangeline?" Byron asked, loading the pack in the back of the car.

"Best. Day. Ever."

"Best day so far." Adir slid his arms around me from behind and nuzzled my neck. "We're going to make every one, one better than the one before.

And I believed him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Evangeline

They had me at first growl.

Okay dramatic, but this was a dramatic situation. In a matter of days, I'd gone from little wolf lost, living in a studio apartment with a basic job and almost enough food to eat, a crappy phone and not much else, to...I didn't even know how to describe it.

Or whether to trust it. But looking across the dinner table into the eyes of the two big grizzly bear shifters who had welcomed me into their home and were offering me everything, I wanted to trust them.

Trust they would continue to be kind, caring, and sincerely meant what they said about helping me while I followed any educational or career dreams of my own. That they would not humiliate me in the bedroom and did mean that they loved how I looked. That when they got to know me, they would like me on the inside, too.

The fact my wolf was completely into them and demanding I let them claim me as soon as possible, preferably as soon as we finished the ham and scalloped potatoes and before we had the loftiest meringue pie I'd ever seen for dessert. She was only willing to wait because she was very into ham.

I never understood how she experienced what I ate because when she hunted and gobbled up something in the woods, I pretty much shut out the experience. Raw rodents of various kinds were much more to her taste than mine. But she seemed to enjoy my dinners for the most part and let me know her favorites. At least when meat was on the menu. Since I'd left my pack, I hadn't been able to provide much that she liked, so the meals around here were definitely a plus in her book. To her, the rice and beans I'd been

subsisting on were ignorable.

“Do you want any more ham?” Byron held up a slice on the big serving fork.

“Or potatoes or salad?” chimed in Adir. “But save room for dessert.”

“I’m stuffed to the brim,” I laughed, pushing back from the table and patting my belly. “Although I didn’t even know you could put meringue on anything but lemon, so I’m intrigued.”

“Chocolate-honey meringue is my specialty.” Byron smiled proudly. “It was my mother’s recipe. She always won prizes at the fair.”

“I didn’t know shifters could enter the fair.” To be fair, I didn’t know shifters could do anything with anyone outside their pack, sleuth, or flock until recently. “I’ve never been to one.”

“Not even after you were living in town?” Adir was clearing the dishes, but he stopped and frowned.

“I didn’t have a lot of extra money, and I figured it would be an expensive day.” Not that I hadn’t wanted to go, or hadn’t been super sad sitting at home while everyone else was at the fairgrounds just outside the town limits.

Byron gritted his jaw so hard, I heard his teeth grind. “I hate that you lacked things you needed. That you were thrown out on your own. But more, I hate that you might not have been. That your whole life could have featured you mated against your will to someone who didn’t love you. Who wasn’t your true mate.”

Adir set the dishes he held by the sink and gripped the edge of the counter. He was facing away from me, but I could see the tension in his whole body.

“Adir?” I got up and moved over to him. “Are you all right?” I laid a hand on his back, wanting to offer comfort. “You’re not upset over me?”

He turned, slowly, and wrapped his arms around me, lifting me to his chest and holding me so tightly my breath whooshed out. “Never again, Evangeline. Nobody will ever hurt you again while I am alive.”

Another embrace encircled me from behind, and I was between them, the heat and strength of their bodies completely shutting out anything but their scent and the security they brought. Could I trust them? Deep inside, a part of me protested trusting anyone, but I was going to. This feeling of safety and desire and the first flare of something else, something I didn’t dare to name, was worth it, even if I crashed and burned in the end.

But at some point, I needed to breathe, so I managed to suck in just enough to wheeze, “I-I, can you guys loosen up?”

“Do we have to?” Adir’s lips were on my face, brushing my mouth, my cheeks, my nose.

I nodded. No more air for words, and they let me slide to my feet. They were still on either side of me, still holding me, supporting me but not squeezing me. “Thank you.”

“Anything for you,” Byron said. “Ready for pie?”

“No, but I’m ready for something else.” I swallowed hard. “Just take it slow, okay? I’m new to all this...”

“Just so we don’t goof and do anything you don’t want, are you suggesting we take you to bed and make love to you?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Claim you?” Adir added. “Because we’re not going to do this until you’re ready for everything.”

That flare in my heart grew. “I...yes. Because I haven’t waited this long to give myself to someone without going full speed ahead.”

Byron’s laugh rumbled against my back. “You make us sound like a flotilla of boats.”

I let my head rest against his chest, tipping my face up to his. “Whatever works. Now, if you guys aren’t ready, I don’t want to pressure you into something that—” Byron’s lips crashed onto mine, stealing the breath I’d just gotten back and showing me how ready he was.

They carried me to Adir’s room and stood me between them again, undressing me slowly and tenderly, caressing with lips and hands each bit of skin they revealed. They murmured loving, sweet things, complimentary things, but I was already lost in a haze of sensuality words could only drift through. I didn’t say anything in return because my limbs were loose and my brain was foggy and their hands were carrying me into a place that I didn’t even know I could go. Didn’t even know was anywhere.

When all my clothes were gone, they settled me on the bed and undressed themselves with much more speed, falling onto the bed on either side of me in seconds. I bounced and giggled.

“One more time, you’re sure, Evangeline?” Adir asked, nibbling on my throat.

Byron’s fingers circling my nipple were not helping my coherence, but I managed to force out a yes because I was afraid if I didn’t, they might stop, and I’d die from want of them.

This agreement seemed to be enough, thank all the gods and goddesses. Everything sped up from there, their hands and lips seeming to cover more of me than two men should be able to. Not that I knew. And while Adir was kissing my lips, Byron knelt between my legs and parted them. He stroked me there, in the spot no man ever had. “You’re so ready for us, little virgin. So wet for us.”

I hoped that was okay but he seemed to be happy about it, circling the place in the front where I touched when I wanted release.

“She’s soaking, Adir.”

I writhed under them, Adir's mouth moving to my breasts, back and forth, nibbling and tasting and sucking. He stopped long enough to say, "I take a good share of credit."

Choking back a laugh at his cocky comment, I closed my eyes and gave myself over to them entirely. Byron's fingers continued their slow, tantalizing play, but something bigger and harder was right at my entrance, my untried way-too-small-for-something-that-huge place. A frisson of fear ran down my spine, quickly replaced by a mind-blowing orgasm. My own touch never made this happen, I thought before things went dark and even hazier. I was still swimming in the climax when he pierced me, the pain mixing in with the pleasure so that the cry wrung from me was a mix of everything.

He paused there for a moment. "Are you all right, mate?"

I groaned and grabbed for his hips. "Don't...stop."

So he didn't. While Adir continued to touch me everywhere else, wakening all my nerve endings to join the party, Byron drove into me again and again. He cupped my bottom with both hands, changing the angle and managing to stroke something way deep inside with each retreat, until suddenly he roared and came, filling me with heat. Adir moved to my left side, sinking his teeth into my throat while Byron did the same on my right. The coppery scent of blood rose to my nostrils, but I felt no fear. Scaredy-cat Evangeline was gone, the newer, braver, happier version claimed by her mates.

We lay together, holding one another and then napped for a while. When we woke again, I welcomed Adir into me, wrapping my thighs around his hips and clinging to him, already claimed but needing this as well, needing both of them to make love to me. I'd be sore in the morning, already was, but it was worth it, and I would get used to it.

I didn't need ninety days to love them.

These silly bears had made me theirs, and I wasn't going anywhere.

Morning came all too soon, and with it all the aches I'd expected and more. I rolled over with a groan, reaching for my mates only to find the bed empty on either side of me. But before I could panic, voices reached me from down the hallway. My mates arguing about something. Then Adir stuck his head in the door.

"Oh good. You're awake. Byron wants to know what kind of juice you like."

"Grapefruit," I said, just to watch his face change when he had to tell me he didn't have it. I was a little cocky after getting laid by my mates.

"All right," he said and disappeared again. Lucky I liked grapefruit because I was going to have it, even if they had to go to the store. They didn't, though, because a moment later, they were both back with a tray laden with coffee and juice and pastry. After getting me propped on pillows against the headboard, they settled it over my lap and flopped on either side of me.

I steadied the tray, not wanting to wear the coffee or anything else. "Well, good morning, mates. I woke up all alone and thought you'd abandoned me."

"No." Adir looked far less cheerful at my tease than I expected. "I had a phone call to make." He picked up a bear claw and took a bite.

"And while he did that," Byron added, "I ran to the bakery. Try a Danish. They have six flavors so I got them all."

I recognized a distraction when I heard one. "Phone call? This early? Is everything all right?"

Adir turned a gaze on me that made me shrink back against the pillows. "It will be. Turns out, the shifter council had no idea your pack was engaging

in such unlawful practices. We filed a complaint on your behalf as well as ours as your mates.”

“Wow.” I didn’t know where to go with this. “Less than twelve hours after you claim me, you are taking legal action as my mates.”

I expected them to ask if it had been okay, but they didn’t. Fierceness poured from them. “Even if you weren’t our mate, we’d have done it,” Byron said. “But this gives us extra status and elevates the complaint faster. Your alpha and those who support his actions will be removed from the pack and brought before the council. Forced matings are rape. And that is not condoned by the council. The elder I spoke with was shocked that it had been going on for so long, but she admitted that some packs do keep to themselves and unless a complaint comes in, they may never know what’s going on.”

“They will need your testimony, mate,” Adir added. “But you can do it via Zoom. Councilor Amanda does not require females or anyone to face their attempted rapists in person.”

It was all happening so fast.

By the end of the day it was done. Councilor Amanda had taken it personally that something like that happened practically under her nose and promised to make sure that the packs that kept a low profile got visits every so often from a council representative. She wasn’t going to arrest every male who’d taken part since it had been the “way” things were done, but she was going after those in charge.

The next morning, I got a text from the councilor thanking me for participating in the actions of justice and telling me that the council was anxious to ensure that the victims of that system had any help they need. Women who had been mated against their will would be moved to another pack with their offspring if they chose, to have a fresh start. I was wiping happy tears and typing a thank-you message when the doorbell rang.

I heard Byron and Adir talking to someone, but I didn't think much of it. After all, they'd lived here for years and the only people I knew in the area were my mates.

So the voice I heard next hit me deep in my gut and made my tears turn to sob.

"Hello, Eva." Arms came around my waist from behind and the sweet scent of violets enveloped me.

"M-Mom?" I turned around, eager to see the beloved face. "How did you...what did you?"

"I missed you, little one. Your brothers and sisters are outside. We didn't want to stay another day, and the council said we could join any pack we wanted. So we're joining you."

I was still crying, sniffing and hugging her. "But there's no pack near here...is there?" Actually how would I know?

"She's joining us, mate." Byron stood in the doorway smiling at us. "In the guesthouse out back, there's plenty of room for your family."

"And there is a pack nearby," Adir added. "That she can join if she likes them."

"We have a guesthouse?" Processing was too hard. I'd only been here such a short time, I hadn't ever been in the backyard.

"I'm glad you're saying 'we,'" Adir said. "And yes, we do."

Dinner was huge, Byron pulling off enough for the entire family while we all chattered and celebrated being together. I looked at my little sisters who would not have to be humiliated and mated by force, my brothers who would never be the men who treated other females that way, and my mother, who looked happy for the first time since we lost my father.

"Who wants dessert?" Byron asked, and received the cheers of my siblings in return. My mates and I went into the kitchen for the cake, and I

threw my arms around them both.

“I love you both so much. You did everything you promised and so much more.”

“We love you, too, mate,” Adir said. “We’re only doing what mates do for each other.”

“Not back where I come from,” I muttered.

“No, not then but maybe now.” Byron kissed my cheek. “The moment we saw your face, we knew you were the one for us.”

I sucked in a breath. That was just what the daydream guy said, so long ago. Or not so long ago but a lifetime nonetheless. I would have to tell them about it one day. “Hey, I’ve been wondering, how did you decide who would be the first one to...you know...”

“To make love to you?”

“Well, I think you were doing that together, but the first one to be inside me.” My cheeks were flaming, and I was speaking very low so nobody in the dining room would hear. What a time to ask.

Epilogue

Evangeline

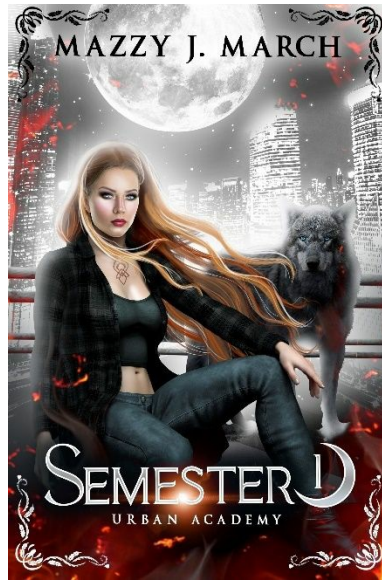
We finally made it to the beach below the cliff, but not quite as in my fantasy. My guys had already claimed me, and that made them mine forever. This day was a less formal situation, a family barbecue to celebrate another mating. My sister, just two years younger, had met a young wolf in the local pack and fallen madly in love with him. Fortunately, it was mutual and clearly fated.

I sat on a chair near the water's edge, watching the joy on Sarah's face as she splashed water on her new mate. So much new for our family here. In fact, one could say that my mates gave me back my family. Mom and the other kids were still in the guesthouse, but they spent a lot of time with the pack, and rumor had it that she'd been spending some time with a certain older wolf who had a glint in his eye.

Adir and Byron were at the grill, along with members of the pack and their sleuth, and the scents of sizzling meat rolled over the sand, enough to feed a lot voracious top-of-the-food-chain shifters. Many of those who had been thrown out of the old pack had been tracked down and offered help, but not my cousin. Maybe one day we'd find her; hopefully she was doing well and had found a safe landing.

A flutter in my belly brought a smile to my lips. I'd tell them tonight, when we were alone. We'd soon have a cub, bear or wolf, I thought they'd be happy either way.

An Excerpt from [Urban Academy Semester 1](#)



Chapter One

Valentina

Getting off this musty bus, its suspension begging for mercy over every bump and change in speed, would be a blessing.

Even if I didn't know where in the hell I was going.

The hiss and chuff of the brakes caused me to stiffen in unsurety. My hand gripped my duffle, the contents of my entire life in the generic-branded bag, as the bus came to a stop.

I suspected the driver was a creeper. His gaze had dug into me repeatedly over the course of the trip from Tennessee; one of those times, he smiled. Eew.

"Have a good vacation," he murmured at a volume low enough to evade human hearing.

"Yeah. You, too."

Good grief, I needed more sleep. I'd just told the bus driver to have a good vacation. A hot meal, a shower, and a place to rest would do me good.

Now to find one of those places.

After the bus sputtered its way to moving again, I saw a shiny, bright building. It was completely out of place in this cozy town, but I'd seen stranger things. There was something about the mirrored windows, the glitz, that called to me. Also, it looked to be a place where people with money gave people like me a job.

A job was what I needed most.

Bag in hand, I crossed the street, dodging a car blowing its horn. The air smelled like any small town. Cinnamon, vanilla, and roasted coffee beans made my stomach growl as the rumble of car engines and chatter of people talking on their phones tainted the peace.

The handle was a cool steel and, as I opened it, a man in a suit came out,

grumbling, something about his new curriculum not selling.

Did people really sell door-to-door anymore? Apparently, that guy didn't get the memo.

“Good morning, dear. How can we help you?”

I noticed posters above the woman's head, signs pointing to different offices, and one girl blew by me, wearing a cute outfit and carrying a backpack. “Is this a school?” I asked, in shock and awe. Maybe it was because I came from a smaller town, but this was nothing like what my high school looked like.

Not even close.

The woman tsked. “Of course this is a school. We don't call it one though. This is the Urban Academy. Higher education for our kind.” Her voice dropped a few octaves when she muttered the last two words. “Are you here for an application? Is it your first day? Did you just move here? Let's pull up your schedule.”

Her mouth was running fifty-seven thousand miles a minute, not giving me a chance to answer or even scoff in rebuttal.

“Ma'am, I'm just here to find a job. I got off a bus a few minutes ago. This was the first place I saw.”

Her entire demeanor changed. Most people's did when they realized they weren't talking to an equal—they were talking to the help. “Ah, I see. Excuse me for the confusion. You look right about the correct age to be one of our students. It's funny you should stop here first. We actually had an availability come up yesterday morning. Give me a few minutes. You've come right in the middle of our St. Valentine's Day ball.”

A ball? Like glittery dresses and tuxes and sweet kisses under heart-shaped balloons?

Ugh, I thought I might dry-heave right there.

Someone came out of a room to my right, opening both double doors. He was wearing a tux and, from the way sweat was beading on his forehead, and he sighed in relief, I would've guessed this thing wasn't his first choice as an extracurricular activity. The soothing melody of a slow song escaped the room. There was something about this place and, before I knew what I was doing, I had my head inside the door, watching in fascination.

And here I thought dances were for high school.

Clearly, I was wrong.

The girls wore elegant, flowing dresses. There were guys, most of them in tuxes, some of them opting for the comedic T-shirt that mimicked the tux. The place was decorated ceiling to floor as though a bag of conversation hearts had combusted right there in the center, underneath the pink and red disco ball, the glimmering squares throwing hues of rose and magenta all over the place.

I didn't go to my prom.

It seemed like some antiquated ritual that I would end up hating. Instead, I still thought about it from time to time.

A smile tugged at my lips as a guy from the sidelines sauntered up to a girl who looked shy. Her shoulders curved as he approached, her blush highlighting her sweet face.

Going to a dance must be fun.

"Excuse me...I didn't get your name." I didn't give her my name? Wow, what a stellar way to land a job.

"Valentina," I replied and pulled myself away from the daydreaming and longing for a life I didn't have.

"Well, right this way, Valentina."

I followed the woman down a starched-stiff hallway, painted all white with gray doors. Someone was allergic to color here.

“Here you go.” The woman waved me into an office, the same lifeless gray as the doors. “Mrs. Chambers, she’s here.”

Another woman sitting at a large desk waved me inside and gestured for me to sit. She asked questions about my age, my work history, and my schedule.

“You do understand that the janitorial staff works at night. You come in at 8 p.m. and leave promptly at 5 a.m.”

I nodded. At this point, I would take anything. “That’s fine.”

She looked at me over her glasses. Her hair was pulled up into such a severe bun that it tugged at the corners of her eyes, making her crow’s feet stand out even more. “You’re willing to clean. That means mopping and sweeping and scrubbing toilets and emptying garbage cans? You realize that’s what you will be doing, right?”

I nodded but couldn’t contain the smile. “I assumed since the position was janitorial.”

“And you’re not opposed to that?”

I snorted. “Cleaning? No.”

“Huh,” she said, and asked for my driver’s license and other pertinent information. “Young people are usually above cleaning. Too good for manual labor.”

I didn’t know much about this woman or what this place was, but people my age, in my experience, were always hard workers. Especially where I was from, there were lumberjacks, contractors, firefighters, and all kinds of people who had intense, laborious jobs.

“When can I start?” I asked, eager for money coming in.

“Tomorrow night. By then, we will have everything ready for you, including an ID card and your dorm room. See you then. Remember...eight sharp.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I left with a spring in my step. Maybe this moving across the country with nothing but your own courage wasn’t so bad after all.

Chapter Two

The sidewalks were wide, the buildings tall, and I had nowhere to go tonight.

I don't know what even made me pick this city to live in, except that it was the first place that came to mind. Cindra and Bob took me in when our parents passed and had so kindly let me stay with them until I grew up. Bob worked so hard to try to get ahead, but with my sister's getting laid off a year ago, things were tight and tensions rose between them. They couldn't even afford to start a family of their own.

I'd gotten a work permit from school, but it wasn't easy for me to earn enough to be a big help at minimum wage and part-time hours.

Then, out of nowhere, a position at Bob's import firm opened up in the South Pacific. Tahiti. Paradise. All expenses paid for him and my sister, and any underage children, had they had any. I heard them talking about it when they thought I was asleep, and I knew what I had to do. They would never have asked me to move out, but neither could they afford my expenses, so he was going to turn down the job. I could not allow that to happen.

They'd taken me on so soon after their wedding, they'd never had a honeymoon. Given me everything I needed. And, finally, I had an opportunity to repay them a little. The next morning, over granola and coffee, I told them my lie. I'd received a job offer and partial scholarship to a college across the country from where we lived, and I really wanted to accept, if they could do without me.

Oh, they tried to act like they were upset, but the relief on their faces outspoke any protests. They said they'd miss me, and I knew they would, but if they were ever going to have a life of their own, I'd have to find mine. It

sounded harder than hard, but it would be worth it.

I took the bus here, to save money, and Bob dropped me off. He gave me a hug right before I boarded then stood and waved as the bus pulled out. I didn't realize until we were hundreds of miles away that he'd also slipped an envelope into my hoodie pocket. A hoodie holding all the money I'd given them to help with household expenses.

My sister had penned a note on the envelope:

You are the best sister ever. I thank the goddess for you every day. Take care and send me pictures of all your campus hijinks. XO, Becky

I'd had a little money before that, a couple of paychecks' worth. Not enough for anything really. Now, I might be able to rent an apartment or something. But they'd needed that money, and I could only imagine how much love it had taken to hold onto it instead of using it for the bills. My eyes burned and my nose itched. My throat swelled even now at the memory. Bob and Becky were in Tahiti by now, sitting on some beach, sipping a tropical drink and planning their family.

Not that I wasn't, but my sister had longed for a baby. And now, with his promotion, they could finally try for one.

But while thinking of them wading in a warm ocean made me happy, it didn't find me a place to sleep tonight. I'd been walking for a while and had to admit I wasn't even sure how to go about finding an apartment or something. Somehow, I'd envisioned a really special place like a pool house or maybe some other additional living space. Something nontraditional and interesting.

But how did one go about finding such a place? I'd already checked all the online listings I knew to look at, and all I'd found were a lot of apartments in big complexes with huge rents. None of those would work for me. The evening wore on and not only was I getting nervous at being all

alone on the unfamiliar streets at night, but it was far too late to hope to find any kind of rental office open.

When I said all alone, I meant in terms of having a family member or friend with me. There were plenty of people out there, most of whom looked like they'd kill me for the modest amount of money in my jeans pocket. Or maybe I was just being overly dramatic. Growing up in a smallish town, I knew almost everyone I encountered on the streets day or night. And few of them were what I'd call wild or unconventional. Most people had the color hair they were born with or maybe had highlights or something, and if they had tattoos, they were hidden for the most part under clothes. Jeans and shirts. Skirts and blouses.

After a few hours of the city, I was starting to wonder if our town was trapped in another decade. Midway down a block of ratty-looking buildings, I came upon a line of people mostly about my age. It looped down a side street going who knew how long. Their clothes were tight, shiny, and revealed most of those tattoos and a few piercings as well. I crossed the street, feeling dowdy and unattractive in the face of their bright hair and dramatic makeup—in many cases on both men and women.

So tired I ached, I stumbled on, wondering what I'd been thinking. Coming here had been a mistake, and maybe I should use my money for a bus ticket back where I came from. I could take up my old job, if it was still available, behind the counter at the Gas 'n' Stock, and maybe get some hours at the diner. I'd be struggling but not feel like a fish out of water. I could probably rent a room from someone...

But then...what kind of a life would that be if I gave up and slunk back with my tail between my legs without even trying? Up ahead, a sign blinked *otel* in orange neon letters. The H was out somehow. Too tired to go another block, I climbed the short flight of steps and pushed open the door to find

myself in a room too small to be called a lobby. Behind a plexiglass barrier sat a middle-aged man looking at something on a tablet. I waited, but he didn't acknowledge my presence.

"Hello?" I finally said. "Do you have any rooms?"

"Is the vacancy sign lit up?" he asked, still staring at the small screen.

"I-I didn't see one." I started to turn toward the door again, but his low chuckle brought me back.

"Because we don't have one. Are you sure you're in the right place? This ain't the place for tourists."

"I'm not a tourist. I just moved to town, and I am going to find an apartment tomorrow. For tonight, I need a room." I raised my voice, wondering why I told him so much but just wanting an answer. "So, do you have a room available?"

"Sign here." He pushed a clipboard with a pile of papers on it toward me. "Fifty-four ninety-five for the night, single room, shared bathroom down the hall."

And didn't that sound awesome? But the money was not as bad as it could have been, and I could just hope there were no bedbugs.

"Fine. I'll take it."

About Mazzy J. March

Mazzy J. March is a fan of all things paranormal—shifters, vampires, witches...dragons and all the many creatures that inhabit the world beyond the ordinary. She has been plotting her Academy and RH stories for a long time and is thrilled to finally have them releasing and ever grateful to the readers who are offering such support and helping her dreams come true.

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