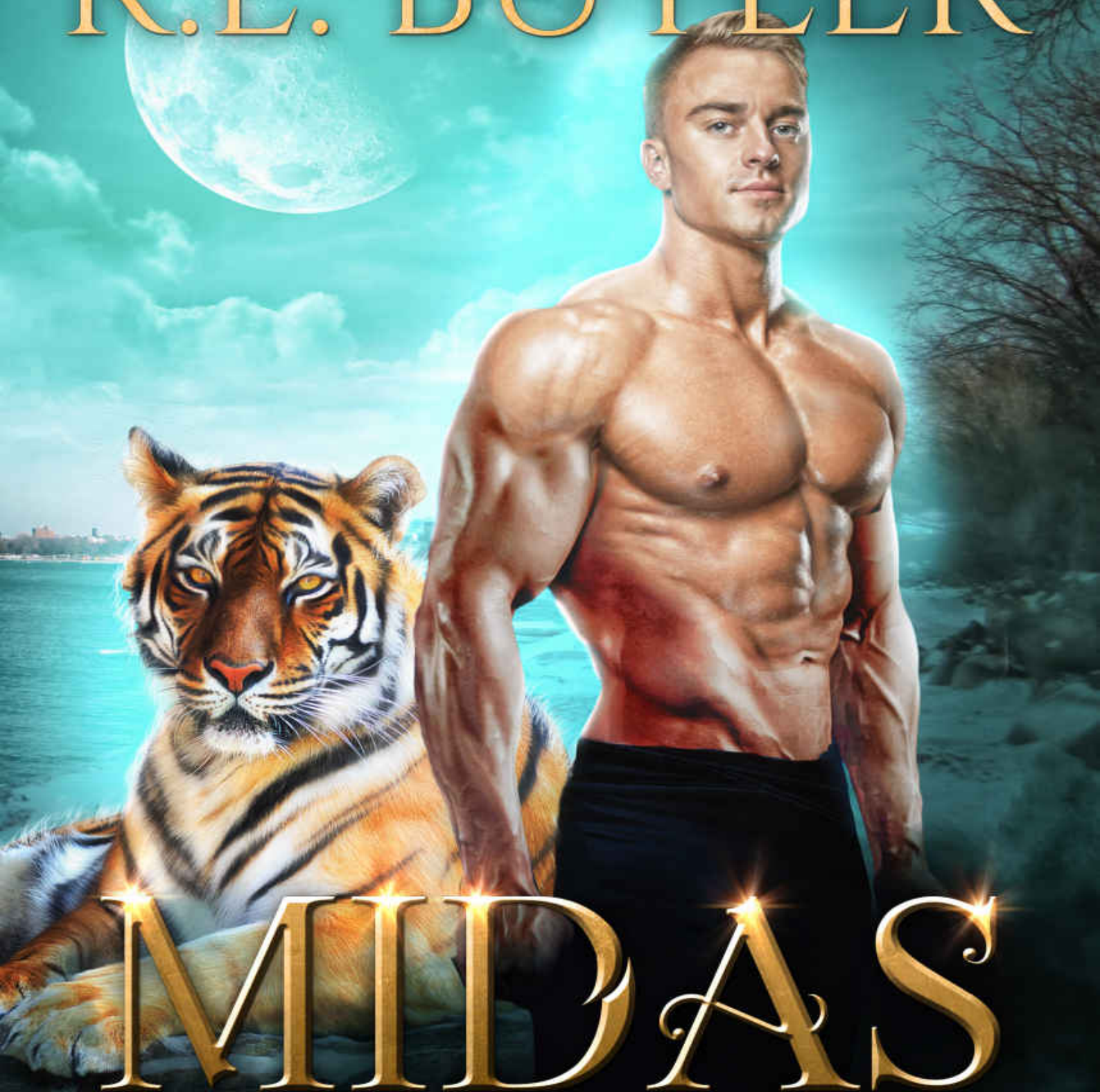


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
R.E. BUTLER



# MIDAS

CLEVELAND SUPERNATURALS  
BOOK ONE

**MIDAS**

# CLEVELAND SUPERNATURALS BOOK ONE

R. E. BUTLER

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CHAPTER  
**ONE**

“Did you really just say that?” Midas Ledger asked as he stared at the female standing in front of him.

“Yeah, I mean, you’re the king. Why can’t we cut the line and get into the restaurant? They should care that you’re eating here.” She let out an exasperated sigh. “They should care that we’re on a date.”

“I think only you care,” he said. He’d never been with someone who cared so much that he was king of the Whisper Creek tigers, and that included himself.

“What?” She blinked heavily mascaraed eyes up at him. “Of course I care.” She made a crooning sound and squeezed his biceps. “You’re the most powerful male around, you should be treated like a king because you are.”

Stifling his tiger’s annoyed growl, he grasped her elbow and maneuvered her out the front door of the restaurant. Snow and wind whipped against him, but he ignored the sting of the icy flakes.

“Stop mentioning that I’m king. I know it and now every damn person in there does.”

“They should.”

“No, they shouldn’t. I’m just a male who happens to be the head of a tiger ambush. I’m not some damn monarch from another country.”

“Well, it’s a perk of being...the leader. You should be treated special.”

He scrubbed a hand through his hair and let out an exasperated sigh. “Darla, this is not going to work.”

She made a face. “If we have to wait for a table, then fine. At least get me a drink at the bar.”

“No, I mean you and I are not working.”

She blinked a few times and then tilted her head slowly. “What? Because I want you to be treated well?”

“No, because you’re chasing after my title and not me. It shouldn’t matter what my rank is in the ambush, it should matter if I’m a good person or not. Which, FYI, I’ve come to realize you aren’t.” Hell, he’d been ignoring red flags for weeks with the tigress from an ambush in New York. He’d met her a month earlier at a tiger gathering in Pennsylvania that he’d gone to with a few of his unmated ambush members. She was pretty, but she was shallow. He’d been lonely, so he ignored the red flags, but her behavior in the restaurant was the last straw.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “I’m sorry, baby, I promise that I care about you. Let’s go to your place instead. We don’t need to eat out tonight.” She purred a little, her eyes flashing to the blue of her tiger, but he could tell by the way her scent didn’t change that she wasn’t aroused in the slightest at the thought of going home with him. And wasn’t that a kick in the beanbags.

“It’s over, Darla.” He lifted his phone and texted Romeo, his number two, to come to the restaurant. The male had driven them to the restaurant and was hovering nearby, waiting to be called.

“What? No! No, please, Midas. I promise I was just being silly.” Her voice went high, and tears filled her eyes, but there was no mistaking the lack of emotion in her voice. She was a female looking to hook up with the highest ranked male, and he’d foolishly ignored all the warnings, not to mention that his cat could not care less about her.

She reached for him, her long nails scratching his forearm.

Extracting her hands from him, he walked to the car as Romeo pulled up to the curb. He opened the door and gestured inside.

“Romeo will take you home.”

Her face brightened, hope flaring in her gaze. “You’re coming with me, right?”

“No. I said he’s taking you home.”

“But I’m staying with you. Your house is my home.”

He bit back an aggravated snarl. “Your home is New York, you were simply a guest in my house, and that time has come to an end. Romeo will take you home, and I’ll have your things sent to you.”

Midas gave Romeo an apologetic look, but the male simply nodded and opened the address bar of the GPS screen.

Darla stomped her foot. “No! It can’t end this way. You have feelings for me. Let’s go to the house to talk.”

“Absolutely not. You can get in the car, or I can call a car service for you.”

“I don’t accept this.”

“It doesn’t matter. Now do you want me to help you get home, or do you want to handle it yourself? I’m an honorable male, but I will only give you so much leeway. You’re no longer welcome in Whisper Creek, and I don’t care to see you again.” He waited while she stared at him, fuming. If her gaze was a weapon, he’d be bleeding. “What’s it going to be, Darla?”

“You can go fuck yourself.” She stormed off down the sidewalk, putting her phone up to her ear as she strode away.

“You want me to follow her?” Romeo asked.

Midas shook his head. “I offered to get her home, and she rejected it, so it’s on her.”

He shut the back door and got into the passenger seat with a sigh.



“You want to go somewhere?”

“Like where?”

“Lykos.” When he didn’t answer right away, Romeo said, “It might take your mind off things.”

“Like my shitty dating luck?”

Romeo pulled away from the curb. “Yeah.”

Midas snorted. “Why the hell not.”



LYKOS, a shifter-friendly bar outside downtown, was busy with a line out the front of people waiting for the bouncers to check their IDs. The local wolf pack owned the club and a fallen angel named Paris managed the place. Cleveland was unique in that it was home to a myriad of different shifter groups, including dragons, falcons, white lions, and bears, not to mention the vampires and wiccans, who were all allied to help each other if needed. Each group lived in their own territory with plenty of space between them, but it was good to have places like Lykos where they could gather safely. Human-run bars were fine, but shifters often preferred not to deal with them.

Occasionally some issues arose from unmated males posturing over unmated females, but it was well known that Paris didn’t put up with anyone’s shit, so it tended to be a rare occurrence.

For a moment, Midas considered waiting in line instead of utilizing Paris’s gesture to allow leaders in immediately. Midas had just recently accused Darla of using his rank and position for her own benefit. But it was damn cold outside, and he’d had a hell of a night so far.

Romeo parked in the private lot, and he and Midas headed inside the club through a back door that entered through a kitchen and storage.

“You thought about waiting with the peons,” Romeo said, shaking the snow from his dark hair.

“Yep.”

“That’s dumb.”

“Because I’m king?” Midas asked as he grabbed the door and held it for his number two.

“No, because it’s cold as all get out, and I don’t want to freeze off any protruding parts of my body.”

Midas grinned as Romeo passed him by.

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

Romeo paused before entering the crowded club. “Maybe you’ll find your truemate tonight.”

Midas looked past him to the dance floor where bodies writhed, painted with lasers and strobes. “I kind of doubt she’s here.”

“Well, maybe you just need to get laid?”

“Getting laid is what got me in trouble in the first place,” Midas said, grimacing. He’d definitely been thinking with his dick when he hooked up with Darla.

They headed inside, finding an empty table after grabbing drinks. Midas was in a pissy mood but was also thankful to be free of the albatross around his neck. He hadn’t realized how unhappy he’d been with Darla over the last few weeks until he’d cut ties with her.

“Want to dance?”

Midas glanced up from his beer to see a female standing in front of the table, a few other females in a loose circle behind her.

The female looked young, but with long-life it was often impossible to tell how young a person actually was. For example, Midas had been on the planet for seventy years but looked to be in his early twenties.

He appreciated a bold female and decided to put away his wariness and just have a good night.

“Sure.”

He slipped from the table and followed her to the floor. The song was fast, the lasers and strobe lights painting the pretty female in an array of colors. She was tall and slender, with wavy blond hair. There were too many competing scents to figure out what she was, but it didn't take long for him to realize she knew exactly who he was.

“I haven't seen you here in a while,” she said, loud enough for him to hear her over the music.

“I don't come all that often,” he said.

He turned her around on the floor, drawing her close and trying to figure out if she was human or a shifter. The only thing he knew for sure was that she wasn't part of his ambush.

“Too bad. You're pretty sexy.” She giggled, her eyes going wide like she was surprised by her boldness.

What was he supposed to say to that?

So he didn't say anything, he simply smiled and kept dancing.

“Come on,” she said, grasping his shirt and pulling him down toward her. “Can't the tiger king say I'm sexy too?”

As he inhaled, he finally caught her scent...human. It wasn't an issue in and of itself for a quick tumble in the sheets, but he wasn't looking to start anything with someone who had a finite existence while his lifespan was on slow mode.

Plus, there was the whole tiger king thing, which he was over with in so many ways.

He twisted her hand from his shirt and gave her a tight smile.

“Were you looking for me in particular?”

“Of course.”

He let out a growl. “I’m not a toy or some kind of prize to win.”

At the growl, her eyes went wide, and fear flickered in them, which was swiftly replaced with annoyance. “Fine, be a jerk.”

He left the dance floor and returned to his table, mentally kicking himself for coming to the club. He wasn’t in the mood before he’d danced, and he especially wasn’t in the mood after.

“You look like you want to kill someone,” Paris said while picking up the empty bottle from the table and putting it on a tray. The big male had dark hair and stormy gray eyes, plus a scar on his cheek from a battle with a demon a century earlier.

Midas looked at the male. “You have a female in your life?”

“Nope. I’m immortal. That makes it difficult.”

“True. I thought long-life was a hassle when it came to dating, but immortality must have its own burdens.”

“Definitely.”

Romeo showed up at the table and fist-bumped Paris. “You wanna jet, boss?”

“Yeah.” Midas stood and shook Paris’s hand.

“Hey,” Paris said, his eyes turning from gray to bronze for a heartbeat, “your true mate will come when the time is right and not a second before. A door is waiting to be opened.”

Midas arched a brow. “You psychic or something?”

“Nah,” Paris said, chuckling. “Just have a feeling. Take it easy.”

Midas watched the male as he moved away, picking up bottles and empty glasses from tables and speaking animatedly to the patrons. Underneath the dark shirt he wore would be marks on his back where his wings had been severed by a heavenly blade when he opted to stop being an angel and become, instead, a fallen one.

“That male has secrets and regrets,” Romeo said.

“Don’t we all.”

“True. Let’s get the hell back to Whisper Creek.”

Midas nodded and walked away from the table, weaving through the crowd and heading out the back door. The night air was crisp and cold, but the snow had stopped. He inhaled deeply to clear the mixture of scents from his nose. The night had proven only one thing to him, and that was his decision to never tell a female he was king until he knew he had her heart. He didn’t want to risk getting involved with someone who was only after him for his rank.

“What do you think he meant by a door is waiting to be opened?” Romeo asked.

Midas opened the passenger door and sat. “No clue. I doubt it means anything.”

But in his heart, he wondered: did it actually mean something? And if there was a door, who was behind it?

CHAPTER  
TWO

Maya Freehold sat in the coven's library and leaned back in the old wooden chair, which creaked a little and made her freeze. She waited, holding her breath, wondering if it would crack into kindling and send her tumbling ass over teakettle into the bookshelves next to her. But it didn't, it stayed strong, thank goodness.

Relaxing a little, she rested her head against the wall and stifled a yawn.

Her coven held monthly meetings and required all the wiccans to attend, whether they were natural or unnatural. Maya was a natural wiccan, from a long line of wiccans including her crazy Aunt Tilly and her mom, Beatrix, rest her soul. The coven only had a few unnatural wiccans, who were human but had some magical leanings that could be nurtured.

"I saw that yawn," Tilly whispered from her other side.

"I tried to be quiet," Maya said. "It's too early for meetings."

"You know Glennis and her meetings," Tilly said sagely.

Glennis, North Corner and head of the coven, liked to hear herself speak. She was a pleasant female, but she could drone the heck on about nothing much and waste hours. Maya would much rather be doing anything else than sitting in the old library and listening to the North Corner go on about the upcoming activities.

Maya folded her arms and focused, but her brain immediately strayed to something she'd seen online the day

before. A coven in Cleveland had placed a recruitment ad on a popular wiccan site.

*Small coven looking for natural and unnatural wiccans to join us in the northern part of the beautiful state of Ohio. Relocation expenses included. Please contact Lorene, North Corner, for more information.*

Maya knew why she was thinking about the Cleveland coven. First, because Cleveland had a reputation for being a supernatural hotspot, with many different shifters and other types calling it home. And second, because Maya had zero rank in her current coven. She didn't necessarily want to be a Corner, but Glennis had heavily recruited powerful wiccans over the years, and that meant that Maya—although powerful in her own right—had no responsibility in the coven because there were a handful of others who had her same strength or better. Because there were so many powerful wiccans in the coven, Maya was rarely ever called on to use her powers for anything other than the general spells cast together by the whole coven. Hell, she hadn't used her power over air in ages. Except for last weekend when she'd had a pile of debris on her front porch, and she'd sent it off into the yard with a blast of air.

Certainly not the best use of her power.

Air was one of those weird powers that people didn't think was impressive. Not like water or fire. Or even earth. You couldn't really see air until there was something in it, like leaves or dirt. Or a cow, like in that one tornado movie.

The solstice and equinox celebrations were boring as hell while she stood on the outside of the main circle and simply watched instead of participating.

She hadn't even been able to get a job at the coven's store to help people with spells and supplies.

It was tough to be a nobody.

When the meeting was finally over, Maya offered her arm to Tilly, who took it and walked alongside her to the home they shared.

“I think I should go to Cleveland,” Maya said.

For a few moments there was only the rustle of the trees overhead and the swish of Tilly’s long skirt.

“It’s cold there. Colder than our tits in a brass bra.”

Maya snorted. “I know, but I’m not happy here. Hell, maybe I’ve never been happy.”

They stopped at the bottom of the porch leading to the quaint two-bedroom cabin, with a green roof and matching shutters, and an old swing that creaked loudly if you swung on it too fast.

“Is this about Van?”

Maya rolled her eyes. “No.”

Tilly’s eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Honestly, it’s not.”

Tilly hummed in a non-committal way that also sounded like she was accusing Maya of lying through her teeth. She walked up the steps and opened the front door, and Maya followed.

“I’m not uprooting my life and moving to a different state because Van was an ass.”

She’d dated the wolf shifter for about six months before the red flags started popping up like a parade. It had been casual at first and then as they got closer and she started to fall for him, he promptly showed his true colors: the pack would always come first, and she would always come second.

He’d even made it clear that if they mated and she had a son, that the son—his heir—would be second in his life and she’d take third place. Then he’d been surprised when she told him to take a hike, because she wasn’t playing second fiddle to the damn pack for the rest of her natural life.

“There’s nothing wrong with me wanting to be adored by the male I’m going to love forever,” Maya pointed out.

She closed the door and hung up her coat, then helped Tilly with hers.



“I’m not remotely saying there is. Van wasn’t right for you in any sense of the word, and I was worried for a little while that you were getting too serious. I’m just glad you saw the light before you got too involved with him.”

“Me too.”

The night she broke things off they’d had a date planned for several weeks—a concert that she’d been dying to go to. At the last minute, literally while he was driving them to the show, someone from the pack asked him to help them out and he’d turned around. By the time she got to her own car, the concert was half over, and she was pissed.

She didn’t think all shifters were that way, but Van was high ranked in his pack and that came with responsibilities, including putting the pack above others.

“I’m just never going to date a high-ranked shifter. Problem solved.”

Tilly went into the kitchen. Maya could hear the water and knew she was filling up a kettle for tea. She toed off her boots and set them on the rack, then went to the kitchen to sit.

“So why Cleveland?”

“Because they’re recruiting and it’s a smaller coven. I could be useful there. I want to help people, I want to be valuable.”

“You are, sweetling.”

“To you. I’m useless in our coven. Glennis won’t let any of the younger witches do anything worthwhile, and with everyone’s long-life I’ll be hundreds of years old before I get to do any good.”

“I understand. She’s been told that she should allow the younger generation to do more, but she’s the North Corner and can do what she wants with the coven.”

“Are you happy with the way it’s going here?”

Tilly turned the stove on and then faced Maya. “I’m too old to change things now. And besides, I want you to be happy and I know you haven’t been for a while. Once you came into

your power, I envisioned us working side by side at the store, casting spells to help people, but Glennis didn't allow it, so you've been stifled. You're so powerful but you don't get to share that gift with others. You should go. Go to Cleveland and spend time with Lorene and her Corners."

"Have you met her?"

"Here and there over the years, she's a lovely woman."

Maya toyed with a spoon left over from breakfast. "You could come with me."

"You're very sweet, but my life is here. We can visit each other."

Maya watched as Tilly went about setting up tea on the table and thought about her plans. Was she really going to do this? Leave her home and her closest relative and move to Northern Ohio to join a coven of people she didn't know?

If she didn't leave, she'd be doing nothing for the spring equinox but standing on the outside looking in.

So yes. Yes, she was going to reach out to Lorene and move to Cleveland to start the next chapter of her life. If she were writing a book, she might title the chapter, "Maya does something unexpected and hopes it doesn't blow up in her face."

"I'll miss you," she said finally.

The tea kettle whistled as if it were punctuating her sentence.

"I'll miss you too, but we won't be far apart, and we can always text and call each other. You're in my heart forever, even if you're not in my house."

Nerves skated through Maya as she bobbed a white peach tea bag in the mug of hot water, but she pushed them away. She could do scary things because she was a badass witch who was ready to see what the future held for her.

No matter what, she was going to go to Cleveland. She was very sure that her destiny lay in Northern Ohio.

CHAPTER  
**THREE**

Midas climbed from his pickup and walked briskly into the building his construction company was hired to renovate. The office building, across the street from the building housing the vampire coven's living quarters, offices, and club, was being remodeled into a bank which would be run by a group of polar bear shifters who'd recently allied themselves to Mishka, vampire master.

Whisper Creek was an hour from downtown, but Midas didn't mind the drive, plus the coven paid contractors well, and it was worth it for his company to take on the massive project. Turning a three-floor office building into a bank complete with bulletproof glass, offices, and living quarters on the top floor was no small task but he had a good group of people working for him and enjoyed a challenge.

Romeo opened the door as Midas approached.

"Morning, boss."

"Good morning." Midas stepped inside and shook off the snow from his coat.

Romeo had joined up with the ambush the previous year. Before him, Midas's second-in-command had been Jorah, a transplant from Florida, who'd found his truemate shortly after arriving in town and left to join up with her family's ambush in another state. Kings always had a second to handle day-to-day issues in the ambush and act as a bodyguard whenever he went about ambush business. Not that Midas really needed a

bodyguard. He was a badass tiger shifter, the most powerful male in the ambush.

But still, he didn't have eyes in the back of his head and needed someone to have his back. Romeo, despite his romantic name, was a tough male and a born fighter.

"I'm going to get back to work in the manager's office on the first floor," Midas said.

"Sounds good. I'm up on the third floor installing light fixtures."

Midas moved to go around the male, when he said, "Mishka would like you to check in with him. Cyrus said he wanted to see you."

Cyrus was part of the ambush, but also part of the vampire coven because he was mated to a vampire female named Cella.

"Why didn't Cyrus call me himself?"

"He did. You didn't answer."

Midas pulled his phone from his pocket. "Damn it, I had the ringer turned off. Okay, I'll run over after sunset."

Romeo nodded and they parted ways. Midas greeted the workers already at work inside the spacious first floor that would house the bank, including a large vault, wood and granite counters, a place for desks, and a manager's office.

The office looked out onto the street, but the glass was bulletproof and one-way, so no one could see inside, but the occupants could see outside. On the day's to-do list was to install a freaking expensive door to the office. The door had a wireless lock, which could be activated from the desk inside the office as well as with an app on a phone.

As he slung his jacket over a crate of floor tiles, he sighed.

His grandfather had been king before him, and he'd been the hardest working male Midas had ever known. He'd been mated at nineteen plus two, which meant that due to the long-life of shifters, who aged one body year for every thirteen that passed after age eighteen, his grandfather had met his soulmate at thirty-two and been mated to her for nearly three

hundred years before she passed away. He'd lived another couple of decades before passing away, and then Midas had taken over.

Midas had thought he'd be good and well mated by now. Some tigers chose a mate that wasn't their true mate—the one female on the planet for them—instead of waiting. He didn't consider himself a super romantic male, but he did want to wait for his one true mate.

Which made him kick himself once more that he'd let Darla stick around. A one-nighter had somehow turned into her moving into his house, although he hadn't let her stay in his room and instead had given her one of the guest rooms on the first floor.

Shaking his head to dispel the thoughts of his singleness, he picked up a power drill and got to work.



BRENT FOLEY, head of Humans Against Shifters, took a look at the tablet and then set it on the table in their makeshift headquarters near downtown Cleveland. He rested his hands on the worn surface and looked around the kitchen, which had become a hive of activity.

He'd come to Cleveland a few weeks earlier to help out his friend Jason, who'd run a similar anti-supernatural group, but geared toward hating vampires instead of shifters. Brent wasn't too crazy about vampires, but he hated shifters with every fiber of his being.

Then Jason had been attacked by a freaking hellhound and got himself a permanent vacation in the nuthouse, and Brent had decided to stick around. Not to avenge Jason—although he would probably go after the vampires at some point simply because he was an honorable male when it came to his friends—but to take out the beasts who called Northern Ohio home.

In all his years of going after shifters, he'd never encountered a place like Cleveland with so many different groups living nearby. Usually each major city had one shifter

group, which made it easier to pick them off and drive them away. Cleveland, on the other hand, had a variety of them: wolves, falcons, dragons, tigers, white lions, and bears.

He wasn't going to mess with the dragons because they were simply too big and dangerous to cross. And he wasn't going to mess with the bears, because they were too coordinated and good at killing people who came against them, and the falcons and white lions lived in a walled city, which made it a little more difficult to get to them.

But the tigers and wolves? They were fair game as far as he was concerned.

And hell, maybe he'd eventually figure out a way to take out the other groups too, but for now he was focusing on the easier to deal with groups, starting with the tigers.

Jason hated the tigers most because one of them had killed his brother Sean, who Brent remembered as being an idiot. But the tigers were a good choice to go after anyway. They lived in Whisper Creek, a small town an hour from downtown. The ambush ran a construction company, which was currently remodeling a building across the street from the vampire coven, that would become a bank and living quarters for the group who ran it.

He'd staked out the building with his right-hand man, Buck, for a few weeks and figured out the schedule quickly. During the day, the ambush worked at the building. Normally, he suspected the vampires would also be working at the building during the night hours, but they were working on a hotel of some kind a few blocks away.

Buck walked into the kitchen. "We're ready for you."

Brent nodded, picked up the tablet, and walked into the family room where the men and women he was closest to in the H.A.S. organization were gathered.

"Morning," he said, standing in the center of the room.

A chorus of responses came from them, and he gave a quick smile to the group and then nodded to Buck, who used the remote to turn on the television screen anchored to the wall

behind him. Brent linked his tablet to the TV and shared the screen. An image of Midas Ledger appeared.

“This is Midas, head of the Whisper Creek ambush,” Brent said. He swiped his finger across the screen a few times, showing different pictures of the man. “We don’t know how old he is, but he has shifter long-life, so it’s safe to say he’s older than he looks.” He showed an image of other people in the ambush. “A loose count of ambush members put their numbers in the sixties, but it’s likely higher than that. Their construction company is downtown for the foreseeable future as they work on a building remodel. They’re on location five days a week, Tuesday through Saturday, some arrive as early as six a.m., but no one stays later than six p.m.”

He flipped through images of the building. He hadn’t been able to get interior shots without arousing suspicion, but he got what he could with long-distance lenses and casually walking down the street to take pictures with his phone as he passed by.

He outlined his plan to take out the tigers, starting with Midas.

The room was silent when he finished speaking.

“Tonight?” Freddy, a man who’d been with Brent almost as long as Buck, asked.

“Yes. We roll out at midnight. Two teams. Volunteers?”

Hands shot up around the room and Brent smiled inwardly. It was so rewarding to know that people hated shifters as much as he did and that he could count on his people to stand with him.

He picked team leaders, then dismissed the group to handle assembling the teams.

Buck joined him as he left the room.

“We might take out some vampires, too.”

“I don’t really care about that,” Brent said. “But if it happens, it’ll be a nice homage to Jason.”

“Indeed. Where do you want me tonight?”

“With me. We’re going to observe how the teams work tonight and then watch the chaos.”

“I can’t wait. I hope we take them all out.”

Brent didn’t think they would be that lucky. But hopefully some tigers would fall, Midas among them. Without their king, they’d be easier to take out. He wanted to get the tigers out of the way and then he was going to set his sights on the wolf pack.

They were the ones he hated the most.



CHAPTER  
**FOUR**

Maya folded the last kitchen towel and set it in the drawer next to the sink. That last load of laundry, containing all the new towels she'd bought when she arrived in Cleveland, was the final item on her to-do list, and she was now officially moved in.

And it had miraculously only taken her two days.

The secret was to not have a ton of stuff and get a rental that came fully furnished. Her phone buzzed and she pressed the speaker button.

"This is Maya," she said, not recognizing the number on the screen.

"Hello, dear, it's Lorene."

"Oh hi! How are you?"

"Wonderful. Are you all settled? Do you need help unpacking?"

"I just finished unpacking. Thank you for the offer though."

"Well done. Would you have time to stop in today? I'd like to introduce you to a few more coven members and also show you around the shop so you can hit the ground running tomorrow."

"That's perfect. What time?"

"Five?"

"I'll be there."

“See you then.”

Maya pressed the button to end the call and glanced at the screen to check the time. She had a few hours to kill, so she decided to go for a drive and get to know the area.

She dressed in what she considered “classic witch” with a long skirt and peasant blouse, leaving her dark hair long with a colorful scarf used as a headband. Glancing at herself in the mirror hooked onto the back of the bedroom door, she smiled. She definitely got her fashion sense from Tilly.

She had a small two-door car that wasn’t fancy but got her from point A to point B without much fuss. She’d bought it because it was the perfect shade: sage green.

The quaint house disappeared in the rear view as she drove down the street that was filled with small homes on small lots, all owned by the coven and used for their members. She’d been offered a home by herself or sharing a home with another wiccan, and she’d opted to get her own place.

She’d never lived alone. She’d gone from living with her mom to living with Tilly. She was sure it would be fine to have a roommate, it was also going to be nice to be on her own.

She spent the next few hours driving around, stopping at boutiques and shops that caught her fancy, and grabbing a hot chocolate from a stand at a strip mall. It had single-handedly been the best hot chocolate she’d ever had, with whipped cream and dark chocolate shavings sprinkled on top.

The Cleveland Mother Earth Store was owned and run by the coven. Lorene, as North Corner, was the big boss, and the other three Corners: Bitty, Gwen, and Idurre were also in charge. It was open to the public, whether they were wiccan-gifted or not. The main part of the store sold everything from candles to herbs and books for spell casting, and the back part of the store contained offices and meeting rooms, where spells were cast and blessings were performed.

Once, Maya had been allowed to watch a baby blessing performed by Glennis, and it had been the sweetest thing she’d ever witnessed.

At least here in Cleveland she would have opportunities to use her magic to help others. That's really all she ever wanted to do.

She parked in the back and got out of her car, hugging her coat a little tighter around herself.

A woman stood at the back door, a plume of smoke wafting from her lips. When she drew near, Maya caught the scent of cloves from the cigarette.

"Hello, Gwen," Maya said, smiling at the frail, old woman. She was an unnatural wiccan and seventy-some years old. According to Lorene, her family line contained powerful wiccans, but they'd turned from their magic during the witch trials out of fear and the magic had ebbed. An unnatural wiccan could build up their magic, but it took an incredible amount of work and dedication. Gwen was powerful and a Corner, and that was testament to her perseverance.

"Hello there," she said, blowing smoke to the side. "How do you like your home?"

"It's so cute, I love it."

"I lived in one of those homes once upon a time. Now I stay with Bitty, and we keep each other out of trouble."

"I lived with my Aunt Tilly for a long time. She kept me on the straight and narrow too."

"That's always a good thing." Gwen stubbed out her cigarette and tucked the remainder into her pocket. "Ready to meet the coven?"

"Are they all here?"

"No, just the ones who work here. And Lorene's granddaughter is here as well, with her husbands."

Maya paused with her hand on the door. "Husbands? Like more than one?"

"Oh yes," Gwen said, adjusting the thick shawl around her shoulders. Maya pulled open the door and let her inside first, then followed. "That was quite the scandal. She has two were-

bear mates. She used to be a Corner but stepped down to join the den.”

“My ears are burning,” a feminine voice called out.

“They should be, you traitor,” Gwen called out.

“Hey! I’m here, aren’t I?”

Gwen grinned. “I love that girl. Miss her terribly.” She hooked her hand over Maya’s arm. “Let’s meet the people, and then maybe you can make me some tea. My joints are frozen solid.”

“Absolutely. I brought some tea I made myself from my garden, it’s apple cinnamon.”

“Sounds perfect.”

They walked into a large meeting room with built-in bookshelves on every wall, filled with books and knickknacks.

Females filled out several tables and a few couches and chairs around the room. All conversation stopped when Gwen and Maya entered the room.

Lorene stood from where she sat next to a young woman who was seated with two men. “Welcome, Maya. Come in, come in.”

Gwen released her grip on Maya’s arm and shuffled off to a cushioned chair in the corner of the room.

Introductions were made, starting with Lorene’s granddaughter Elizabeth, who pointed out her twin husbands—Ash and Axe—and promised that she wasn’t a traitor.

“I think leaving the coven because you got your happily ever after is a good thing,” Maya said.

“That’s what I’ve been saying!” Elizabeth stuck her tongue out at Gwen who shook her head with a smile.

Lorene called everyone to attention. “Thank you all for taking the time out of your day to be with us. I’d like to introduce Maya Freehold. She hails from Rhode Island and Glennis’s coven and answered my ad to join our coven. Maya, tell us a little about yourself.”

Maya smiled as a bolt of nerves shot through her. She was kind of an introvert and didn't necessarily like to be put on the spot, but these were her new people, and she didn't want to run out of the room screaming.

"Hi, everyone," she said, clearing her throat. "I'm twenty-two plus four, and my power is over Air. I love to garden and make teas out of things I grow. I love to read and collect old spell books and journals. And...I'm looking forward to getting to know all of you."

Everyone smiled at her.

"We don't have a lot of air power," Lorene said, "it'll be a boon to the coven to have you join." She clapped her hands together. "Now, everyone, except for Elizabeth and the Corners, please shake her hand as you leave."

The females who weren't Corners stood and greeted Maya. One of them, a young blond, gave her a hug. "I'm Lulu. I'll be at the front desk, come see me when you're finished with the tour, and we can chat."

"Sounds good," she said.

When the room was empty, Lorene sat and smiled. "I'd like you to share with the others why you really came here, because I think it's important that we understand how other covens are running things and how we might help."

"Oh, sure," Maya said. She straightened in the chair and looked at the five wiccans. The two males were on their phones and didn't seem to be paying attention, but she suspected as the mates of a wiccan, they were always paying attention. "My coven was really large, and Glennis, the North Corner, recruited powerful wiccans constantly. It meant that the hierarchy of the coven was really skewed to be power-heavy, with the most powerful ones doing all the spell casting for the coven." She didn't think she was a slouch in the power department, but some of the air power wiccans in her old coven were so powerful they made her feel damn near human.

"So you never got to cast spells on your own for the coven?" Elizabeth asked, her brow furrowed.

“Rarely. My Aunt Tilly is more powerful than I am, and she wasn’t even in the inner circle. If you could imagine how the ceremonies look, with the Corners in a circle around the bonfire and the coven in a circle around them? My old coven had many circles around the Corners, each one related to the strength of the power. I was on the very outside of things, along with most of the females in my generation.”

“Well, that’s just bullshit,” Bitty said.

“It is,” Idurre said. “How do they expect the younger generation to mature in their powers if they’re not using them regularly? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

Lorene drummed her fingers on top of a spell book. “I’ve known Glennis for a few decades. She’s definitely power hungry, and I think it’s because she worries about someone ousting her. If she’s got loads of people below her, working for her, then there would be a lot of people in the way before someone could get to her.”

Maya hummed. “I never thought of it that way, but it makes sense. She’s almost fanatical in her recruitment. I saw her turn away a woman who had dual powers—nature and fire—because neither of the powers were very strong, even though it’s super rare for a wiccan to have more than one actual power.”

“She’s a nut,” Gwen said. “But the question is why do wiccans stay there if they’re not utilizing their powers and being denied full use of the coven?”

“Safety in numbers,” Elizabeth said. “Glennis probably leans into those fears. Some of the older generation still worry about another witch trial happening.”

“You don’t?” Lorene asked.

“Not really.” She shrugged. “The witch trials were because humans were scared. They’re still scared, but they also know that we’re not demonic and that there’s other things to be afraid of instead of our kind.”

“Good point,” Lorene said. “At any rate, I’d like to reach out to your aunt and offer to let any other wiccans from their

coven join us if they'd like. We could nurture a whole new generation. Do you think they'd be receptive?"

"It's worth a shot." Maya wasn't sure anyone would make the move to Cleveland, but she was the sort of girl who never said never.

They spoke for a little while longer about the coven, then Lorene asked her to demonstrate her power. Maya used her power to blow out the candles in the room, then ruffled the pages of the spell book Lorene had in front of her. Lifting her hands high, she used her power to open one of the windows and then spoke the spell to draw the air to her. The chilly winter air rushed into the room, and everyone shivered.

"Sorry, I forgot it was so dang cold out," Maya said as she sent the cold air out of the room and shut the window with a flick of her hand.

"It's okay, that was really impressive," Lorene said. "If you'd like to go find Lulu, the Corners and I will chat for a bit and then we'll bring you back in to talk about your future with the coven."

"Thanks," she said. "Gwen, I'll bring you some tea when I come back."

"Me too," Bitty said.

"I think we could all use some tea," Lorene said.

"You got it."

Maya left the room and shut the door behind her. She walked down the hall to the main part of the store and found Lulu cleaning the glass front door.

"Oh hi, how'd it go?" Lulu asked.

"Good. They're chatting about me."

The phone rang at the counter and Lulu said, "Here hold this for a sec," handing the window cleaner and cloth over. Maya watched her hurry away and then turned to the door to continue the cleaning job when it opened suddenly and cracked her right in the head.

The cleaner dropped to the floor with a thud as she wobbled back on her heels, her vision going wonky. She was only aware of her magic, which flared oddly and disappeared as darkness engulfed her and the world went silent.



CHAPTER  
FIVE

Midas put the blinker on and turned into the parking lot of the Cleveland Mother Earth Store. He didn't normally visit the coven, but one of his elderly ambush members had arthritis, and the wiccans made a balm that worked wonders for shifters with that ailment. Usually, he'd have one of his people run to the shop, but he'd been downtown at the remodel anyway and didn't mind the detour before heading to Whisper Creek.

He turned off the engine and climbed out, stopping to stretch with a groan. It had been a damn long day at the job site, and he was exhausted. He couldn't wait to get home and have a beer and unwind.

His cat let out a curious sound in his head and his gums tingled like his fangs were trying to erupt. Pausing, he lifted his head and inhaled, sorting through the scents, but didn't pick up anything but snow. Shrugging internally, he flipped up his coat collar and trudged to the door.

The door clacked hard against something as he pushed it open.

A female gasped and rocked back on her heels, a cut on her forehead welling immediately with blood. She dropped to the floor and his cat went berserk.

He could hardly think straight as he eased inside the shop and knelt next to the woman. The moment his fingers grazed her throat to check her pulse, everything—including his tiger—went quiet within.

She was his fucking true mate.

What the actual hell?

Shaking off the thoughts rampaging through his mind, he leaned down and listened intently to her breathing.

“Holy crap! Is she okay?” a young woman asked as she ran to him.

He looked at her. What the hell was her name? He couldn’t think of anything but the fact that he’d brained his true mate with the door.

“She got knocked out, but she’s breathing. Is Lorene here?”

The female moaned and wiggled on the floor, her eyes flickering open.

“Ouch.”

He leaned over and smiled at her.

Holy shit she was stunning.

Long chocolate hair, hazel eyes, perfect lips.

She smelled like the air after a thunderstorm, like dark skies and electricity.

His whole body reacted to being in her presence, and the very first thing he thought of was hauling her over his shoulder and hoofing it home to mark and mate her, but he wasn’t a caveman for crap’s sake.

Turning off the pervert part of his brain, he said, “Hey, are you okay? I’m so sorry, I didn’t know someone was behind the door when I opened it.”

She blinked at him as if her eyes weren’t able to focus, and then she shook her head. Wincing, she brought her hand up to her forehead, but he pushed it away. “You’re cut and bleeding, don’t touch it.”

“Who are you?”

“Midas. Do you want me to help you up?”

“Sure?”

He chuckled. "Is that a sure yes or a sure you're not sure?"

"Sure, yes. I think."

He supported her back and lifted her gently to a seated position, not removing his hand from her shoulder until he was sure she wasn't going to fall backward.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Maya."

"You're a wiccan?" he asked.

"Yes."

"So you should be able to heal yourself then. I sent the girl to grab Lorene, I didn't know how injured you were."

"The girl? Oh, you mean Lulu. I think I'm okay, aside from a piercing headache."

"I'm sorry you were hurt."

Lulu appeared with Lorene, who carried a first aid kit.

"Let's get something on that," Lorene said. "You can do a healing spell."

She handed her a gauze pad, and Maya pressed it gingerly to her cut and winced.

"Midas, are you here for the arthritis balm?" Lorene asked.

"Yeah, I was in the neighborhood."

"I'll grab it."

"Thanks."

She gave him a curious look and then turned, her long skirt swishing around her ankles with the motion.

"Can I get you something?" Lulu asked, wringing her hands.

"No, I'll be okay, I need to get back to one of the rooms so I can cast a spell to fix my injury."

Midas helped her to her feet, and she swayed. He didn't let go of his hold to keep her from falling, but also because he

couldn't seem to stop touching her. His cat was yowling in his head to point out that they were true mates and ask if she felt connected to him, but he shushed the creature and kept his mouth shut about anything romantic-related.

"I'll help you," he said.

She nodded and leaned against him, and his tiger loved it.

He'd been in the store before, so he knew there were meeting rooms that were used to cast spells, so he walked her slowly down the hall and into the nearest unoccupied one.

"What can I get you?" he asked as he helped her sit at a round table.

"The kit on the wall."

She rested her head on her upturned hand and sighed.

"Are you really okay?" he asked. "I'm so sorry."

"I'll be fine when I cast the spell."

He brought the kit to her. She lifted her gaze and then said, "What are you?"

"Tiger."

Something flickered in her gaze, and he wasn't sure what it was, but he thought it might have been akin to disgust.

Shit. What if she didn't like shifters?

Well, he'd just have to convince her that shifters were awesome, especially tigers.

"What's your rank?"

She asked the question nonchalantly, but there was an edge to her voice that said she wasn't really being nonchalant at all.

Immediately his hackles rose, and a warning went off in his brain.

She wanted to know how powerful he was.

Fuck.

"I'm just a lowly nobody," he said, hoping he sounded more genuine than he felt. He didn't like lying, but he'd

promised himself he wouldn't tell a female he was king until after he'd won her heart, and that included his beautiful wiccan true-mate.

Her eyes narrowed slightly and then she nodded.

“Oh, okay.”

“Is there a reason you asked?”

“Just curious.”

“What are you ranked?”

“Covens don't rank.” She opened the kit and took out a few vials and some folded pieces of cotton, along with a small stone bowl. “Well, not this one. I'm from Rhode Island, and that coven did ranks, but most don't. The four Corners are in charge and that's it.”

He didn't actually know that. He didn't know much about covens or wiccans, but he wanted to learn about Maya.

He watched as she mixed a few liquids into the stone bowl and then used a wooden skewer to stir them together. She put the liquid onto one of the pieces of cotton and rested her hands a few inches over top.

*“Tahedo sumpli, fin fin resht.”*

She lifted her hands and looked at the cloth with a grumble. Putting her hands back, she repeated the words and then looked at the cloth again.

“Is it supposed to do something?” he asked.

“Yes, it's supposed to glow when it's infused with my power. I...don't know what's going on.”

His phone buzzed and he glanced at his watch to see who the call was from.

Romeo's name flashed on the small screen. He swiped and texted that he'd call him back in a few minutes.

“I should go,” he said. “Would you...like to go out tonight?”

She gave him an incredulous look. “I'm bleeding.”

“You’re going to heal yourself, right?”

“I can’t. At least not right now. Damn it, my power is on the fritz. You must have damaged the part of my brain where my power is. If that’s even a thing.”

“Hey, I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“You still hurt me.” Her voice went high, and he could pick up the scent of her fear.

“I didn’t mean to. I didn’t expect someone to be standing right at the door.”

She let out a slightly hysterical laugh. “So you brain me and then you ask me out? Classy.”

He scowled. Did she not know they were true mates? Or did she know but not want to pursue it because he’d said he was low ranked?

Shit, he needed to get his act together.

“I just wanted to take you out, Maya. I said I was sorry.”

“I know what you want,” she said, rising to her feet slowly. She leaned on the table. “So why don’t you get out of here. You’ve done enough damage.”

He wanted to protest, but he was actually pretty pissed at himself for not only hurting her but apparently making her think he was just trying to get into her pants.

“Fine,” he said. “Hope your magic gets better and your head too.”

She snorted and sat back down with a groan.

He walked from the room, nearly taking Lorene out in the process.

“Here’s the balm, Midas.” She handed him a paper bag. “Are you okay? Your eyes are gold.”

“I’m fine. Thank you for the balm.”

He took a step away and she grabbed his arm. “Something’s wrong, your aura is a mess. What happened?”

He spared a tiny glance toward the room he'd just left. "Nothing. Not a damn thing."

Gently he extracted his arm from her grip and stalked down the hall. Lulu said goodbye to him, and he grunted in return, then hit the door and headed to his truck.

When he was behind the wheel, he stared through the windshield, at war with himself.

His tiger wanted him to go back inside and apologize to Maya again, to explain that whatever she thought about him, which was clearly something awful, wasn't accurate. That he was sorry for whatever had pissed her off and wanted to fix it.

And really, he couldn't figure out why she was so pissed. Because he'd hurt her or because he'd asked her out? That didn't even make sense.

But despite the war within him, he opted to turn on the truck and leave. If he went back into the store while she was still mad at him, he was liable to make things worse. The better option was to give her a day to cool off and heal, and then he'd reach out through Lorene and make amends.

He still wasn't going to tell her he was king though.

He'd save that for when he'd won her heart, however long that took.

CHAPTER  
**SIX**

**M**aya's head hurt so badly that her eyes watered, and she was also maybe crying a little because she was pissed.

The nerve!

The way Midas practically purred the word date to her, she knew he was thinking about a bedroom and not a restaurant.

He might very well be the sexiest male she'd ever seen in her entire dang life, but that didn't mean she wanted to jump his bones.

Well, she did.

But dang it, he shouldn't be expecting anything.

Letting out a deep sigh, she stopped thinking about Midas and focused on the poultice. She settled her hands a few inches from the blessed cotton fabric that was saturated with a blend of herbs and minerals that would aid her natural healing abilities and get rid of the insane headache and heal the wound without leaving a scar.

Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the poultice and spoke the words of the spell to enhance it with magic.

Nothing happened.

Again!

With a frustrated groan, she sat back in the chair. That damn Midas had screwed up her magic mojo. She'd had no problem with her magic until he nearly took her head off.

"Are you all right, dear?" Lorene asked.



“My magic’s not working.”

Her brows rose as she stopped at the table. “It’s not? Because of your injury?”

“Maybe. I don’t know why it’s not working, only that I can’t even juice up the poultice.” Oh, she’d be so severely pissed if that male had caused this.

“Well, I’ll take care of it. Once you’re healed, I bet things go back to normal.”

Lorene laid her hands over the poultice and spoke the spell. Maya felt the heat of her magic as it infused the poultice, like a warm breeze on the beach at sunset.

Lorene lifted the cotton and laid it gently against her wound. Immediately, Maya could feel the magically laced poultice working. She closed her eyes as the headache began to ebb.

“Tell me what happened.”

Maya shared what transpired at the front door.

“Well, you’ve had an interesting first day,” she said with a smile.

“I’ll say.”

“You met Midas?”

“I did.” She grumbled internally. That male was infuriating, and she’d only spent a few minutes with him. Well, it didn’t matter how good looking he was, or how he smelled like leather and sunshine.

Lorene chuckled softly. “Well, he’s an interesting man. The tigers live in Whisper Creek, it’s about an hour from here.”

She did not want any information about him.

“Of course he’s not there during the day, he’s working with the tiger construction company downtown for a remodel for the vampires.”

“What do the vampires need remodeled? And why would tigers work for them? I thought shifters didn’t like vampires?”

Years ago, vampires kept shifters chained up in what were commonly referred to as “blood dungeons,” where they bred them in captivity and drained them of blood. Shifter blood, like wiccan, was more powerful than human, and could be addictive to vampires.

“I told you that Cleveland is unique. The vampires have an alliance with every supernatural group in the area, including us. One of our wiccans—Arisa—is mated to a vampire.”

“I didn’t know. I mean I knew there were a lot of shifter groups here, but I didn’t know the vampires were cool with everyone, and vice versa.”

Lorene hummed as she removed the cotton. She moved gracefully to the bookshelf and returned with an antique mirror.

Maya looked at herself, holding the mirror close to check where the cut had been and found it fully healed, the cut closed without scarring and not even a bruise was left behind.

“It looks wonderful, thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I should try my magic.”

“Of course, whenever you’d like.”

Maya rubbed her fingers together and called for the power of air, visualizing the papers on the table rustling.

Nothing happened.

Shit.



“YOU’RE PROBABLY JUST BRAIN DAMAGED,” Lulu said.

Maya grimaced. “If you were trying to be helpful, that was not the right way to go about it.”

“Oh crap, no I’m sorry. I mean, maybe your brain is still healing, and your magic is just focusing on that right now.” She let out a little nervous laugh. “I really didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

“It’s okay, I’m not made of glass. And maybe you’re right.” Maya wanted to believe it at any rate. She really, sincerely hoped that her magic was going to come back, because she didn’t think it was something you could lose with a blow to the head.

“Let’s do something to get your mind off things. Hey, we could get together this weekend, go to a club?”

She smiled at her. Lorene had mentioned that Lulu was an unnatural wiccan who had very little power but was sweet and dedicated to the coven. “I’d like that. Just not the vampire club.”

“Oh no, I don’t go there. I mean I could, I’ve heard I don’t really smell like a wiccan so no one would bother me, and Arissa said the club is perfectly safe. But there’s a shifter friendly bar called Lykos, that’s run by this super sexy fallen angel named Paris. It’s a great place to hang out.”

“Sounds good.”

“Do you like to date shifters?” Lulu asked.

“I’ve been single for a while. My last boyfriend was wolf, the one before that was human. I don’t discriminate, as long as he’s sexy that’s all that matters.”

Sexy and low-ranked, if he was a shifter. She sure as heck didn’t want to date a shifter who had a ton of responsibilities with his people. Maya wanted to be the number one female in her male’s life, the way he’d be number one in hers. Period.

Lulu chatted while they straightened the shop, discussing everything from her family’s lack of understanding why she’d want to work for the wiccans to the coven gossip about one of the fire power’s relationship issues. By the time the shop was closed for the night, Maya felt like she had a brand-new friend, and all the latest gossip.

After saying goodnight to the Corners, she and Lulu walked outside.

“I hate winter,” Lulu said.

“It’s not so bad,” she said, looking up at the night sky. She reached for her power tentatively and felt nothing. Not even a little wiggle of air moving at her will.

“You moved because your coven was too big, right? I love our coven, everyone is so nice, even if you don’t have power.” She added hastily, “I mean like me.”

“Thanks, Lulu. I think my power will come back. I’m not going to worry about it.” Like Tilly always said, it wasn’t any good to worry until there was something to worry about.

And for now, she was potentially still healing, and her magic was just being used to that end.

She wouldn’t worry.

For now.

“See you tomorrow,” Maya said. “I had fun tonight.”

“Me too. See ya.”

They parted ways, Lulu heading to her apartment nearby in a coven-owned complex, and Maya to her new home. She called Tilly on the way and shared what happened, leaving out the part about how attractive and infuriating Midas was.

“Your power will come back, sweetling, I’m sure of it. These things happen. You had a trauma, your power is probably protecting itself and taking care of you.”

“I hope so. It feels weird to not have access to it.”

“Go rest and don’t worry about it. You know what I like to say about worry.”

“I know, and I promise. A bath and a good night’s rest sounds perfect.”

“Let me know how it goes tomorrow. I’ll keep a good thought for you and even send a blessing your way.”

“I’d love that. And I love you.”

“Love you too.”

The call ended and Maya smiled to herself. Tilly always knew just what to say to ease fears and bring peace. She missed her immensely, and it had only been a few days since she'd left.

But aside from nearly getting decapitated by that...male, she liked the coven and the Corners, and she loved her little house. It might have been a weird, nearly disastrous night, but she was sure a bath, her favorite pajamas, and some reading before she went to bed was just what she needed to turn her magic around.

It wasn't like it could go dead on her forever. Right?

CHAPTER  
SEVEN

Midas didn't mean for the construction company meeting to go past eight, but he was having trouble concentrating and kept losing his place.

He'd slept like hell, so the meeting didn't even start on time. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Maya, that terrible head wound, and her angry, accusing glare when he asked her on a date.

He'd felt like a giant ass all night, and his tiger would not leave him alone about her. All he wanted to do was go find her and apologize, explain that they were truemates, and get a fresh start.

In fact, he planned to go to the wiccan store on his lunch break and talk to her.

He still, however, wouldn't tell her he was king. Not until he knew for sure why she asked his rank. He couldn't imagine a female wanting to know a male's rank for anything other than hoping he might be high enough, and that wasn't going to fly. She might be his truemate, but he wanted to make sure she liked him for him, not his proverbial crown.

Refocusing on the present, he closed his laptop and said, "Okay everyone, let's get the day going. By the time we get out to the site, we'll be three hours behind."

"You want us to stay later?" Derek asked.

"If you want to and are able, yes. If you can't, that's fine too."

He rose to his feet as his phone buzzed. He heard another phone buzz nearby and glanced to see Cyrus lift his phone to his ear.

His screen read Ven, a vampire in the coven. “Hey, Ven, you’re up early. Or late, I guess, in our case.”

“Midas, someone set a bomb off in the bank. We’ve got people on the scene, but are any of your people there?”

“What?” he demanded. “No, we’re all still in Whisper Creek, we had a meeting. A bomb went off? Are you sure?”

“Pretty damn sure.”

“I’m on my way. I’ll bring Cyrus with me.”

“Rage is talking to him now. The trolls are searching the wreckage for people, we wanted to know if anyone was working yet.”

“We’re all accounted for. See you shortly.”

He ended the call and told the group, “We’ve got a huge problem.”



MIDAS STOOD in the ruins of the first-floor lobby of the bank and looked around. Explosives had taken out much of the work they’d done over the last few weeks. The structure was still intact, so at least there was a silver lining to the mess. But they were essentially going to have to start from scratch.

It would mean more money and a new completion date.

“Holy hell,” Cyrus said. “This is worse than what they did at the restaurant.”

The restaurant next to the coven had been targeted by the First Church of Humanity. Their operatives had set a bomb off in the kitchen, and Cyrus had nearly died. That explosion had been contained to the kitchen, whereas the bombs that went off today had been set in several places on the first floor.

“Are they still up across the street?” he asked.

“Yep,” Cyrus said. “It was an all-hands-on-deck effort with this one. They searched the club and restaurant to make sure nothing had been tampered with, and everything’s fine over there. It seems the bank was targeted.”

“Yeah, but by who?” Midas asked.

“Good question.”

Romeo walked over. “We found a timer in the rubble. The police have it and they’ll run prints for it.”

“So that means it was meant to go off this morning,” Midas said, frowning. The bomb had gone off at 6:30 a.m. when they would have been fully staffed and working inside the building.

“What are you thinking?” Cyrus asked.

“That we were the targets.”

“You don’t think it was meant to target the vampires’ businesses?” Romeo asked. “Who the hell would target us? And why?”

Midas shook his head and blew out a breath. “I don’t know, but if whoever set the bomb used a timer, then there wouldn’t have been any hope of vampires being in the building at that time in the morning. So either the vampires were targeted because of the new build, or we were.” And although he didn’t want to think that the tigers were coming under fire for any reason, it seemed strange to put a bomb in a new build during the daytime if they were planning to target vampires.

He walked outside, spoke to the fire marshal and police chief, and then called Mishka.

“I’ll be over after sunset,” Midas said. “I’m going to work with the crew to assess the damage and begin cleaning up. I’ll give you my best estimate for how much this will set us back, not only with a completion time frame but also cost changes.”

“Of course,” Mishka said. “Whatever you need, let us know. Cyrus can handle getting work orders and payments for cleanup and supplies. I’ll speak to you after sunset.”



Midas slid his phone into his pocket and turned to look at the building. From the outside, it didn't look like anything had happened. But from the inside, it was a disaster.

And this was a bump in his plans for the day that he hadn't expected. He'd wanted to go talk to Maya during lunch, but now he needed to be here to work. And he had a meeting with Mishka after work, and for sure she wouldn't still be at the store by the time that was finished.

Tomorrow, then.

Although it warred with him to wait another day to speak with her.

Maybe he could call the store and speak to her instead. It would be better than nothing.

Striding back inside, he pushed his tiger to the deep recesses of his brain, the yowling creature demanding he go find Maya, and focused on the job ahead.

“Aaron, call for some dumpsters to be delivered ASAP. Pay extra if necessary. Cyrus, let's get a full assessment of the damage, starting down here and moving up. Once the assessment is done, we'll move the trash to the dumpsters, clean up, and start over.”

They'd need to replace the floors, walls, and ceilings, not to mention any wiring or plumbing that had been damaged by the blast. It would've been easy to be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of work they had to redo, but he was not a male who backed down from a challenge.

The males turned to their respective jobs. Midas made his way into the manager's office that he'd been previously working on. A bomb had been set off in that room. The walls were trashed, as were the ceiling and floors, much like the rest of the first floor. The windows were still intact, however, because they were made to withstand a blast, as was the security door he'd finished installing the previous day.

It was an electronic door, but even without power to the building, the door would still work because of the generator,

which hadn't been harmed in the blast. It was going to be a damn long day.

But the bright side of things was that he could at least call for Maya, and hopefully, she'd be willing to meet him somewhere. He didn't like the idea of his true mate out in the world without him. Especially if someone was targeting shifters, which could potentially mean that all supernatural groups were in danger, including the wiccans.

He snarled at the thought.

But who the hell was targeting the tigers in the first place?

CHAPTER  
EIGHT

Maya stared at the coffee, her vision blurring a little as she yawned.

“What, you didn’t sleep last night?” Lulu asked, perched next to her on a stool behind the counter of the Cleveland Mother Earth Store.

“I...had a weird dream.” She brought the coffee mug to her lips and took a drink. She’d need about a gallon more to combat the fatigue that plagued her from her tossing and turning.

Who’d have thought sexy dreams could make you so tired?  
Must be all the writhing in the dream.

“Weird, like scary? Or just weird-weird.”

“What’s weird-weird?”

“I once dreamed my cat got lost, and when I found him, he was wearing a suit and teaching a geometry class.” Lulu shrugged. “You know...weird-weird.”

“That’s definitely weird, but no, it wasn’t like that. I dreamed about a guy.”

“Ooh,” Lulu said, her eyes going wide. “Fun. Anyone I might know?”

While Maya hadn’t really been able to see who she’d had the sexy dream about, she knew in her heart it was Midas. There was no mistaking the broad shoulders and trim waist, or the golden hair.

The jackass who'd given her a concussion and then smarmily asked her for a date.

Of course her subconscious wanted to get naked with him. He was super sexy. Just not someone she wanted to be with.

“Nah,” she said.

“How's your power this morning?”

Maya put the mug on the counter and sighed. “I haven't tried to conjure yet. I'm afraid.”

“Well, it could still be too early, right? Lorene said you might just need to rest and let your magic get its mojo back.”

“I know, but I'm anxious about it.”

“So you're going to wait a while longer before you try?”

“I probably should.”

Lulu smiled knowingly. “You aren't going to, though?”

Maya finished the last of the coffee and smiled back. “I think I'm going to try. If it doesn't work yet, then I'll just hope that it will happen soon.”

“Good luck!”

Maya headed into the back and walked into the storage room. She thought she'd have the best luck with her power if she was outside, and she would use every trick in the book to enhance her chances.

Grabbing what she needed from the shelves, she stopped in the breakroom to get her coat and headed out the back door.

Freezing cold air made her gasp and hesitate at the door before she stepped out fully and let the door close.

She hustled to the side of the building and brushed the snow from the grass. Using blessed salt and dried sage, she made a circle on the ground and knelt in the center with a candle.

Lighting a candle was such a basic thing, it was one of the first spells she ever learned.

She closed her eyes and rested her hands on her knees, focusing on the world around her. She could feel the chill in the air and the bite of the snow that blew off the building. She could feel the cold ground under her, the rapidly melting snow wetting her skirt.

Lifting her hands, she cast the spell to light the candle.

She didn't smell anything and didn't hear the wick light, so she opened her eyes.

It wasn't lit.

“Dang it.”

Nerves slithered through her, but she pushed them away. This time, she kept her eyes open and focused on the wick.

The spell left her lips, and she didn't even get a tingle in her fingers from her power.

The candle, annoyingly, remained unlit.

Light, damn it!

Sitting back with a huff, she stared at the candle, willing it to light, power or not.

“No luck, my dear?”

Maya hadn't heard Lorene come outside. She glanced at her and shook her head.

“Not even a flicker.” She rubbed her fingertips together. “I can't even feel my magic.” Panic welled again, but she wasn't going to get into panic mode over this. Not yet, anyway.

“You can't do anything at all?”

“Nope. The last successful thing I did was cast the spells for you and the Corners.”

“Well, we can gather the Corners and cast a spell on your behalf, ask our powers what's going on.”

Maya broke the salt circle and grabbed her supplies, rising to her feet and hissing at her cold, wet knees.

“Do you think it would help?”

“Perhaps. But what do you think could be the reason for your power loss? I can think of a few off the top of my head.”

Making a face at the thought of a test, Maya followed Lorene into the building. “A curse is the big one.”

“Have you been cursed recently?”

They stopped in Lorene’s office, taking a seat on the plush couch.

“I’m not aware of any curses,” she said dryly.

“So probably not that. Another?”

“Ignoring power and not nurturing it, so it fades.”

“Which you’ve clearly not done. Do you have another idea?”

Maya was certain there were more ideas for reasons that magic went on the fritz, but she couldn’t think of anything.

“I don’t know. I feel like I should know, but it’s not coming to me.”

“Your magic has changed on a cellular level and needs a catalyst to bloom.”

“Why would it change? Because of my head injury?”

“Now that I don’t know for sure,” Lorene said. “Anything is possible when it comes to magic, even things that are frustrating. You were using magic before your head injury, and now you’re not. Perhaps the simplest answer is that your magic is healing in some way and isn’t available to use. But it could be something else, and you coming here is more about the future than just wanting to get out of Rhode Island.”

“So, it’s a coincidence that I hit my head and my power went kaput?”

Lorene smiled. “It’s possible, dear.” She rose to her feet and walked to her desk, returning with a large book that had a worn, leather cover. “I did some research on your situation. The spell we can cast is called a reckoning spell. Have you ever heard of it?”

“I don’t think so.” Maya took the book and looked at the open pages that detailed the spell. “What does it do?”

“It’s like a divining spell. Your power loss was so severe and sudden that there has to be an explanation for it.”

Maya read through the spell, exhaustion making it take longer to translate the words from ancient wiccan to English. The spell was essentially a ceremony where the Corners asked the powers controlling the natural elements of earth, air, fire, and water to touch the afflicted wiccan and show the reason for the power decline. It often appeared as a vision to the wiccan, who could then act to change whatever the cause.

“Did you talk to your aunt?”

“Yeah, she told me to be patient, that it would come back to me when it was ready.”

“And it might,” she said. She pointed to the yellowed pages. “But I think the reckoning spell will pinpoint what caused your magic to retreat. I’ll arrange for the Corners and the shifter guards for Saturday evening, before sunset, to convene on the bluffs.”

When the word shifters left Lorene’s lips, Maya’s heart started to pound, and she pressed her fingers to her chest. Damn, even the thought of shifters, not Midas specifically, was enough to make her heart go crazy.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m just tired and frustrated. Without my power, I feel like I lost a limb.”

“We’ll get to the bottom of it, I promise. Just don’t lose hope.”

“I won’t.”

She clearly didn’t look or sound hopeful, because Lorene said, “I’m sorry you’re going through this, but something wonderful could be on the other side, you know. The universe doesn’t give trials without rewards or storms without rainbows, even if it can take a while for the good things to appear.”

Maya smiled but didn't really feel like it. She figured her bad luck had started when that infuriating Midas had winged her noggin like a freight truck. Before she met him, everything was fine.

He was definitely the source of her magic going all screwy. She was sure of it. If he hadn't hit her head, she wouldn't be without her power right now, thank you very much.

"I think I'll take a long lunch break, if that's okay?" she asked as she handed the heavy book to Lorene and stood. "I'd like some time to think."

"Of course. Take whatever time you need. Just let Lulu know that I can relieve her for her lunch if you're not back in time."

Well, she didn't think she needed that much time. The bank the tigers were remodeling wasn't that far from the store. She could go there, yell at Midas, and get back in time to eat the lunch she'd packed for herself.

Midas had no idea what was coming for him.

Hell hath no fury like a witch without her powers.



CHAPTER  
NINE

Midas hefted the panel of charred sheet rock and carried it out of the office. He'd been working for hours, listening to the grumble of his tiger who incessantly demanded he drop everything and go find Maya.

He shoved the sheet rock into one of the dumpsters in the parking lot and wiped his brow.

"How's it going?" he asked Cyrus who was carrying a wheelbarrow full of debris.

"Okay," he said. He stopped next to the dumpster and picked up a shovel. "I hate that this sidetracked us."

"Yeah. Thankfully we weren't here. I'd rather have to start over with the remodel than bury any of our people."

"Definitely." He gave him a curious look. "You okay?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You looked kind of pissed."

Midas hadn't told anyone what happened at the store between him and Maya. He was mainly embarrassed that he'd hurt her and then acted like an asshole, but he was also stressed because he wasn't with her.

"This is just the way my face looks," he said dryly.

Cyrus chuckled. "If you say so."

With a grunt, Midas walked back into the building, checked in with his people, and returned to the office to

continue the cleanup. He'd made great progress in the room, hauling out the damaged ceiling, walls, and floor.

His tiger let out a curious sound in his head and his spine tingled in warning.

The door to the office slammed shut.

He spun with a growl, but it died in his throat.

Maya.

"I've got a bone to pick with you."



MAYA HAD BEEN FUMING the entire drive to downtown. She hadn't known for sure where the remodeled bank was, but Lorene had said it was across from the coven's club, Fang, so she'd put the club into her car's GPS. She parked on the street a few blocks away.

She knew exactly what she was going to say to Midas when she saw him. She'd had imaginary conversations with him ever since she'd woken up from her way-too-sexy dream. In every scenario, she definitely won the argument, leaving him begging for her to be with him. Which she was going to haughtily ignore.

Her heart clenched as she walked down the sidewalk and she paused, leaning against a parking meter. She could see people walking in and out of a building and knew it was the remodel by the hardhats many of them wore.

She took in a few measured breaths and willed her heart to calm. She didn't want to have a freaking panic attack. If only her magic was working.

Straightening, she smoothed her trembling hands down her skirt and then rubbed a few of the beads on the bracelet Tilly had given her for good luck. Head held high, she strode forward and walked into the building. No one was paying attention to her. No one even seemed to notice she was there.

It would have been helpful if she could have cast a spell to locate Midas, but as she looked around the space, she realized that she could actually feel some kind of connection to him. Something primal.

Wasn't that a kick in the pants?

She moved deeper into the main room, frowning as she noticed there was significant damage in the building, as if a bomb had gone off or something. She wondered if that was why they were remodeling it. Shaking off the thoughts, she turned and saw Midas through an open door, his back to her.

Triumph!

Striding through the door, she slammed it shut.

He spun with a growl that stopped like a squeak.

"I have a bone to pick with you," she said, glad her voice didn't tremble even though she felt like her whole body was twitching with nerves.

He frowned, his brows furrowing. "Maya? What are you doing here?"

"I just told you. I have a bone to pick with you."

"Oh?" The frown eased and his lowered brows arched. He folded his arms, his muscles bunching against the fabric of the dark shirt he wore.

She was absolutely not drooling over him.

Focus!

"I think you're an ass."

"And?"

She was flustered for a moment. Was he admitting he was an ass?

"And," she said, indignantly, "I'm not going to mate a male who acts so casually about sex. Not when it's between true mates."

He didn't say anything for a long moment. Then he opened his mouth and something hissed and then clanged behind her.

“What the hell?” she asked, spinning. “Did the door just lock?”



OKAY, so Maya was even more beautiful than he remembered, especially now that she was filled with fire and indignation. He'd honestly never seen anyone so lovely, even though she was fully pissed at him.

The good news was that she *did* know they were truemates. The bad news was that she thought he was such a jerk that she didn't want to mate him.

There was a strange hissing and clanging noise. Maya spun.

“Did the door just lock?”

He walked to the door and jiggled the handle. It turned like it was unlocked. He bent down and peered at the security system and could see the glint of the deadbolt.

“Yeah, it's locked.”

The panel was dead, though. Something had triggered the mechanism to lock and then disabled the panel.

“Can you fix it?”

“I don't think so,” he said.

Someone banged on the door. “Midas? You okay in there?”

“Yeah, Romeo. The deadbolt locked and the panel is dead. What happened?”

“The generator had a power surge. It's fried. Everything in the building is dead.”

“Shit.”

“Want me to break the door down?”

“Hell no, it's a thousand-dollar door.”

“I don't want to be stuck in here,” Maya said.

“Me either, but I’m not going to ruin a door because the power went out.” He called through the door, “How long will it take to get a new generator?”

“I’ll go with Cyrus now and get one. But if the panel is fried then we’ll have to rewire it to get it to work, even with a new generator.”

“Get it done,” he said.

“Yep.”

He heard Romeo walk away and call for Cyrus.

Maya leaned on the door. “Well, this is just great.”

“Hey, you didn’t have to shut the door, you know. You could have just yelled at me with it open and then we wouldn’t be trapped.”

“You’re not blaming me for this, are you?” She gave him an incredulous look.

Holy hell she was gorgeous. Her hazel eyes were flashing, and her scent was invading his senses, all thunderstorms and electricity.

“I’m just saying that you made a bad situation worse. I’m not technically blaming you.”

She stalked away from him with an exasperated sound, walking to the wall of windows that overlooked the street. “This is probably security glass?” she asked after a few quiet moments.

“Yep. I couldn’t break through it if I tried.”

She snorted and rubbed her temple.

“Does your head still hurt?”

“No.”

She groaned and tilted her head back, closing her eyes. “This was not how this was supposed to go.”

“Sorry?”

He joined her, watching the street. He wanted to say a few hundred things. After all, he’d been planning to speak to her

anyway, but being in her presence made his brain misfire, and his cat was so loud in his head that he couldn't think straight.

She turned to face him. "Why did you act like that yesterday?"

"Like what?"

"Like I'm just a good-time girl, like I'm not worth getting to know and only worth a tumble in bed?" He could hear the genuine hurt in her voice, and it made his heart pang.

"I'm sorry that what I said came across that way, it wasn't my intention."

"What *was* your intention?"

He took her hand and linked their fingers. A jolt of electricity sparked between them, and she gasped.

"Oh! I think my magic flared. Hold on, let me check."

She rushed to the door and laid her hands on the security panel. As he walked to her, he heard her speaking what he assumed was a spell.

There was a pale yellow glow around the lock that seemed to come from her hands, and then it died.

"Damn it."

"What?" he asked.

She leaned her back against the door with a frustrated groan. "My magic's on the fritz. Ever since you brained me with the door."

He grimaced. "I'm sorry about that."

She waved her hand at him. "I know, you said that already. I'm scared it's really gone. I feel like someone cut off my arm or something." She rubbed her hands together and looked at them. "For a moment there, my magic felt like it was coming back. I thought I could cast a spell to open the door, but it didn't work. As fast as my magic came back, it disappeared."

He frowned. "Your magic is gone? Like totally?"

"Yeah, I feel almost human. It's so weird."

He took her hand again. It felt good to touch her, like something was missing and he'd found it.

That same spark appeared, but this time he didn't let go.

She stared at their joined hands, her head tilted.

"What the heck is going on?" she asked. She lifted their joined hands.

"I'm not sure," he said. "But, Maya, we're true mates. Maybe that means something to your magic. Maybe it's on the fritz because..." He didn't finish the thought, because he wasn't sure what to say.

"Because what?"

"I'm not sure."

She dropped his hand and the tingling he felt disappeared. He took her hand again, but instead of just holding it, he used it to draw her close.

Now this felt good and right. He slid an arm around her waist and drew her against him. She gasped and her mouth fell open, her eyes going wide.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

"An experiment."

He lowered his head and kissed her.

CHAPTER  
TEN

The press of Midas's lips against hers sent Maya into a tailspin. Her magic flared within her for a heartbeat, making her skin tingle, but more than that was the awareness that settled on her.

Midas was her truemate. Yes, she'd known that in her heart, but she hadn't really wanted to admit it. She'd planned to just walk away from him because he'd behaved badly toward her, made her feel like crap. But this male? Who held her close and kissed her like he was dying and she could save him?

He was not the male she'd met last night.

She put her arms around him, resting one hand on the back of his neck and the other on his shoulder. Her hips tilted without a thought from her, wanting more contact and, boy, did she get it. She could feel the hard ridge of his erection and it made her whole body light up.

He tilted her head and deepened the kiss. She was melting in his arms.

She let her hands roam as the kiss went on forever, smoothing her fingers over his broad shoulders and down his tapered waist. She stopped at his belt buckle, the metal cool and unyielding. Then she gripped the edge of his shirt and lifted, pulling it free of his jeans.

He snarled softly and rested his hand over her head on the door, tilting her back. She lifted the shirt higher, then slipped her hands underneath to touch his stomach. His abs were



flexed, and she traced each muscle, feeling the smooth, warm skin.

When she grazed one of his nipples, he gently bit her bottom lip and eased from the kiss.

“Maya,” he said, his tone low and laced with heat. His eyes were gold and he smelled amazing, like spices and sunshine. It’s what she’d smelled the night before. It was the scent of his arousal, and she’d mistook it for something sleezy, but it wasn’t.

Her skin tingled and she wanted more. Wanted more kissing, more touching, more everything.

“You can tell me to stop,” she whispered, biting her bottom lip. She lowered her hands to his belt and tapped the buckle with her fingernail. “But I don’t think you will.”

He narrowed his gaze and rested his free hand on her neck, his thumb grazing her pulse. “No?”

“Nope, I think you want this as much as I do.”

“Last night you thought I was a letch.”

She smiled. That was a really good word.

“You’re not, are you? You’re just a male who wanted his truemate and didn’t know how to articulate it.”

She’d never really been a bold person. Hell, the boldest thing she’d done lately was move to Cleveland. But her body was humming, and her skin was hot, and she knew the only thing that would make her feel right was being with him.

“I messed up last night.”

“Why didn’t you come find me?”

“I was going to call today to talk to you.”

She touched one of the buttons on her top, twisting it so it opened.

“I would’ve liked that.”

“This is better,” he said. He pushed her hand out of the way and undid the buttons of her blouse, spreading the

material over her shoulders until it dropped to her wrists and bared her to him. She was wearing a satin bra, but the way he looked at her like he could devour her and she'd enjoy every second made her feel like she was naked.

“Midas?”

He gazed at her, the gold swirling with the brown. “Yes, my queen?”

She smiled at the nickname. “Let's start over.”

His mouth turned down. “This isn't what I wanted for our first time together.”

She cupped his face, her heart racing. “I'm on fire, Midas. I want you.”

He dropped to his knees and gathered the hem of her skirt. “Then you've got me.”



MIDAS WANTED to do a hundred things to Maya, but he couldn't stop being angry that they were trapped. It wasn't her fault by any stretch, but the ability to really take care of her like he wanted, like he'd fantasized all night long? That wasn't going to be easy.

He tugged on the skirt experimentally. It didn't budge. She lowered the zipper, and he caught the skirt and drew it down her legs. She was wearing panties that matched the bra, a pale peach satin that complimented her skin tone.

She definitely looked good enough to eat.

They knew next to nothing about each other, but the only thing that mattered right now was that they were true mates. He'd get her to fall in love with him as a seemingly low-ranked male, and then once he had her heart, he'd tell her everything. She'd be his queen, so he was going to treat her like one right now.

He stroked up her legs, her skin soft and warm under his touch. He reached her panties, and he hooked his fingers in

them and drew them slowly down her legs, baring her to his gaze. She was bare, her skin coated with her arousal that was so sweet his mouth watered at the thought of getting to taste her.

She stepped free of her panties and before he could reach for her, she lifted her foot and touched his stomach.

“How about you take off some clothes too?”

He jerked his shirt over his head, and then grasped her hips and leaned in to kiss her stomach just below her navel.

He caught her leg behind the knee and lifted it over his shoulder, then nudged her other leg a little more open. He spread her open gently, revealing her clit. He leaned in and licked it, then stroked his tongue as low as he could, reveling in her sweet taste.

Later, he was going to spread her out on a bed and eat her until she creamed for him over and over, but for now he was going to make her come and then fuck her until they were both sated.

He slipped a finger into her and pumped slowly as he licked circles around her clit, rubbing his tongue along the sides until he heard her sharp intake of breath and knew he'd found the right spot.

He added a second finger, pumping into her fast and scissoring them, sucking on her clit and lashing the tip with his tongue before returning to her favorite spot for some more licks. He couldn't get enough of her sweet sounds of pleasure, her body heating for him as he brought her to the edge of pleasure.

Her calf flexed against his back, and she pushed his head back with her hand. “I want to come,” she panted, “on you.”

He slipped his fingers from her and sucked on them, his eyes nearly rolling back in his head at the decadent taste of her.

Then he undid his buckle and shoved his jeans down his legs. He stretched his legs out and beckoned her to him. She straddled him and grasped his cock, then lowered herself on

him. The moment her heat surrounded him, he nearly came. He ground his teeth together and focused on his beautiful mate.

When they were wed tightly together, her thighs against his, he grasped the center of her bra and pushed it over her breasts. She lifted herself on him, using his shoulders as leverage, and lowered herself back down. He cupped her breasts and leaned in, playing with them and kissing her lips as she moved on him.

He pressed his thumb to her clit. She rocked on him, and her eyes closed as a rapturous look crossed her face. He rubbed her clit and leaned back on his free hand so he could watch her come.

Her hips jerked as she came, her skin flushing and her knees tightening against his side. She covered her mouth with her hands and cried out, freezing on him as waves of pleasure shook her.

He pulled her hand free and kissed her palm. "I don't care who hears us."

She wiggled on him, and he groaned. "It's your turn."

He boosted her from him and then rose to his feet. He picked her up and strode to the door, which was the only part of the room not damaged by the bomb. He lifted her against the door, and she hooked her legs around his waist. He guided himself into her heat and then braced one arm on the door and the other under her ass.

He took a small step away from the door and then pushed more fully into her. When he pulled back and stroked in again, her head fell back against the door, and she moaned.

"Yes. Oh yes."

He fucked her swiftly, pumping in and out of her, the door squeaking against the hinges with each thrust.

She lowered her hand and pressed it between them. Her eyes were bright with passion, her lips swollen from their kisses. And it was the damn sexiest thing he'd ever seen as she

rubbed her clit. Her pussy gripped his cock hard, and he growled.

“You’re fucking beautiful,” he said through clenched teeth. “Come on me, come with me.”

She moaned loudly, her fingers moving rapidly on her clit. He was mindless now, lost to the passion and moving on instinct. She was a hot heaven he never wanted to leave, and he wanted to brand her from the inside with his come, make sure everyone knew she was his.

“Midas!”

He felt her come, felt the heat of her pleasure, and he followed, letting out a roar of completion that echoed in the room.

He thrust a few more times and then stopped deep within her as his cock spasmed and he shivered.

She cupped his face and kissed him sweetly, softly. “Oh, Midas.”

“My queen,” he said hoarsely, “you rocked my world.”

CHAPTER  
ELEVEN

Maya could have stayed in his arms against the hard door with his cock deep inside her forever. Well, maybe not forever, but certainly a long time. She'd never been with anyone like Midas.

She supposed that was the way with true mates. Everything else before you met them was a shadow.

Her magic flared within her suddenly, her vision blurring and her skin tingling.

"Ow, shit!" Midas said, his hands tightening on her.

She blinked until her vision cleared and saw burn marks on his skin where her fingers had been. She pulled her fingers away and looked closely at the marks. They were healing already, but she'd never seen anything like that before.

"I...don't understand." She looked at him. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, you didn't do it on purpose. Are you okay?"

"Let me down."

He eased from her body, and she immediately felt the loss and regretted whatever had caused the afterglow to disappear. She inspected her fingers but didn't see any burn marks on her skin.

She brought her hands close together and electricity sparked between her fingers, but it had a blue tint.

She'd had access to her air power her whole life, but nothing like this had ever happened before. It was like her

power was suddenly supercharged.

Looking around the room, she saw a pile of debris in the corner. She lifted her hand and the debris swirled on the floor, rising into the air like a mini tornado. She moved it to a wheelbarrow and let it drop into it, dust flying up when it landed.

“I thought your magic was on the fritz?” he asked as he dressed.

She followed suit, smiling when he handed her the skirt that was on the floor. As she dressed, she said, “It was. It feels supercharged now.”

“From us having sex?”

She shrugged. “Stranger things have happened. Actually,” she said, looking at her hands, “it feels different.”

“Different how?”

“I’m not sure. It’s hard to explain. It feels like there’s something new to my magic, like it’s the same but also different. I wonder...”

She buttoned her shirt and then moved to the door. Laying her hands on the security system that kept the door locked, she closed her eyes and focused. Immediately she could see in her mind’s eye what the interior of the lock looked like. She could see the fried wires and the blackened components.

“It’s ruined,” she said. “The whole thing will have to be replaced. But I think I can get us out of here.”

“Well, go ahead, my queen, I trust you.”

She opened her eyes and looked at him. He was watching her intently and looking very sexy. And she didn’t mind the nickname, either. No one had ever called her *my queen* before.

Turning her attention to the panel, she said, “Stop being so distracting.”

He chuckled. “I can’t help it that I’m sexy. You are too.”

She did not think that was awesome.

Focusing once more on the lock, she pushed her power inside and surrounded the deadbolt within the mechanism. It took a few firm tugs, but she was able to finagle the deadbolt back inside the panel.

Taking a step back, she grasped the handle. “Let’s see if what I did worked.”

At first the door didn’t open, and she worried that she’d missed something, but then she realized the wall was a little warped, probably from whatever had happened to cause the damage. She pulled more firmly, and the door opened fully. She stepped out of the way and walked out. Midas was right at her side, taking her hand.

“That was amazing,” he said.

She wanted to preen like a peacock or dance a little jig. Her power was back!

He walked her through the building and outside to the back parking lot, explaining that someone had set bombs overnight that went off that morning, when they were supposed to be on shift but had been delayed for a meeting.

“If it hadn’t gone long, we would’ve been here when it happened.” He stopped and looked at the building. “We’d have had mass casualties for sure.”

“Who would do that?”

“We don’t know. The police are investigating, and so are our people and the vampires. Hopefully we figure it out before something else happens.”

“Could I see you after work?” she asked.

“You can see me now.”

“Don’t you have to get back to work?”

As if on cue, someone called for him and he excused himself.

He walked away, and she watched as he interacted with a few males. Hadn’t he said he was a low-ranked male? He sure didn’t act like one, and people didn’t treat him that way.



Her stomach churned. This was just what she hadn't wanted to happen.

She didn't want to be with a high-ranked male because he would never put her first. Even if Midas had rocked her world, the moment the ambush needed something, he'd left her alone, just like a high-ranked male would.

He left the males and walked toward her.

"Midas?" someone else called.

He waved a hand dismissively. "Call Cyrus. I'm going to take a break. No one call me."

He took her hand and said, "Where did you park?"

"What?"

"Where did you park? Did you get a taxi here?"

"No, I parked a few blocks away. You're leaving with me?"

"Of course, I'm going to make sure you get back to the store safely."

"You don't need to deal with them?" She looked over her shoulder as he led her from the parking lot toward the sidewalk.

"Hell no, they can handle things."

"They sure rely on you like a high-ranked male."

He cleared his throat. "It's my construction company so I'm their boss. Didn't I tell you I wasn't high ranked?"

She hummed but didn't answer his question. She couldn't shake the feeling that he was lying. Or, if not lying exactly, he was definitely keeping the whole truth from her. Omission was still a lie, no matter how you looked at it.

He held out his hand when they reached her car, and she fished the key from her skirt pocket.

"You were working at the store, right?" he asked as he opened the passenger door for her.

Okay, he was a gentleman, and she definitely liked that, but she also couldn't get over the ache in her gut that there was something off about everything between them.

“Yeah.”

He shut the door and walked around to the driver's side.

He was definitely sexy. And her body was still humming, like her climaxes were just tingling under the surface still. Her toes curled in her shoes, and she cleared her throat, trying to distract herself. She didn't want to get all worked up again, not when she wasn't really sure who he was at this point.

“So,” he said, “I'd like to take you out on a date tonight, but I'm going to be here late. I have to meet with the vampire coven after sunset because of the damage to the building. Can I take you out tomorrow?”

She was a little hurt that he didn't want to go out with her tonight, or at least meet up with her, even if they just hung out.

“Sure.”

She could feel him looking at her, so she glanced at him and smiled in what she hoped was a reassuring way. She really didn't want him to ask a follow up question where she would have to admit that she thought he was a liar-liar-pants-on-fire.

The ride to the store was quiet. She was lost in her thoughts, and he clearly was as well, so she didn't attempt to make conversation. When he parked at the back of the store, an SUV pulled up next to them. She leaned over and saw one of the males from the construction company.

“What's he doing here?” she asked.

They got out of her car, and he came around to her side and handed her the keys. “I need a ride back. Let's exchange numbers. I'd like to call you tonight after my meeting.”

She opened her contacts and entered his number as he rattled it off, and then she sent him a text so he had her number.

“Are you okay?” he asked. He touched her face and she looked at him.

It was hard to look at him, actually. He was just too gorgeous, and it hurt her heart that he was probably lying to her for some unknown reason.

“I’m just surprised you don’t want to hang out tonight, I guess. After...everything.”

Ah, what she didn’t want was to sound like some lovestruck whiny teenager.

His fingers tightened against her skin for a brief moment. “I’m sorry that I have to deal with this. I can come over after I meet with Mishka, but I don’t know how late it will go. I wish I could get out of it, but I run the construction company and I can’t put off the master vampire of the city.”

“I get it.” She tilted her head out of his grip and took a step back.

His tiger made a low growling sound.

“I’m going to get to work. I think you have to also,” she said. “I’ll talk to you after your meeting.”

She smiled at him, tempted to kiss him, but ignored the thought. If she kissed him, she might feel compelled to tell him everything she was feeling, and then she might be setting herself up for something terrible.

She said goodbye and walked into the store. As the door shut, she heard him call her name, but she didn’t go back outside. The last thing she wanted to do was cry, but there was something deep within her that wanted to do that very thing.



“I DON’T KNOW,” Lulu said as she poked her straw in the thick strawberry milkshake. “What makes you think your mystery guy is hiding something like what rank he is? And why the heck won’t you tell me who he is? I might know him.”

Maya stirred her spoon in her chocolate banana milkshake. She’d purposely not told Lulu who Midas was or every detail of what had happened, just that she’d gotten trapped with a

shifter she was sure was her true mate, but for some reason he wasn't telling her what his rank was.

"You don't need to know his name, let a girl have some secrets," she said. "And I just feel in my gut that he's not telling me everything. He said he's low ranked, but his people treated him like he was high ranked."

"You don't like high-ranked guys because of your ex?" Her lips puckered as she took a drink.

"Yes." But if Midas had been up front with her? If he really was high ranked but was going to treat her right? Then she'd have been okay with it. It wasn't like she saw him at a club and picked him up randomly without any real connection between them except lust. He was her true mate, so she would be stuck with whatever rank he was, no matter if it was high or low.

She didn't actually care what rank he was, she cared how he would treat her. Because she'd been treated so badly in the past, the correlation was that the higher the rank, the more a male cared about his people over his mate. She'd seen it at the highest ranks in her ex's pack: the alpha male routinely cast his mate aside to tend to his people's matters.

Shivering in thought, she shook the images of her ex out of her mind.

"I just don't like being lied to," she said finally.

"Who does?" Lulu pointed out, which was an irrefutable truth.

A bell rang as the door opened and a few males walked in. She didn't recognize them, but something within her stirred at seeing them.

Lulu looked over her shoulder and then turned back to her milkshake. "Those are tigers."

"Oh?" Maya mentally sighed. That's probably why she felt some kind of connection to them—because they were part of Midas's group.

“Yep.” She peeked over her shoulder again for a moment, then looked at Maya. “Derek, Aaron, and Mitch.”

“How do you know them?”

“Well, they go to the shifter bar Lykos, and I go there from time to time. Oh, we should go! And also, Mari’s mated to Manny, and she’s part of the coven.”

Maya hadn’t met Mari, but she’d heard her name.

“They all live in Whisper Creek,” Lulu said, when the males had taken several boxes of to-go bags and left. “It’s an hour from downtown, give or take. I went to a ceremony there once with Mari to help her out. I also got to meet Midas.”

Maya’s heart did a two-step and she grimaced and rubbed at her chest. “Midas?”

“Yeah, he’s the king.”

Everything in Maya’s world narrowed down to the last word her new friend had spoken: *king*.

Well, holy crap. This news was so much worse than him being high ranked. He was the freaking leader of the tigers.

“He was dating a lady tiger from another pride not too long ago. I heard she got too clingy, and he kicked her to the curb, had his guy Romeo send her packing. Can you imagine the humiliation?”

*Yes. Yes, she could.*

“It’s ambush, not pride.”

“Yeah, I always get that mixed up. There’s a pride of white lions in Cleveland too, they live with the falcons,” Lulu said. “But anyway, he’s sexy, no doubt.”

“Which one?” she asked dryly, trying to distance herself from the emotions that swirled within her.

“Oh, both of them. I mean, Midas is sexy as hell, but Romeo’s sexy too. What’s the saying? I wouldn’t kick either of them out of bed for eating crackers.”

“I’ve never really understood that saying.”

Lulu sucked the last bit of milkshake through the straw and then pushed the glass to the end of the table. “I think it means that even if they have horribly annoying habits, that they’re good looking enough you ignore them. Unless it’s snoring. I don’t mess with guys who snore.”

“Only one way to find that out,” Maya said with a chuckle.

“Fact.”

Maya finished her milkshake while she listened to Lulu wax poetic about the tigers she’d be willing to let eat crackers in bed, but all she could think about was that Midas had lied, and about something important. She’d asked him his rank, because she’d been trying to protect herself from getting tied to a male who would never put her first. There wasn’t anything wrong with wanting to be the universe for a guy. That’s how it was supposed to be: her true mate was her whole world, and she was his.

She wondered briefly if she’d manifested this bullshit, if her being worried about being with a high-ranked male had somehow made the universe give her the highest ranked male in the whole damn group. But whether she’d actually caused the situation by daring the universe to prove her theory right or not, one thing was abundantly clear: Midas had lied.

And she didn’t want to be with a guy who lied.

CHAPTER  
TWELVE

Midas stared at his phone while he waited for Mishka to arrive in the War Room, a large conference room in the offices of Fang that the coven used for meetings. He hadn't been able to shake the way things were left with Maya. Something was definitely wrong.

After what happened in the remodel's office, she'd gone from vixen to aloof, and he couldn't pinpoint when it happened or what caused it. She'd been cold as ice on the ride to the store, and when he'd planned to go in for a goodbye kiss, she'd given him a weird half-smile and walked away.

He'd called her a couple hours later when he'd had a break and she hadn't answered either the calls or texts. He'd tried multiple times over the course of the remainder of his workday as well as when he walked across the street to the club for his meeting.

She'd gone radio silent.

His tiger let out an unhappy snarl in his head.

"Hello, Midas," Mishka said as he walked into the room.

Midas rose and shook his hand, and greeted the others as they walked in behind him. Mishka's inner circle known as the *family*—his closest vampire friends—entered the room. Midas had brought Romeo and Cyrus with him.

"Rage is going to put the exterior camera footage up on the screen," Mishka said, taking a seat at the head of the table. "Tell us what you observed, Midas."

Midas launched into the day, from the initial discovery to the clean-up and generator issue that caused him to be locked in the office.

“I understand you were locked in the office with someone not from your coven?” Mishka asked.

“A wiccan,” he said, discomfort settling over him like a wet blanket.

“Oh?”

“She’s a...friend,” he said. “She was able to unlock the door with her power. The locking mechanism was fried with the generator problem, so it will have to be replaced.”

“One more thing on the list,” Cyrus said with a sigh.

“Here we go,” Rage said, pointing a remote at a large screen on the wall. “We don’t have footage of the back, which is how we assume the people who set the bombs got into the building. We checked camera footage from the businesses around the bank including the apartment complex, but none caught anything of note. The bombs went off at six thirty this morning.”

Midas watched the footage as the building lit up from within.

“I think we were targeted,” Midas said.

“Why your people and not us?” Mishka asked.

“Because the bomb was set to go off after my people would have been there. I have a good portion of males who start at six a.m., including myself most mornings. If the bomb was meant to target vampires, it wouldn’t make sense to set it after sunrise because there would be no vampires there.”

“They could be targeting the building itself,” Brone mused, his purple eyes flashing.

“To what end?” Cyrus asked. “The bank isn’t a threat to anything.”

“True,” Mishka said, rubbing his chin in thought.

“Jason’s out of commission,” Temple said.



Jason was the head of the anti-vampire group The First Church of Humanity. He'd been taken out by one of the vampire mates, who was a hellhound breeder. He hadn't seen a hellhound in person before, only pictures of them in history books, but he'd heard the hounds were a boon to the coven and excellent allies. Particularly since they took out the number one enemy of the coven.

"What about him?" Mishka asked.

"I mean I think Midas is right and it's not about us, but about them: the tigers. We know that Jason had an ally in an anti-shifter male. What was his name? Boyd? Brian?"

"Brent," Brone said, his upper lip curling. "He eluded capture when Jason was taken out."

Midas blew out a breath. Brent Foley was the leader of an anti-shifter group called Humans Against Shifters. When he'd come to Cleveland to help out his old friend Jason, Mishka had alerted the leaders of the various shifter groups to be on alert. It hadn't crossed Midas's mind that it was Brent at the core of the attack on the bank, but that seemed highly likely.

"It must be him," Midas said. "It's not as if we woke up this morning with an enemy targeting us specifically."

"The question is what do we do about it?" Cyrus asked. "We know next to nothing about him. He's not even from here, right? Isn't he from California?"

Midas had gotten a dossier on Brent and his anti-shifter group from the vampires. He'd increased patrols in Whisper Creek and informed his people to be on the lookout for anything suspicious as well as ensuring no one went anywhere alone. They'd not seen hide nor hair of anything out of the ordinary.

Except for the bank bombing.

Plans were made to get the various state and local law enforcement agencies on the task of locating the male and his people, as well as alerting the other shifter groups to double safety efforts until the threat was neutralized.

When the meeting was over, Mishka stopped Midas at the door.

“The surveillance equipment will be installed tonight, and we’ll have trolls patrolling not only the building itself but the block to ensure nothing like this happens again. I’m thankful no one was hurt.”

“Me too.”

“How far back does this push the remodel?”

“I’m hoping only six weeks. I’ve added additional tigers from the ambush to aid the cleanup which wasn’t quite finished up today. As long as the supply lines remain open and we can fill the orders for what we need, I think it’s doable.”

“Good. Be careful, my friend.”

“I will. You too.”

He walked from the room and met up with Cyrus and Romeo in the lobby next to the coat check.

“Home?” Romeo asked.

“I need to go to the wiccan store.”

Cyrus’s brow rose. “Again?”

Midas leveled a short growl. “Yes, again. Not that it’s any of your concern.”

Cyrus put his hands up. “Sorry. I just didn’t realize... well, it doesn’t matter. It’s not my business. I’m going to catch up to my mate and help set up the security equipment across the way. I’ll be late in the morning, depending on how long things go tomorrow.”

“See you,” Midas said.

He and Romeo headed out to the parking lot. He wanted to tell him that he could go alone, that there was no reason for him to also go with him, but he’d instituted an ambush-wide rule that everyone had a buddy when they went somewhere, and he couldn’t ask his people to do something he wasn’t willing to do himself.

“Don’t bite my head off,” Romeo said as he got behind the wheel of the SUV.

“About what?” he asked, looking at his phone and all the unanswered calls and messages.

“Why are we going to the store?”

He lifted his head and looked out the windshield as they pulled into the main street and headed to the highway. “You know that female I was with yesterday?”

“The wiccan?”

“Yep.”

“Yeah. What about her?”

“She’s my truemate.”

Romeo made a noise of surprise. “Something’s wrong though? You’ve been acting weird for the last two days.”

Midas blew out a breath. “I told her I was low ranked. I’m pretty sure she doesn’t believe me, because ever since I dropped her off at the store earlier today, she’s been dodging my calls.”

“Lemme get this straight,” Romeo said. “You found your truemate and the first thing you did was lie to her? Well, no wonder she’s pissed.”

“I want to know that she cares about me for me,” he pointed out. “I don’t want to get burned again, but lately it’s all that seems to be happening.”

“You’re being a dick and not giving your truemate the opportunity to prove herself different from the others. So what if she’s impressed by the king title? Most people are. It’s not like she could be using you for your title, she’s a wiccan. I think you fucked up.”

He clenched his fists and his claws dug into his palms. He knew that!

“I don’t know how to fix it.”

“I’m not sure either but apologizing in person seems like a good way to go about it.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do.”

“Good. I’m glad I can be here to watch you grovel.”

“I can still kill you, you know.”

“Nah.”

Midas snorted and rubbed his temple where a headache was blooming. His whole body was strung tight, and he wanted nothing more than to grab Maya, hold her close and tell her he was an ass and needed to apologize. He’d beg for her forgiveness.

He didn’t see her car in the parking lot of the store. Romeo pulled to a stop and Midas stared out the windshield for a few minutes in silence, and then said, “Let’s go home.”

“Are you sure? Someone might know where she lives.”

He shook his head. “If she wanted me to know her address, she would’ve given it to me. I’m not going to ask her coworkers to tell me something she didn’t offer.”

Romeo hummed but didn’t say anything. When they were on the way to Whisper Creek, Midas felt defeated. How had something that was supposed to be so perfect and amazing—finding his truemate—turn out to be such a colossal shitshow?

If he could go back in time, he’d entirely redo their first meeting, starting with not injuring her with the door. Since time travel wasn’t possible, he had limited options at his disposal to fix the mistakes he’d made, but he did need to talk to her to get to the bottom of things.

Tomorrow he’d wait for her at the store.

Romeo stopped in front of Midas’s home.

“I’m heading to the store first thing,” he said as he got out.

“I’ll be here.”

“Thanks.” He paused and looked in the SUV. “I mean it. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Midas. Night.”

He said goodnight and watched his second-in-command drive off. Trudging to the house, he tried not to think about how lonely and cold the bed was going to be, or how much it sucked that his mate wasn’t with him.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTEEN**

**M**aya parked in the back of the store and flipped down the visor. She'd put on makeup that morning, but it hadn't covered the dark circles her lack of sleep had garnered her. With a sigh, she pushed the visor back into place, grabbed her tote, and got out.

As she shut her door, something caught her eye, and she realized that Midas was standing at the back door.

He had no right to look so mouth-wateringly good.

Her body heated and her stomach twisted, as memories of their time together filled her mind.

She walked slowly toward him and stopped a few feet away.

The moment she was close to him, she felt her magic stir.

Holy crap, this was not fair!

Being in his presence was just one more reminder that her magic had gone haywire when she'd been injured, and it was somehow tied to him.

"Maya," he said, his voice rich and low. "What's going on?"

She opened her mouth, but then closed it. She just didn't know what to say.

"Can you at least tell me why you ignored my calls and texts yesterday?"

She wasn't sure what to say, because the answer was complicated on some levels, but she still blurted out, "I know you're lying about your rank."

His brows rose. "Why do you care? Why on earth does it matter whether I'm low or high ranked?"

She heard a car pull into the parking lot and she so very much did not want to have a conversation with him in front of other people. She pulled him to an alcove to get out of the wind and folded her arms.

In a rush she told him everything that happened with her ex, from the constant stream of broken promises to the insistence she be okay with taking a back seat to whatever he decided was more important than her.

She shrugged and brushed at a stray tear. "I don't want to go through that again. And to top it off, you lied. You looked me straight in the eye and lied to my face. Twice!"

He let out an angry snarl, but she held up her hand. "I want to be the most important person to my true mate, Midas. Because he's the most important person to me. I was just so damn pissed at you the night we met. I mean, I was in pain and embarrassed that I was hurt in such a stupid way, and then you came off as so sleazy when you asked me out." She sighed. "This whole thing has been a huge clusterfuck."

He cupped her chin and made her look at him. "Where did you get the idea that I wouldn't put you first?"

"Right after we walked out of the bank building, you left me standing alone for like ten minutes." She tilted her chin until she was free of his touch. It made her magic flare, and she didn't want to deal with that right now.

He dropped his hand. "I needed to let my people know I was going to be leaving to take you to the store."

"You wouldn't even see me last night," she said. She was so tired, and her magic flaring was making her feel even more exhausted.

"I'm going to point out that we could have at least talked yesterday if you'd answered my damn messages. But I also

came here last night.”

She frowned. “You did?”

“Yeah.” He rocked back on his heels and put his hands in his pockets. “Your car was gone. I was tempted to ask someone in the store for your address, but I didn’t want to put them on the spot if they were uncomfortable giving me the information. So, I’m here now. I’ve been waiting for an hour because I didn’t want to miss you coming in.”

She shook her head. “I can’t deal with this right now.”

“What?” he asked, his voice getting even lower as his eyes flashed.

“I’m tired, okay? I slept like crap last night and I have to work today, so I don’t want to be out here talking about this.”

“That’s not fair, Maya. I came here to see you. I messed up, several times, and I’m sorry for all the misunderstandings. But I’m here now. Can’t you give me some time?”

Her vision hazed a little as anger poured through her.

“Are you kidding me? You want me to give you time when you couldn’t give me any yesterday?”

“It’s different and you know it,” he seethed.

“Nope. No.” She shook her head and slashed at the air. “I’m not going to tie myself to a male who asks for what he won’t give. I don’t care if I’m half in love with you. You need to go.”

She spun and stalked away.

He called after her, but she refused to stop until she was inside the store and in one of the blessing rooms with the door shut. She knew she was being petulant but couldn’t stop the emotional rollercoaster. Somehow Midas and her power were linked, and it was only in his presence that it returned.

What she needed right now was space.

It killed her to not go out to the lot and talk to him, to keep the distance between them. She was usually a very forgiving person, but she felt entirely too vulnerable in his presence.



She'd broken her cardinal rule and gotten involved with not just a high-ranked male, but the highest ranked male in the ambush, and he'd done everything she'd dreaded. He came to apologize, but so had her ex—in the beginning. Then they reached a point in the relationship where he stopped apologizing and just told her to accept that she was never going to be his number one.

Surely Midas was heading in that direction with her. How could he not? He was king, after all, and that came with some serious responsibility.

Plopping into one of the chairs with a sigh, she laid her head in her hands and wished that things were different.



BRENT HAD GOTTEN a call earlier that morning to let him know that Midas had deviated from his normal routine. Instead of going downtown, he'd gone to a store. Buck had been tasked with following Midas that day. When Brent arrived and parked next to Buck's truck on a service road in the woods behind the store, he got out of his car and climbed into the truck. Buck handed him a pair of binoculars.

"I'll be damned," Brent said, focusing on Midas.

The man paced at the back door, looking up every few minutes and scanning the lot.

"What do you think?" Buck asked.

"I'm not sure. When did he get here?"

"His right-hand guy picked him up earlier than usual, they got here before six. I followed the tracker on the truck and caught up with them before they got here. I just happened to find this service road, or I would have parked somewhere else and waited in the trees."

The service road was definitely a boon since it was cold as hell out.

As the minutes ticked by, Midas greeted people who walked into the store but didn't follow anyone inside.

“What is this place again?”

“Mother Earth something or other,” Buck said.

“Oh, the wiccans. Now that's interesting.”

“Why?”

“Well, shifters and wiccans are all in cahoots here in Cleveland. They're all allied together. If he's here, then he needs something from the wiccans. But a specific one, otherwise he would have gone inside with the people who showed up already.”

Buck hummed and stared out the windshield while Brent opened his phone and checked his notes on Midas. He was definitely a methodical sort of guy and took his work very seriously. It was too bad he was a shifter. He'd have been a good one for the Humans Against Shifters group.

A few minutes later, a beat-up old car pulled into the parking lot and a woman got out. She stiffened as soon as she saw Midas. They spoke for a short period before ducking into an alcove.

“Wish we could hear what they're saying,” Buck said.

“Don't need to,” he said.

“What, you read lips?”

“Nope, body language says it all.”

Buck leaned forward a little bit, resting his chin on the steering wheel. “And what's their body language saying?”

“The most important thing in the world: we've finally found Midas's weakness.”

CHAPTER  
FOURTEEN

Midas couldn't believe what had just happened. Not only had Maya called him out on his lie—and truth be told, he'd known in his heart that it was going to come out sooner rather than later anyway—but then she'd said she was falling in love with him but didn't want to spend time with him.

It was like getting kissed and punched at the same time.

He didn't know what to do with the information.

So he'd done the honorable thing and given her the space she asked for even though it warred with everything inside him.

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“You okay, boss?” Romeo asked and startled him from his musings.

Midas got into the truck and said, “I think I fucked up.”

His brows went high. “Think or know?”

“Know.”

“Ah. The witch?”

“Yep.”

“Can I help?”

“Not unless you can turn back time.”

“I wish. Because then I'd go back and ask if you could move the damn pride somewhere tropical because this

freaking winter weather is driving my cat insane.”

Midas smiled despite the ache in his heart. “Cleveland’s nice in the summer though. So it’s worth the shitty winter.”

“If you say so. Maybe I’ll feel differently when I find my truemate and have someone to warm up the bed with.”

Midas grunted and remained quiet for the rest of the ride.

“If I could offer a tad bit of romantic advice even though I truly have no business offering such?” Romeo said as he parked the truck.

“You can try.”

“Go back to her. Don’t leave until things are settled between you. You’re truemates. Whatever issues you have, the important thing is you found each other. Honestly if I found my truemate, you’d have to take a blowtorch to my ass to get me away from her, and even then, you’d have to knock me out.”

“She asked for space.”

“Okay, so you’re being a good guy, but you can still be with her. What’s her issue?”

“She didn’t like the lie.”

“Well, who the hell would? Did you tell her why you lied?”

No, actually, he hadn’t. Because she’d blurted out a terrible history she had with a high-ranked male in a wolf pack in Rhode Island, and she didn’t trust high-ranked males. He hadn’t wanted to dump on her, even though it bugged the hell out of him that she put on him all that shit from that male.

He might have kept the truth from her, and he might have had an emergency to deal with, but he never intended to put anyone before her. If she was his queen, if they were mated fully, then she would have been by his side at his meeting with Mishka. But he couldn’t bring her along when they were virtual strangers and not even appropriately mated.

They'd had knock-out amazing sex, but he hadn't marked her.

"Okay, so go tell her about your worries. Lay out your reasons the way she did hers, and let the cards fall where they will. She should forgive you for withholding the truth until you knew what she wanted from you. She was burned before and changed how she acted, so why wouldn't she expect the same from you?"

A blast of icy wind made Midas wince when he opened the door, but also his heart clenched at the truth of Romeo's word.

"You're pretty smart," he said.

"I try. Just remember this when my performance review comes up. I could use a raise."

"You got it." Midas moved to walk into the building.

"You're not going to go get her now?"

"She asked for some time to think, so I'm going to give it to her even though my cat is being a total ass. If I go right back, then I'm not proving that I'm listening to her, so I'll give some time for things to settle, and then I'll go to her around lunch."

"I'll drive."

Midas nodded and thanked Romeo after he grabbed the door. As he made his way into the office to start laying the new floor, he glanced at his watch. In a few hours, he'd be back at the store and could see Maya again. This time, he'd tell her everything like he should have from the beginning, and he'd make sure that she knew he would always put her first, and if there came a time when he couldn't, then he'd make sure she was by his side like she should have been from the beginning.

His cat let out an annoyed yowl in his head.

It's a good plan, he mentally told the beast.

*Yowl.*



“I NEED A CANDLE,” a young male said.

Maya looked up from the stack of books she was adding to the shelves in the store.

“Sure, I can help with that,” she said. She stood and stretched out the kink in her back. “What kind of candle?”

“A red one,” he said decisively.

She walked him over to their candle section, which was a very long table filled with every sort of candle a person could need, from the basic colors to the ones filled with minerals or gemstones.

She touched a red taper candle but didn’t pick it up. “What do you need it for?”

“A love spell. Red is for love, so I need a red candle.”

She didn’t need her power to know he was entirely human. Her aunt would have called him a mundane, a human who liked supernatural things but had zero talent with it. Mundanes could become unnatural wiccans or wizards, but it took years and due diligence.

“Well, yes, that’s true. But red candles with love spells are more for lust than actual love. Are you looking for a good time or for romance and true love?”

He blinked in surprise. “I thought...it’s not the same thing?”

She snorted so hard she had to take a step back and cough. “No, of course not. Lust is physical and urgent. Love is emotional. Lust is a sprint, love is a marathon.”

Her mind strayed to Midas.

She’d really spilled her guts to him earlier, and then she hadn’t even let him comment on what she’d said or share anything with her. She’d flayed her soul in front of him and then walked away.

Her fingers tightened on the candle for a moment, and she forced herself to relax.

“Tell me about the person the spell is for.”

“She’s my neighbor, and I’m crazy about her. We just can’t seem to get out of the friend zone.”

“You want a relationship?”

He nodded immediately.

“Okay, then you want a pink candle.” She released the red candle and lifted a pale pink candle. “You do understand that a love spell, whether romantically charged or lust driven, is not going to force anyone to do anything they wouldn’t normally, right?”

“Oh, I know, I just thought it couldn’t hurt. You know, ask the universe to give me a hand.”

“I hear you,” she said, smiling. “There are plenty of people who come to the store with the same thought. The universe has a simple rule: what you put out, you get back times three. If your intentions are pure, you’ll see a beneficial result, but if not, then you’ll be on the receiving end of a massive butt spanking from the universe.”

“I only want to see things move forward romantically with her,” he said as he looked down at the candle. “I’ve got the spell, the salt for the circle, and the string. But I guess I need pink string?”

“Yes,” she said, leading him to another table of fabric supplies, where she found a spool of thread of the same delicate color. “Here you go.”

“Thank you so much,” he said, hugging the candle and thread to his chest. “If we get married and have kids, I’ll name one after you.” He paused. “What’s your name?”

“Maya.”

“Ah, good. That’s a nice name. I was worried it was some awful thing and then I’d just committed to naming a kid that.”

“I appreciate the offer,” she said with a chuckle. “Lulu will check you out. Best wishes for the future and your lady friend.”

“Thanks, Maya.”

She left him to Lulu’s assistance and returned to the stack of books. Settling on her knees, she picked up the top one, which was a guide to growing magical herbs, and slipped it onto the shelf with the others.

While she set the books in their correct spots on the shelves, she thought about Midas. She shouldn’t have treated him like that. Even if she was angry that he lied, he was still the king of his people for goodness’ sake and should be treated respectfully.

Especially from his truemate.

And she did know they were truemates, and she genuinely wanted to be with him.

But she was so scared to be put on a shelf like these books. To always be put aside for the greater good, to never be good enough to capture her mate’s attention fully, to always have something else, someone else, be more important than her.

She hung her head. She was never going to get anywhere in life, let alone on the romantic front, if she didn’t stop putting so much pressure on everything.

How differently would things have gone with Midas if she’d just told him her fears and let him answer her? Instead, she word-vomited on him and then ran away like a coward.

“Are you okay?” Lulu called.

“Yeah, why?”

“I don’t know, you look depressed.”

“I am.”

“Oh, then you’re not okay.”

Lulu walked over, her skirt swishing around her ankles. “Wanna go to lunch? Velma is going to relieve us in a few minutes.”



Maya glanced at her watch. “I would like to go to lunch, but I need to do something on my break instead. Maybe tomorrow?”

“Sure. I’m just going to head to the deli and get a sandwich and some soup. I still haven’t warmed up from the drive in this morning.”

Maya finished shelving the last book and stood. They headed to the breakroom to get their things and passed Velma, who wished them a good lunch.

She braced against the cold as she opened the door and held it for Lulu.

“Where are you headed for lunch?” Lulu asked.

The door shut and blew a bit of warm air around them. “Downtown. I want to see a tiger about a date.”

Lulu smiled widely. “I’m so jealous! I need to find my forever guy.”

“We can cast a love spell if you want later.” Even though Maya’s magic wasn’t working right now, between her instructions and Lulu’s actions they should be able to get one going.

“Oh really? That would be awesome, I’ve never tried one.”

“I’ll help, it’ll be fun. Wish me luck!”

Something thudded at their feet. Maya glanced down and saw a silver canister roll to a stop next to her boots. A heartbeat later, there was an explosion of bright light, and she was knocked off her feet. She was blinded by the light, her ears ringing, as she landed hard on the icy pavement.

She couldn’t move, her body immobilized by the shock of the blast.

Her vision came back and then tunneled to nothing again. As she slipped into the darkness, her last thought was: Midas.

CHAPTER  
FIFTEEN

Midas wasn't a nervous guy by any stretch, but the closer he got to the store, the more anxious he felt. He was halfway between wanting to barf and wanting to yell profanities.

The morning had passed achingly slow, but the good news was that it was finally lunchtime. He'd left Cyrus in charge with explicit instructions to not fucking call him unless someone was on fire in such a way that they were going to set the entire city on fire.

He'd even gone so far as to turn off his phone so there was no chance of being disturbed while he talked to Maya. He didn't plan to return to the bank for the rest of the day and hoped that she'd allow him to take her out on a date. A real one, with nice clothes and a fancy restaurant.

His heart clenched suddenly and he inhaled sharply, rubbing the space over his heart with his fingertips.

"You okay?" Romeo asked.

His mouth went dry, and he blinked a few times and swallowed hard.

"I think so."

The pain in his chest grew worse the closer they got to the store, until he had spots in his vision, and he felt like someone was trying to pull his heart from his chest. Panic engulfed him. His lungs burned. His cat went silent.

Romeo swung into the parking lot as a van passed by, tires screeching on the pavement.

“What the hell?” Romeo asked, braking hard.

Someone was laying on the sidewalk outside the back door.

The hair color was wrong to be Maya, but Midas jumped from the truck anyway and raced over.

He pushed hair from her face and found it was Lulu, one of the witches. Romeo joined him as Midas pressed his fingers to her pulse. She moaned softly, her eyes slowly opening.

“They took her,” she said weakly.

“What? Who?” Midas demanded.

“Maya. Someone took her.”

Everything within him went ice cold. He bellowed, “Lorene!”

The back door swung open a moment later, the North Corner standing with wide eyes in the doorway.

“Oh! Lulu!”

“Someone kidnapped Maya,” Midas said. He shoved Romeo’s shoulder. “We gotta go!”

He and Romeo ran to the truck and jumped inside. In moments they were on the street.

“Which way?” Romeo asked. “I don’t see the van.”

Midas searched through his feelings for his connection to Maya. Even though they weren’t mated yet, they were still mates and he was going to fucking find her.

“Left. Left!”

Romeo cut the wheel and turned down a side road, pressing his foot on the gas. Midas called Cyrus and told him to mobilize the ambush, because someone had targeted his truemate. Coupled with the destruction of the bank remodel, it was clear that someone was trying to hurt the tigers. The only

reason someone would go after Maya was because of him. He snarled, his fangs erupting from his gums.

*Hold on, Maya. I'm coming for you.*



MAYA WOKE SLOWLY. Her head hurt and her ears were ringing, and although she was sure her eyes were open, she couldn't really see anything, but a dark haze.

Her memories came back in a rush, and she recalled the canister that had gone off and knocked her out. Panic rose within her, but she pushed it away. It wouldn't do to have a panic attack right now, not when she couldn't see clearly and had no idea what was going on.

Her ears stopped ringing a few moments later, and she winced at the pain as they healed. Then she could hear people talking in low voices. They were all male as far as she could tell. She inhaled slowly and smelled rotted earth and wood.

And then suddenly she smelled body odor, and she couldn't stop from moving away.

Someone grabbed her chin and the body odor smell almost made her gag.

"She's awake, Brent." The male had a southern drawl, which might have been charming if he hadn't been party to her kidnapping.

She blinked rapidly and her vision came back to her, the haze clearing away.

Pulling her chin from his grip, she quickly cataloged her surroundings.

She was in a delapidated barn. There were a few metal bins that were on fire, males huddled around for warmth because the barn was missing part of the roof and the sides were crumbling from rotting wood.

She was also tied to a chair.

A male walked over. He wore a mustard yellow jacket like she'd seen the farmers wear, with a stocking cap, and gloves. He was unshaven, but at least when he stepped up in front of her, the stinky male stepped back.

“Hello,” he said. “You’re probably wondering why you’re here.”

“It crossed my mind.”

He smiled, but it was laced with condescension. “The tiger king likes you, so we’re going to use you for bait.”

Alarm raced through her. She could feel the evil radiating off the male. His aura was a mess, all blacks and grays with hints of dull red. There wasn’t even a speck of goodness within him. She knew in her heart that he wasn’t going to lure Midas using her and then give him a present. He was going to try to kill him.

Well, fuck that.

She tried a different tactic. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know who this tiger king is.”

The smelly male slapped her across the face so hard her eyes watered and blood filled her mouth as her teeth cut her tongue.

“Ah,” she said, hissing at the sharp pain.

“Don’t lie,” the other male said. “Buck can do worse than that. Things that would make you wish you weren’t conscious.”

Buck cracked his knuckles and smiled, and it was such a vile look on his face that it took all her willpower not to start bawling. They were going to lure Midas to her, and then kill them both. She knew if she didn’t get free, she was going to be shuffling off the mortal coil in short order.

Not fucking today.

If only she had her damn magic.

She didn’t even feel the tiniest spark of her power and wanted to curse the universe for whatever had caused the

disruption, especially now when she needed it so badly.

“Let’s try this again, shall we?” he said. “Now I’m Brent, and your name is?”

Well, she sure as hell wasn’t going to lie again. “Maya.”

“Good. Where is your phone?”

“I...don’t know. It was in my bag.”

Buck looked scared for a moment. “We didn’t grab her bag, we just grabbed her.”

“Well, that wasn’t very thoughtful, was it?” Brent punched Buck square in the face and the big male took a step back and covered his suddenly bleeding nose with his hand. “Get me Martin. I need Midas’s number so we can tell him where to meet us. Now.”

Buck hurried away, lifting his phone to his ear.

“I’m surprised that a witch can be with a tiger,” Brent said. “I thought they stuck to their own kind.”

“I wouldn’t know,” she said. “I only know that I just met Midas and I’m not in a relationship with him.”

When he narrowed his gaze at her, she hurried to add, “I mean, I like him and I’d like to pursue something with him, but it’s early. He may not drop everything to come for me, you know.”

“Oh, he will,” Brent said. “We saw you two talking this morning. You may have not realized what was going on with him, but he was a man in love. Or at least the early stages of it.”

Her heart took that moment to soar like a damn eagle. He loved her? Even a little bit?

Shit, she needed to lock that down.

The important thing to remember was that someone had been watching the store and saw them together, deducing that she was important to him.

“Why do you want to take him out? What did he do to you?”

“You’ve not heard of me?”

“Should I have?”

He looked mildly irritated. “I suppose not, since you’re a witch and not a shifter. I’m the head of Humans Against Shifters, and we eradicate shifters. Midas didn’t have any weaknesses I could exploit, so I tried to take him and his crew out at the bank, but that failed. We’ve been following him since then. And low and behold, here you are.”

“You set the bomb in the bank?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“Because you don’t like shifters?”

She couldn’t really wrap her head around that. There were really people who didn’t like shifters so much they wanted to kill them? What about live and let live?

“Of course not, they’re not natural.” He sniffed and made a face.

“By that logic, neither are wiccans,” she pointed out. Then she clamped her lips together, because that might have been a stupid thing to remind him of.

He crouched down and gave her another one of those weird evil smiles. “I’m aware of what you are, Maya. And I agree with you that you’re not natural. Power like you wield is against the natural order of things. Although I suspect you’re one of those fake witches because you haven’t used any magic to get yourself out of here. You’re probably one of those hippy-dippy human women who likes to dress up like the witches and play pretend.” He hummed off-tune for a few beats and then patted her knee as he stood. “It doesn’t really matter what you are, because the important thing is that you matter to Midas. Once we take him out, the rest of his people will be easy to pick off.”

He spoke so casually about ending life as if he were talking about squashing a bug. She knew, though, that Midas

was fierce and strong. She'd felt the tiger within him, known he was more powerful than he said. He would surely be able to defeat this human nutjob.

Because the truth was, her power was gone, and if she couldn't get herself free then she needed to be rescued. She'd never seen herself as the damsel in `distress, but there was no mistaking that she was in real danger right now, and her time on this earth was finite, no matter her long-life.

*Midas, I need you.*



CHAPTER  
**SIXTEEN**

Midas's people caught up to him just as he fully lost sight of the van. He'd lose sight of it for a minute or two and find it again, but then it disappeared entirely and he couldn't find it.

He couldn't feel Maya, even a tiny bit.

He rolled to a stop and rested his head on the steering wheel for a brief moment.

"Midas," Romeo said.

Midas lifted his head and let out an ear-splitting roar, his tiger grieved that Maya had been taken.

Romeo shook his head and rubbed his ear with his finger. "I know you're pissed, but we'll find her."

"I can't feel her," he said. "I don't know what that means."

"Look," he said, holding up his phone. There was camera footage of the back of the wiccan store. He took the phone from Romeo and watched the clip that showed Maya and Lulu speaking, a van pulling up slowly and someone opening the side door and tossing something at their feet. There was an explosion, and the females were launched backward, Maya landing a few feet away in a heap. Males rushed from the van and tossed her inside, slipping away just as he and Romeo appeared.

They'd been so close to stopping the assault that his tiger's fury ramped up again.

“Don’t roar again man, you’re going to pop my eardrum,” Romeo said. “Lorene gave the footage to the police who are searching for the vehicle. There’s a supernatural unit within the Cleveland PD that’s on task. They’ll communicate with us when they find anything.”

“I can’t wait for the police to locate her. She could be hurt right now.”

“I know. I’m going to suggest you shift.”

Midas looked at him. “What? Why?”

“I think you’ll be able to feel her more if you shift. You’re more in tune with your supernatural side when you shift, we all are. It stands to reason that since you two are truemates, even if you’re not mated, that your cat may be able to sense her more than you can. It can’t hurt, right?”

He stared out the windshield, his tiger simmering under his skin.

Climbing from the truck, he shut the door and turned to face the group of vehicles. Every single male who’d been at the construction site was with him in support. It humbled him and bolstered him.

He would find his truemate.

There was no other option.

“I’m going to shift and hunt for her,” he said loudly as several of the males got out of their vehicles or rolled windows down to listen. “If you want to shift, stick with me, I’m going to be running on instinct. If you want to drive, follow Romeo.” He paused, emotion choking him for a hard moment. “She’s my truemate. Your future queen. Her abduction can’t go unanswered.” He lifted his head and let out a furious war cry, and then he shifted. His tiger exploded from him, shredding his work clothes, muscles rippling and fangs ready to maim and kill to get to Maya.

He focused on Maya, first imaging her when she’d come to confront him at the bank, her eyes blazing with indignation, her lips twitching in anger. He’d been ridiculously attracted to her even when she was pissed at him, his tiger admiring that

she wasn't afraid to stand up to him and call him out, even though she'd been so very wrong about him.

And he'd been wrong about her too.

Maya was wounded from her past and pushed him away in defense of her broken heart. He could relate. But together they were going to heal each other's hearts and start over.

And they would definitely be starting over. This wasn't the end of things, he would find her and save her, and put down the threat to his mate. Then he'd make sure she knew she was the most important person in the world to him.

Several of his people shifted. He turned and padded to the edge of the road, leaping over the ditch, and landing in a low bank of snow. His toes curled into the damp ground, his tail swishing as he closed his eyes and focused once more on his mate.

Lucious female. Strong and beautiful. A born leader and his sole purpose in life.

He felt the connection to her flare within him. It was weak, but there. A flicker of familiarity and the start of new love.

He could feel where she was like an invisible tether from his heart to hers.

He swore he could hear her call for him in his mind, too.

*Midas, I need you!*

Leaping forward, he took off as fast as he could, the trees blurring by him as he raced in her direction. He could hear his shifted people racing behind him, and the roar of vehicles as they followed on the road.

*Hold on, I'm coming for you.*



MAYA WASN'T TIED to the chair with rope, which she might have been able to wiggle out of at some point. Or duct tape

which she might have been able to break like she'd seen on online demonstrations, if that stuff actually worked.

As far as she could tell, because she couldn't see her wrists as her arms were behind her back, but it seemed like handcuffs or some kind of shackle.

Her legs weren't tied to the chair, but she couldn't get up because the cuffs were looped around one of the chair back's sections.

She was essentially hogtied and helpless, which was not a predicament she ever pictured herself being in.

Closing her eyes, she focused once more on her power, calling out to the sentinels of the power of the air to give her back her abilities and help her snuff out the evil that was trying to destroy her and the tigers, especially Midas. It seemed unbelievably cruel that she would come to Cleveland and find her true mate, and then be killed by an anti-shifter fanatic group before anything more than the first hot tumble happened.

She felt nothing, not even a tingle.

Her power was lost to her, and she truly didn't get it.

Internally she railed at the unfairness of it all. If she died today, she wouldn't get a chance to tell Midas that she was sorry about all of it. She'd held her past against him, lumped him in with the males she'd known before because she was scared to be hurt again.

But this hurt worse.

Lowering her head to her chest, she sighed softly and tried not to cry.

No! She was not defeated; she would not just give up and let these assholes hurt her mate.

But what the hell could she do?



MIDAS SOARED THROUGH THE WOODS, at times feeling like he'd sprouted wings on his back. He didn't ever remember running so fast, even when he was a young male and raced his friends in the ambush.

The more ground he covered, the stronger his connection grew to Maya, until it was a living, breathing thing within him. It was like he had a second heart beating in his chest, pounding out a rhythm that was leading him directly to her.

A dilapidated barn came into view amid the remains of farmland carved among the trees. He skidded to a stop at an old dirt road and sniffed the dirt and rocks, finding the scent of fresh motor oil and rubber. He lifted his head and stared at the barn, not even his whiskers twitching.

There! Movement.

People were inside the barn, he could see them through the broken down walls.

Tahlon, a white tiger, pawed up next to him and gave a low chuff, flicking his head toward the barn.

Midas nodded, lifting his head and inhaling to sort through the scents. It was too windy for him to pick up Maya's scent, but he could feel that she was there.

His people joined them, the vehicles stopping far down the road and moving off into the trees to stay hidden.

Growling softly, he moved stealthily forward, staying low in the weeds and weaving his way to the barn. A few yards away he froze as two males wearing camo pants and jackets walked out of the barn and separated, each heading in a different direction around the barn.

They were patrolling, which meant that whoever had taken Maya expected to be found at some point, but he was confused that no one was standing guard.

He crouched into the tall weeds at the edge of the clearing and waited for the males to pass each other at the front of the building. Then he gestured with a nod to Tahlon and Aaron, who raced forward to take out the guards. He glanced over his shoulder to see his males, who were still in human form,

stepping out of their hiding spots. Romeo nodded at him, his eyes flashing to the amber of his tiger.

Determination filled Midas.

Inside he roared a triumphant war cry, but outside he remained silent as he stalked forward, then jumped at the old wooden doors of the barn. They splintered under his weight, shattering beneath his big paws.

Now he roared.

CHAPTER  
**SEVENTEEN**

**M**aya had the strangest feeling steal over her. One minute she was trying to wiggle a hand free from the cuffs and the next she felt positively feral, her skin tingling and her fingertips aching suddenly.

Brent and the asshole who'd slapped her were in one corner of the barn staring at a tablet and talking quietly. The rest of their cronies were milling around, surrounding the lit trashcans and huddling together. Wind whipped through the breaks in the walls, snowflakes swirling in the air.

She could see gray skies through some of the holes in the walls and roof.

The feeling rose within her again, and she had a brief vision of a field and barn followed by an angry snarl.

Midas!

She closed her eyes and leaned into the feelings coursing through her. Her magic flared slightly, the air blowing her hair a little bit. Focusing on the cuffs, she tried to move the locking mechanism to release her. She heard a slight metallic scraping sound, but then her magic disappeared again.

Shit.

The door splintered suddenly, a huge orange and black striped tiger roaring in anger and defiance. The males in the barn screamed and raced to grab weapons. Other tigers poured into the barn and attacked.

Midas moved toward her, but Brent blocked his path, lifting a fat yellow gun and squeezing the trigger. Barbs shot out from what was a stun gun, landing in Midas's fur and sparking with electricity. He hit the floor with a groan as Brent continued to squeeze the trigger.

"I knew he'd come for you," Brent gloated, moving slowly forward as Midas continued to be shocked by the barbs embedded in his skin.

Maya's magic flared again, and she broke the cuffs, the pins holding the cuffs closed flying away as she rose to her feet. She lifted her hands in the air and the barbs ripped from Midas's skin. With her power flaring brightly within her, she sent the barbs toward Brent, sinking them into his face. He dropped the gun and waved his hands wildly to get them free, his skin bleeding as they were torn out.

"You bitch!" he yelled.

Brent's pal turned toward her, lifting a knife and slashing at her.

Midas leaped onto his back and sank his deadly claws into his shoulders, pulling him to the floor. The male screamed, the knife clattering to the floor.

Midas rose to his feet and roared, the sound shivering over her skin. She cast a quick protection spell over the tigers, ducking as a male towered over her with a chain dangling from his hands. Midas battled with him, taking him to the floor and sinking his fangs into his throat. The chain whipped frantically against him, but Midas didn't let go until the male stopped moving.

She saw a white tiger fighting two males and she grabbed the chair she'd been tied to and sent it flying in their direction with her power, taking out both males.

She looked around and saw that the tigers were winning, and the males were fleeing.

And then someone grabbed her roughly and pressed a knife to her throat.

"I'll kill her!" he yelled.





BRENT KNEW a lost cause when he saw one, and he wasn't about to be taken out by damn tigers over a witch of all things. He'd clearly miscalculated how efficient the tigers were at tracking their mates, and how silently they'd moved to take out the patrol outside the barn. They'd flowed into the barn through the broken door like a tidal wave.

He thought he was winning when he'd hit the tiger he was sure was Midas with the stun gun, but then that bitch had used her power to remove the electric barbs and given Midas and the others an advantage.

Ducking through a broken board at the corner of the barn, he and Buck scurried away into the woods with the others, heading to where they'd left their vehicles on an old dirt road a mile from the barn.

He'd get Midas another day.

They regrouped at the vehicles, waiting only a few minutes for stragglers.

Of the thirty males that had been with him in the barn, only six remained. But he had his right-hand man with him, and that's what mattered. The others were unfortunate losses, but he had scores of people ready to step up in their place.

"What now?" Buck asked, holding a rag to a wound on his arm from a tiger claw.

"Back to headquarters," Brent said. "I need time to think."

"My brother's back there," Murphy said, his eyes wide with fear, and blood dripping from a gash next to his eye.

"And?" Brent asked irritably as he opened the truck door.

"We need to go get him."

"He's already dead," Buck said. "You go back there, you're on your own and you're definitely going to be killed by those fucking animals. What's it going to be?"

Murphy, who apparently was a coward at heart, hung his head and shook it slightly. Well, cowards did get to live to see another day, although Brent would have to reconsider giving him any sort of authority in the future.

Cowards might live, but they didn't win wars, especially not against shifters.

"Let's go," Brent said.

"You don't want to wait a little longer?" Buck asked as he climbed behind the wheel.

"And risk the tigers finding us? Hell no. If anyone is alive, they know to go to headquarters." He doubted anyone else was alive, though. Grabbing his phone, he swiped through his contacts.

"Who you calling?" Buck asked. "The cops?"

"Why on earth would I call the police?"

"Because they're killing our people."

"We also kidnapped Midas's mate and were planning to kill him. Unfortunately, the government has declared that shifters can use deadly force to get their mates to safety. We started the mess and have casualties because of it. The police would only make things messier than they already are."

"You have a plan?"

"We're going to put Ashley into play." He found her in the contacts and pressed the button to connect the call. "I need some serious recon. I think we need to go back to the drawing board in order to take out the tigers."

He didn't like being wrong, but he'd clearly been ill-prepared for how fast and deadly the tigers were in defending their mates. Now he wondered if he'd chosen a bad first target. Maybe the wolves would've been easier, Adam and his witch mate.

Shaking his head, he focused on the present.

"Ashley," he said when she answered. "Get ready."



MIDAS FELT the male die and extracted his fangs from his neck. Blood coated everything, the gaping wounds in his throat had pumped out blood at a fast pace.

“I’ll kill her!”

Midas’s lips curled over his fangs as he saw a shaggy human hold a knife to Maya’s throat.

Maya stared at him, her eyes pleading.

Wind whipped around them, and he realized her magic was working.

“Fucking stop it,” the male yelled, digging the tip of the knife into her skin. She gasped and went still, the wind stopping.

Midas stalked forward slowly, his gaze on the knife that had caused a small wound in her throat, where blood made a red line to her collarbone.

“You need to let her go,” Romeo said coming to stand next to Midas.

“No. She’s my ticket out of here alive.”

“You’re the only one standing, you idiot,” Romeo said. “Look around.”

The male’s eyes scanned the area wildly, his irises like dimes from stress and fear.

“Th-they left? Left me?” he whispered hoarsely.

Then his eyes narrowed, and he angled the blade over a little more, until Midas knew it was pressing against her artery. One wrong move and she’d bleed out in a heartbeat.

“Then I’ll take her with me,” the male sneered.

Midas concentrated on his connection to Maya, pouring all his emotions into it. All the blooming love, the hope, and concern that he had for her.

He saw her fingers darken slightly, blue lines of electricity forming around her fingertips.

She curled her fingers and held his gaze. The ground shook, the roof ripping off as a whirlwind carried it away into the gray sky beyond. She snapped her fingers and wind blew up her body, shoving the knife and the male's arm away. With a roll, she hit the ground on her knees and Midas took the opportunity, jumping on the male and taking him down to the floor.

He curled his paw over his head and wrenched it to the side, cracking his neck with enough force to nearly tear his whole damn head off. Midas watched as the light faded from his eyes and then he stepped off him and moved to Maya.

He shifted on the fly, rising to his feet and rushing to her as she stood and embraced him.

He felt electricity and glanced down to see her skin was covered with thin blue glowing lines.

She lifted a hand, her fingertips glowing blue. "It's back! Because of you!"

CHAPTER  
EIGHTEEN

Maya felt her power return in full, and it had the edge of something different than before, the way she'd felt when she and Midas had been intimate in the bank. Her power was the same but new, a different dimension from what she'd had before.

Her fingers were glowing blue, something that had never happened before.

"It's back!" she said in shock. "Because of you!"

Midas's hands tightened on her. "Are you okay?"

She hugged him tightly, her arms around his neck and her body pressed to his. "Yes! Thanks to you. You saved my life."

"You saved yourself there at the end," he said, lowering his head to the juncture of her neck and shoulder.

"I couldn't have done it without you being here," she said. She was still confused about what was going on with her power, but then she thought back to what Lorene had said about the reason for her power going on the fritz: that it needed a catalyst because it had changed.

Her magic came back when Midas was around and disappeared when he was gone.

He was her catalyst. Her magic was different because of her truemate. It boggled the mind.

"But you're okay?"

“I am. Thank you for coming for me.” She leaned back, resting in his strong arms. “Are you okay?” She ran her fingers down his bare chest, looking for residual injuries from his many fights.

“I’m fine. I healed fully when I shifted.”

Something was off about his voice. She looked at him and found his face was blank, but his eyes were filled with distrust.

“Midas? Are you okay?”

“Why couldn’t you use your magic?”

“I did. You saw me.”

“Before I got here. Why couldn’t you set yourself free?”

“Because I didn’t have my magic. I told you it’s been on the fritz since I met you.”

“So why is it okay now? Why are your eyes blue and your skin covered with blue lines that look like they’re glowing.”

She pulled her magic back, and the glow disappeared. She’d honestly never had that happen before, and she couldn’t really explain it. How had her air magic suddenly become some kind of electricity? She needed to talk to Lorene.

“It’s because of you,” she said. “We’re true mates.”

“But that doesn’t make sense. The witches who mated tigers in the ambush didn’t lose their powers or get new powers that only worked when they were together.”

She shrugged. “I can’t explain it. My powers disappeared when you and I met, and they only come back when we’re together.”

She actually wondered if when they mated entirely, when he bit her and made her his official mate, if her power would remain whether they were together or not. She’d never heard of a power that only worked when near someone in particular, but then again magic could be unpredictable.

He cleared his throat. “Let’s get you back to the store.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing, Maya.” He took her elbow and led her away, stopping briefly to tell Romeo to handle things and that he’d be back after dropping her off.

They walked to where there was a line of vehicles hidden in the trees quite a ways away from the barn. He opened the passenger door of a truck and helped her in. Then he got into a plastic box in the back of the truck and removed clothes and boots, dressing swiftly before getting behind the wheel. He turned around in the road, heading away from where she’d been captive.

Midas hadn’t said a word to her since they left the barn, and no matter how often she started a conversation with him, he only grunted in response. She couldn’t shake the feeling that something was very wrong between them now that hadn’t been before, and she had no clue what it was or how to get him to open up to her.

What the hell had she done wrong?



“COULD YOU TAKE ME HOME?” she asked.

Midas glanced at her. He’d been trying not to actually look at her, because his tiger wanted him to shift and snuggle up with her, and make sure she was okay. But the rest of him was too pissed.

He’d thought she was rank chasing when she’d originally asked him what he was. Then she’d called him out on his omission and lumped him in with the asshole wolf she dated before she came to Cleveland. And now? She seemed to want him because he unlocked her power.

It wasn’t possible, was it?

Did she really only want him because her power wasn’t working unless they were together? And what the hell did that even mean? How could he, who didn’t have a lick of magical power, cause her magic to grow and change?

He couldn’t stop being pissed.

He didn't want to be used by his mate, he wanted to be loved for who he was. Wanted for himself and not what he could provide. He'd gone from one bad situation into another one.

"Sure," he said finally. "I don't know where you live."

"In the wiccan development," she said. She programmed her address into the GPS. They were only a few minutes away. "Midas, are you okay? You've hardly said two words to me since you saved my life."

He wanted to ask her whether she wanted him for himself or for what he could do for her power, but he couldn't bring himself to actually form the words. What was the saying? Don't ask a question you don't want the answer to.

He was afraid that she'd say she wanted to be with him because he made her magic better. Or that she would say she wanted to be with him for him, but she'd be lying.

It was hell on earth that his mate was more interested in him now that her magic was fixed. This was so much fucking worse than a rank-chasing female.

"I'm fine," he said.

He could feel her looking at him, and he wanted to say something reassuring to her. The protective male in him wanted to assuage her worry and tell her everything was going to be okay. But he couldn't because he didn't know.

He couldn't be with a female who only wanted him for what he could provide for her. What the hell kind of life would that be? What could he say?

It was better to say nothing.

He parked in front of the little house and turned off the engine. He came around to her side and opened her door, helping her out. The driveway and sidewalk had been freshly shoveled and salted, but he wanted to make sure she made it safely inside.

At the door, she unlocked it and stepped inside, then left it open and walked through. He stared at her as she disappeared



down the hall.

He should leave. Close the door and walk away, take some time to figure out what he wanted to do.

But instead, he walked into the house and shut the door, following her into a bedroom.

When they had sex this time, on a bed and not against the wall, it took every ounce of power he had not to sink his fangs into her throat and mark her as his mate, leaving him vaguely unsatisfied, his tiger angry and pacing in his mind.

As they both came down from orbit, she rolled to her side to face him.

“Why didn’t you mark me?”

*Because I don’t trust your intentions.*

He hedged momentarily and then said, “Because we don’t know each other.”

“I think we do though. And we’re true mates.” She went onto her elbow and looked down at him, hurt evident in her eyes.

It made his heart ache to look at her, so he sat up, grabbed his shirt from the end of the bed, and slipped it on.

“There’s no timeline, and we did just meet a couple days ago,” he said, rising to his feet. He hated how much he wanted to stay in bed, how much he longed to ask her what her real intentions were toward him. He finished dressing, then turned to face her. She looked small and vulnerable on the bed, her skin still flushed from her climax, her brows furrowed in worry and her lush lips pulled into a frown.

“Midas,” she said, sitting up.

“We haven’t even gone on a date yet,” he pointed out. “We’ve had only a few interactions, and in case you’ve forgotten, you said some pretty shitty stuff to me earlier today. You needed time to think, and now I do.”

“I don’t understand,” she said. “What did I do wrong?”

He wanted her so badly he couldn't think straight. But he didn't want to spend the rest of his life wondering why she was with him. He was falling hard for her, and now that her motives for being with him were suspect, he didn't know what the fuck to do.

So he walked away.

"I'll call you," he said over his shoulder.

"Midas, I was coming to see you when I was taken," she called out. "I wanted to apologize for what I said."

He didn't stop walking, didn't let what she said now turn him back.

The bracing cold wind did little to cool his heated skin as he walked to the truck and got in. He didn't look at the house as he backed away, worried he might see Maya at the window and turn back.

The pull to go to her, no matter what he thought her motives might be, was so real that it felt like his tiger was going to rip through his skin. But he didn't go back, he continued away from her home and returned to the barn to help his people clean up and discover what he could about who'd taken her.

He needed to make sure his people were safe, especially her.

Even if he didn't mate her, he didn't want her to be hurt.

He'd imagined rescuing her and then spending the day making up for lost time. He hadn't expected to question everything about her motives.

CHAPTER  
NINETEEN

Maya's body was still humming as she listened to Midas drive away. What the ever-loving hell had happened?

Flopping back on the bed, she closed her eyes and reached for her power, finding it dimming as swiftly as it had come back when he'd been with her.

For Hades's sake!

She simply couldn't win.

Groaning, she got up and looked for her phone, realizing it was probably in her bag at the store still. She got on her tablet and sent a text to Lorene.

*I'm home and safe now. Is Lulu okay?*

*So happy to hear it, my dear. Yes, she's fine, she wasn't knocked out with the blast thankfully and I was able to heal her with a tea. Are you well?*

*I'm good. I asked Midas to bring me home, but I realize now that my bag and car are at the store, and I'm stranded.*

*I can come get you.*

*That would be wonderful, thank you.*

*I'll be there shortly. Would you like me to bring you your things and car or would you like me to bring you back to the store? You can take the day or several days if you need to. You were kidnapped and harmed, you should be resting.*

She was too keyed up to rest, honestly. Too worried about what was going on with Midas. And she really felt like getting

to the bottom of her power surges was going to at least get her some answers.

*I need to talk to you, so if you can just bring me back to the store, that would be perfect.*

*Of course. See you soon.*

Maya put the tablet on the bed and went into the bathroom to shower. After dressing in leggings and a long sweater, she grabbed her coat and donned her favorite boots. By the time Lorene arrived, she was ready to go and hustled out the door and into Lorene's old Cadillac.

"I didn't think they made cars like this anymore," she said as she sank into the plush interior.

"Oh, they don't. This is a relic, like me. But I love it, and I have a mechanic who takes very good care of it." She smiled at her as she backed out of the drive. "Now, my dear, tell me what's wrong."

Maya inhaled and opened her mouth to speak but promptly started to cry.

Lorene stopped at the end of the driveway and put the car in park. It rocked back on the wheels, creaking a little before it stopped.

Lorene put her arm around Maya. "Tell me what troubles you."

She told Lorene about the abduction and how Midas had cooled off, despite being intimate. "I'm certain he's not telling me the truth. Again."

"About what?"

"That he's okay, that we're okay. Something changed, and I can't figure it out."

She hummed. "Tell me again the conversation in the barn?"

Maya thought back over the interaction. She'd been so overjoyed that she figured out what had happened to her

magic. Or maybe she hadn't figured out the why per se, but she knew that Midas was her catalyst.

"I told him that my magic was fixed because of him. He said it didn't make sense. Then he shuttered on me, like we were strangers and not mates."

Even though he'd rocked her world again in her bedroom, there had been an aloofness to everything between them, like he was performing a duty and not being intimate with her because he wanted her. She'd never been so fulfilled and so empty at the same time.

"And your magic is blue now? Electric blue?"

"Yes."

Lorene put the car in reverse and continued to back out of the drive, putting it into gear and heading out of the development.

"Well? Do you know what's up?" Maya asked.

"As far as your magic goes, I need to talk to Bitty. She's our resident shifter expert. I don't want to say exactly what's going on with your magic until I do some research, but I want to set your mind at ease that it's not a bad thing at all, it just means you were meant for something more than just the power over air."

"What?"

"Give me some time when we get to the store, then I'll tell you what I think's going on. As far as you and your tiger king, it seems to me like he suspects you are with him because of his powerful position. No male would want to be with a female who doesn't want him for who he is."

"Do you really think that's it?"

"It's possible. After your conversation with him in the barn, it seems like he's unsure of your intentions."

"But we made love."

"Was it love or was it an animal impulse? I mean he is a shifter, and they crave being with their mates. Even if he was

angry and distraught over your intentions, he probably couldn't help himself."

Maya sank lower in the seat and crossed her arms. "That does not make me feel better."

Lorene chuckled. "I'm so sorry, but I think it's the answer."

"I don't want to be with him because he makes my magic better. It's a nice bonus, but even if I was mundane forever, I would still want to be with him."

"Then tell him that."

"What if he doesn't believe me?"

"That's the million-dollar question. You'll have to find a way to convince him that you're with him for him and nothing else matters."

Maya grumbled. "I don't suppose you know how to do that?"

"I'd tell you if I knew, but I don't. You'll figure it out, I know you will."

"You have a lot more faith in me than I do."



MAYA GREETED ARISSA, a redheaded wiccan who was mated to the oldest vampire in North America. She was part of the coven and also lived with the vampires.

"Lorene asked me to make a protection bracelet for you," Arissa said as she walked up to the counter.

"Oh? That's so nice." She almost said that she could have made one for herself, but of course her magic was incognito so she actually couldn't.

Arissa set a long wooden case on the counter and opened the lid. "I make them for the vampires and their mates, plus any supernatural people who work for the coven too. Lorene

told me your magic is on the fritz and she knows I keep a supply of them ready to go. Pick whatever you'd like."

She looked at the bracelets that ranged from delicate gold links to wide leather bands. Each one had a center gemstone, some smooth and some rough cut.

"You give them to shifters too?" she asked as she lifted a pretty braided leather bracelet with a cat's eye stone set in white gold.

"Sure." She paused and then said, "Did you have someone in mind?"

"I do, but I don't think he'd accept it, and I couldn't make one for him anyway."

Arissa took the one Maya was holding and put it on her right wrist. She patted the top and then rested her hand over it. Warmth flowed over her skin as Arissa let her power seep out. "Well, your power is there, it's just muted."

Maya tilted her head. "You can feel my power?"

"You can't?"

"No. It flares when I'm with...a male, but then it disappears when we're together."

Arissa hummed and lifted a wide leather bracelet with a cat's eye stone similar to the one she was now wearing. "Give this to your male. The bracelet won't keep you from getting hurt, but even if your magic isn't working right the bracelet will still help you feel when something is off or wrong, and for your male too."

Maya accepted the masculine bracelet and thought about Midas. "Thank you so much for coming to see me and for the bracelets, I really appreciate it. I could use all the help I can get."

Arissa tucked the box under her arm and smiled. "Have you heard the story of the alpha wolf's mate, Cinder?"

"No."

“Well, she’s wiccan and she had the power over fire. When she met Adam, her power went wonky.”

“It did? What happened?”

“It turned out that she was destined to be a mixture of wolf and wiccan, what’s known in their shifter group as a lygisa. When she met Adam, it started a change within her on a cellular level. She was the daughter of a wolf and a wiccan, so she was just waiting for her truemate to kick things off. Her power is one of protection. A pack with a lygisa is pretty invulnerable.”

“I didn’t know there were people like that,” she said. “My power changes when I’m with him, but it doesn’t last. Then when we’re not together, even my real power won’t come back to me.”

“That’s really awful, it must hurt your heart to be out of sorts with things.” She leaned on the counter. “I don’t suppose one of your parents is a shifter?”

“No such luck. Lorene is talking to Bitty about my situation, but it feels pretty hopeless.”

Arissa hummed and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “Don’t lose hope. I’m certain the Corners can figure it out, and if not, there are spells that could be cast to divine the situation with you, like a reckoning or seeking spell. One way or another, your power will come back to you, because it’s part of who you are.”

Arissa patted her hand and said goodbye, heading into the back to talk to Lorene before she left. Maya tucked the men’s bracelet in her skirt pocket and returned to sorting colorful scarves for a display table, which she’d been doing before Arissa’s visit.

Her mind spun over the conversation, but in the end she had no more information now than she had when she’d arrived at the store. Lorene and Bitty hadn’t come up with any answers yet. The only thing Maya knew for sure was that her power seemed to be playing hide and seek, and the only thing that made it come out to play was Midas.



“I think we should go out tonight.”

Maya nearly jumped out of her skin when Lulu spoke behind her.

“Shit, woman! Wear a bell or something,” she said, pressing her hand to her “

“Sorry,” Lulu said, clearly trying to hide her smile.

“Sure, sure. Now what did you say before you scared the ever living hell out of me?”

“I said we should go out tonight. To Lykos, the shifter bar.”

She opened her mouth to say no, because she was hoping to hear from Midas, but it had been several hours since they’d parted ways at her house, and he hadn’t so much as sent her an *are you okay* text. She was tired, but she was also wired, her mind spinning in a hundred different directions.

“All right,” she said.

Lulu’s eyes went wide. “Really? I had an argument all ready to get you to go since I was sure you were going to say no.”

“I like to keep you on your toes.”

“Mission accomplished. We can leave after work. I’ll drive.”

“Sounds good.”

Lulu squeezed her shoulder. “Something good is going to happen tonight, I can just feel it.”

“Feeling psychic?”

She shrugged. “Maybe. Besides, what’s wrong with a little hope?”

“Not a thing.” Unless you had very bad luck.

Lulu walked to a bookshelf and started to clean, while Maya went back to her task. Her mind wasn’t really on the scarves, it was on Midas.

Would he call her? Should she call him?

What the hell should she do?

CHAPTER  
TWENTY

Midas climbed from the SUV and stretched with a groan. He was fucking exhausted and the very last thing he'd wanted to do was go to Lykos, but if he went home, he was going to go batshit crazy thinking about Maya. And his tiger was likely to rip out of his skin and hunt her down to mate with her.

Keeping himself occupied all day so he didn't have time to think about her had been an exercise in futility. Everything he did made him think of her. Every time he heard a phone buzz or ring, he hoped it was her. But it never was.

He hadn't contacted her either though. He wasn't sure what he'd say.

Part of him wanted to tell her to fuck all the way off forever.

But the larger, roaring part of him wanted to scoop her up in his arms and tell her that he loved her from the very depths of his soul and wanted her to be his mate in truth and his queen.

He'd wondered if she'd come for him, but she hadn't.

When he'd heard several of the males suggesting a night at Lykos, he'd invited himself along so he could continue to distract himself from the real issue: what the hell should he do about Maya?

"You look like you'd rather be anywhere else," Derek said as he got out of the passenger side.

“Nah,” he said, lying through his teeth. “I wanted to go do something tonight instead of sitting home and doing nothing.” Well, he actually had things he could be doing for the ambush right now, including going over the old laws and updating the language to more modern terms, but that was hardly a pressing matter.

Not like his currently absent true mate and her magic’s penchant for being strong around him.

Derek gave him a curious look but didn’t ask any follow up questions, which was good for his ability to continue to breathe. Midas was definitely not in the mood to be questioned.

Their group bypassed the line and headed inside through the back door. The club was packed, the music pumping, and everyone seeming to have a good time.

Paris waved at him from behind the bar and pointed to the corner where a booth was marked with a reserved sign.

“Did one of you call?” Midas asked as they settled into the booth.

“I did,” Romeo said. “Last time we were here, Paris gave me his number, told me to call ahead and he’d clear out a booth whenever you were here. It’s something he’s doing for the alphas.”

Apparently, Romeo explained, Jes and Chance, the joint kings of the nest, hadn’t been able to get a table when they’d come with their shared mate Danica, and when some of their people asked a group of humans to move, it had turned into a thing and Paris didn’t want that happening again.

Midas sipped at his beer and watched the crowd, but he wasn’t there mentally, he was thinking about Maya and wondering what the hell he should do.



“YOU EVER BEEN TO A SHIFTER BAR?” Lulu asked as she held up her ID for the bouncer at the door to Lykos.

“No, there weren’t any near the coven in Rhode Island.”

“This is a cool place. All the groups hang out here.”

Maya held up her ID and the male looked at it, looked at her, and then handed it back. “Have fun.”

“Thanks.”

She walked inside with Lulu, bracing herself as the music slammed into her and made her ears ring uncomfortably for a moment. “Damn that’s loud,” she said once she got used to the noise level.

“Yeah!” Lulu said with a grin. “Dance or drink?”

Everything within Maya went on alert. She felt a tingle in the center of her body, her magic warming within her. “Holy shit.”

“What?” Lulu asked.

Maya inhaled and nearly swooned as her magic lit up and her fingers tingled. “He’s here.”

“Who?”

She shook her head. “Never mind. Let’s get a drink first.”

They made their way to the bar. Lulu signaled one of the bartenders, and a handsome male strode over.

“Hello, lovelies,” he said with a charming smile. “What can I get for you?”

“Hi, Paris,” Lulu said. “I’ll take a vodka cranberry.”

“Same for me,” Maya said.

Paris nodded and made the drinks. Maya turned and scanned the room.

Midas was definitely there, she could feel him in her heart.

Lulu elbowed her and then handed her the drink. She offered money to pay for it, but Lulu said it was her treat.

“Oh, there’s an empty table over there,” Lulu said. “Let’s go sit and get the lay of the land.”

As they made their way to the table, Maya caught sight of Midas at a corner booth. He was staring down into a half-empty beer mug, his arms folded, and his shoulders hunched.

He lifted his head suddenly and made eye contact with her. She saw his eyes flash to amber for a brief moment. Then he lowered his head and didn't look at her again.

She wanted to leave right then.

But she refused to be a coward.

Walking to the table, she settled on a tall stool and took a sip of the drink.

“Is your guy here?” Lulu asked.

“Yeah.”

“Wanna go talk to him? I don't mind.”

“I do, but I need some time to think about what to say.”

She still hadn't figured out how to convince him that she wanted to be with him because she genuinely liked and cared for him. How could you get someone to believe something that was a feeling?

“Oh hey, Alli's here,” Lulu said.

“Who?”

“Alli. She's a fallen angel like Paris.” Lulu pointed to a beautiful blond who walked up to the bar, leaned over and accepted a cheek kiss from Paris, and then went to a table of females.

“There are two fallen angels in Cleveland? I've never even met one before tonight.”

“There's three, actually, with Darien. He works for Mishka.” Lulu took a drink and then chewed on the swizzle stick. “Cleveland's got a ton of supernatural creatures that aren't usual. There's a Pegasus who lives with the bears, plus a couple of ancient bear shifters there too. There are nymphs, which are fae who don't have their wings. There's a Valkyrie—that's a human and vampire mix—who works for the coven, and she's actually mated to two polar bears.”

“That’s pretty neat. I only ever spent time with wiccans, but there was a wolf pack nearby as well.”

“I’m glad you came here,” Lulu said loudly.

Maya wanted to say she was glad to be in Cleveland, but she was way too torn up in knots over Midas to mention it out loud. If only he’d look at her.



BY THE TIME she finished her drink and felt a little bit of courage flowing through her, she’d decided she was just going to go talk to him. The worst thing he could say was no, and then she’d at least know where she stood with him. If he didn’t want her, then she wasn’t going to beg. She’d leave with her head held high.

And then she’d have a hysterical meltdown in private and vow to never love again.

Rising to her feet, she said, “I’m going to talk to him.”

“Go get him, girl. Sending all the good vibes.”

“Is that a thing?”

“It definitely is a thing,” Lulu said, smiling encouragingly.

She wove through the crowd, her eyes on Midas. He stood suddenly and slipped from the booth. He was heading her way!

He nearly strode right by her.

She grabbed his arm.

He froze and looked down at her, his brows high like he hadn’t realized she was there.

“Can we talk?” she asked loudly.

He shook his head. “I can’t talk to you right now, there’s an emergency.”

She dropped his arm and felt something crack inside, like her heart hadn’t been able to take the weight of his words.

He stared down at her for a moment and then walked away, a few of his people catching up to him. She watched him until she couldn't see him anymore in the crowd.

She'd like to say she was surprised by his behavior, but she honestly wasn't. It's what she expected all along—that he'd put his people first over her.

Ugh.

She couldn't stop feeling petulant. It would have taken him two seconds to tell her what was going on, or that he'd be right back to talk to her. He could have said anything, but he'd just walked away, putting everything above her. Even if the world was on fire and she was the only one who could put it out, she'd still take two damn seconds to tell him what was going on.

She returned to the table and pulled out her phone. "I'm going to call a car service and go home."

"What? No, I'll drive you."

"You don't have to, you should stay and enjoy yourself."

"Meh," Lulu said. "I had a drink, and there's no one I want to dance with anyway. Let's go."

"If you're sure?"

"You bet." They donned their coats and walked out the front door. Maya could hear a commotion behind the club.

That must be the emergency Midas had mentioned.

It clearly didn't concern her, so she wasn't going to give it another thought.

The only thing she was going to do was figure out what her next step was. Her future depended on the choices she made, she just didn't know what to do.



CHAPTER  
TWENTY-ONE

Midas knew the moment Maya walked into the bar. He couldn't have been more surprised if he'd woken up with his head stapled to the floor. She looked amazing in a low-cut white top that gave just the right tease of cleavage and a multi-colored skirt that did nothing to hide her curves.

Damn, she made his mouth water.

His knuckles cracked as he involuntarily squeezed the mug's handle. He quickly released it before it shattered.

Seeing her made his body ache, and not in the good *we just fucked all night long* sort of way.

He debated going to talk to her, but even though he'd spent hours away from her, he still hadn't decided what to do with her magic issue, not to mention how she'd lumped him in with an asshole wolf who didn't know a good thing when he had it.

How could he prove that he'd put her first if she didn't give him a chance? But on the flip side, how could he trust that she wanted to be with him for him and not for what being with him did to her magic?

He was fucked coming and going.

His phone rang as he mused on what a shitshow his life had become.

"Yeah?" he barked without looking at the screen.

"It's Paris. You need to come outside immediately. Grab your males."

“What’s wrong?” he demanded as she scooted from the table.

“Someone slashed all the tires in the back lot.”

“Shit. I’ll be right there. Let’s go,” he said to the males with him, quickly explaining what had apparently happened.

As he wove through the crowd, he felt a hand on his arm and looked down, surprised to see it was Maya.

“Can we talk?” she asked.

“I can’t talk to you right now, there’s an emergency.”

She dropped his arm like it was on fire, and her brows drew down. He didn’t have time to deal with her and soften his tone to protect her feelings. Walking away, he pushed her out of his mind and focused on the situation.

In the back lot behind the club, Paris and a dozen males were inspecting vehicles that had their tires slashed.

“Adam’s sending tow trucks to get the vehicles to the pack dealership and replace the ruined tires,” Paris said while Midas inspected his truck and saw that three of his four tires had big gaping slashes in them.

“This is fucking ridiculous,” Midas said.

“Do you have cameras back here?” Romeo asked.

“Yeah, but someone took them out,” Paris said, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “One of Adam’s males went to leave and saw his tires were slashed, so he came back in to tell me. I realized that nearly every damn vehicle’s tires were slashed, and it wasn’t an isolated incident. This has never happened before.”

Midas walked around and spoke to everyone who was with a vehicle. They were from all the different shifter groups—wolves, tigers, dragons, bears, falcons, and white lions.

When he returned to Paris, he told the fallen angel what had happened recently. “We thought we were being targeted,” Midas said. “But maybe every shifter is being targeted.”

“Who would do that?” Paris asked.

“Brent Foley and the anti-shifters of Humans Against Shifters,” Midas said.

“I heard he was in town, but I thought he disappeared after the head of the anti-vampire group got taken out of commission?”

“I don’t know about that, but I know that the bank my company was remodeling for the vampires was rigged with explosives, and my mate was abducted to lure me to my death.”

Paris’s brows rose. “Shit. Wait, since when do you have a mate? Do I know her?”

Midas hadn’t realized he’d called Maya his mate. “It’s... complicated. Suffice it to say that if the tigers aren’t the only ones being targeted, then all the groups need to be on high alert.”

“I’ll make sure to post security in the parking lots going forward and I’ll rig up more cameras that are tamper proof too. Let me know if you need anything.”

Midas nodded. He caught up to his people. Every vehicle they’d driven to the club was tampered with, which meant they were stuck there until Adam’s people could get the vehicles towed to the dealership and the tires replaced, unless they called for a car service.

Blowing out a breath, Midas rolled his neck. “I’m going to talk to Maya,” he said to Romeo. “Call a car service for our people and anyone else who wants to get home and not wait around. Make sure everyone leaves the keys for their vehicles inside so Adam’s people can get them towed.”

“Will do,” Romeo said.

Midas walked back into the bar and went straight to the table where he’d seen Maya and her wiccan friend sitting. But the table was now occupied by four others.

“Did you see where the two females who were sitting here went?” he asked as alarm filled him. Where had they gone?

“Yeah, they left,” one of the females said. “You can join us though.”

Ignoring the blatant invitation, Midas rushed outside to the main lot and scanned the area, but he didn't see Maya.

Fucking seriously?

He slammed his hands down on his hips with a growl.

He'd told her there was an emergency. She couldn't wait ten minutes? She said she needed to speak to him, why wouldn't she wait?

“Un-fucking-believable,” he said with a snarl.

This was just the cherry on the crap sundae of his day.



LULU ASKED Maya if she wanted company, but she didn't think she'd be any good for conversation.

“Thanks for the ride,” she called from the porch, waving as Lulu gave her a thumbs up and drove away.

Inside, she eyed the couch and considered flopping on it and having a damn good long cry at the twist of fate. But then she had an idea.

Turning to her bookshelf, she ran her fingers along the spines of her magical books until she reached a very large, very old volume of ancient wiccan spells. Hefting the book from its space, she took it to the desk in the corner of the room and turned on the little lamp.

She ran her fingers over the raised title: *Spells and Potions for Modern Wiccans, Fifth Edition*.

It was a hundred years old at least, which meant modern was a loose term.

She hadn't looked inside the book in years and had bought it on a whim at the estate sale for one of her old coven's members. Tilly had told her the book wasn't worth anything, because some of the spells skirted the edge of dark magic,

which was a terrible thing to get into as it warped the wiccan and made them nuts.

When she'd bought the book, she skimmed through it but hadn't seen anything relevant to her situation at the time. But something prodded from the depths of her subconscious that she had seen something on the quick perusal that was definitely applicable now.

She sat and opened it, being careful to touch the pages as little as possible as they were crumbling along the edges.

There were spells to remove hexes.

Ones to defeat orcs.

Ones to bless a garden or plot of land.

"Finally," she said as her gaze caught the word she was looking for: *Marvhel*.

It was an ancient wiccan word for power removal. It took her a while to get through the spell because she had to translate it from ancient wiccan, which was not her strong suit, but she made it through.

Cast by Corners or four other powerful wiccans if there weren't Corners available, the spell would remove the power of a wiccan, leaving her with only long-life. Any power she had would cease to exist.

Closing the book, she picked up her phone.

"Hi, Lorene. Are you available for a chat? I need a favor."

"I was just getting ready to leave the store, but I can wait. Is everything all right?"

"It will be. I'll see you soon."



MIDAS STARED at the first few tow trucks as they entered the parking lot. Adam, the alpha wolf, climbed from one and walked over to greet Midas, who'd personally called the alphas in the area to alert them of the situation. A meeting was

set up for the following evening for them all to get together and discuss the situation with Humans Against Shifters. It would be the second time they met recently, but this time Humans Against Shifters had officially struck out at all the groups, and it was time for everyone to be more vigilant.

“Midas,” Adam said, walking up.

“Hello, Adam,” Midas said, shaking his hand.

“This is a fucking thing,” Adam said as he looked at the parking lot. “You’re certain it’s Humans Against Shifters?”

“Yes. Have your people had any issues?”

“No, but I’m sure it’s just a matter of time.”

“Thanks for handling things with the vehicles.”

“Of course. Which one is yours? I’ll make sure it’s the first to get the tires replaced.”

Midas shook his head. “Thanks, but don’t worry about my vehicle. You can handle the tire replacement however you see fit, I don’t want special treatment.”

“If you’re sure?”

“Yeah, I’ve actually got a car service waiting for me and we’ve got spare vehicles in the ambush for people who need them.”

“I’ll reach out when your vehicle is ready,” Adam said, extending his hand.

“Thanks. Take care.”

Midas walked into the bar to speak with Paris, then returned to the main parking lot where a small SUV sat waiting.

“Hello,” the male said from the front seat.

Midas greeted him as he sat in the second row and shut the door.

“The app said you wanted to go to Whisper Creek. The drive time is twenty-two minutes. There’s a cooler with drinks if you’re thirsty.”

The car pulled away from the parking lot, and Midas's tiger let out a mournful sound. He rubbed the space over his heart and thought about Maya and the hurt look on her face when he'd told her he didn't have time to talk to her.

Her words came crashing back into his mind: *I want to be the most important person to my true mate, Midas. Because he's the most important person to me.*

Tonight he'd done exactly what she'd accused him of, what she'd confessed as her biggest fear when it came to a relationship with a high-ranked male: he'd put his people above her.

She was his true mate, which meant she was his people, but she was the most important one. She'd been afraid of not being first in his life, and he'd assured her at the time that she was crazy for thinking he wouldn't put her first. Then he'd done the opposite.

*She wasn't the crazy one, he was.*

Why hadn't he taken a moment to tell her what was happening and included her? He wouldn't have wanted her outside in case there was danger, but he could have set some of his people to guard her and then come to speak with her afterward. Hell, she was a witch, at least when her magic wasn't on the fritz, and possibly could have helped keep the ambush safe. Instead of doing any of those things to prove to her that he wanted her to be part of his life in every way, he'd shut her down in a hurtful way.

Why had he thought she'd just be waiting around for him when he hadn't given her any reason to?

He'd made her accusation a reality.

He had put everyone ahead of her.

Shit, he was an asshole.

Why did he constantly fuck up with her? It was like he had perpetual foot-in-the-mouth disease.

As much as she was afraid to be put aside due to his responsibilities, he was afraid to be used for his power, to be

only wanted for his title. They'd both manifested what they'd most feared—her thinking she'd never really be his first priority and him thinking she was using him for the power he seemed to elicit from her—and now they were in some unholy circle of screwing things up again and again.

He double tapped his phone screen and opened the contacts, finding Dell, one of the elders of the ambush.

He answered on the second ring. “Good evening, Midas.”

“I hope I didn't wake you.”

“Not at all, I was just watching a documentary with the missus. What can I do for you?”

“Gather the elders at my house, please. I'm about twenty minutes away.”

There was the briefest of pauses and then he said, “Is everything all right?”

“It will be. See you soon.”

Ending the call, he exhaled and tucked his phone into his pocket, staring out the window into the darkness. If Maya had a problem with his rank, there was really only one thing to do about it.



CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-TWO**

Midas walked into the two-story colonial and found the four elders sitting at the kitchen table. Elders weren't chosen by the alpha, they were the oldest and wisest of the ambush members, dedicated to preserving their way of life and helping the king to lead the pride effectively. They didn't have any true power in the ambush, but a king would be a fool not to rely on their wisdom.

"Thank you for joining me," Midas said. He sat at the head of the table and looked at the males who'd been his most trusted advisors since he took over the ambush. They'd guided him more times than he could count, sharing their knowledge and being gracious with their time whenever needed.

Antwan, the oldest of the males at seven hundred and some odd years, said, "What can we help you with?"

He folded his hands, his tiger letting out a curious sound in his head.

It was all so very clear to him. Maya didn't trust that he would put her first in all things because he was king. Even though it warred with the protective male in him to say she was right in that regard, because he wanted to be able to both lead his people and dedicate himself to her, she actually was right and he couldn't do both. He'd told her she was wrong, but he'd proved her right several times.

He knew he had to get his head out of his ass when it came to her. He couldn't seem to get over the thought that she was

with him only because he was a powerful male. The way to stop that from being an issue was to cut his power off entirely.

While other shifter group leaders seemed to have no trouble being mated and being the boss, he knew that Maya's romantic past was making it a precarious position. He could tell her until he was blue in the face that he would always put her first, but he couldn't actually prove it in truth.

"I've decided to step down," he said finally.

Every pair of eyebrows around the table rose comically high.

"What?" Dell asked incredulously.

"You're not serious," Larry said.

"What on earth for?" Calvin asked.

Midas put his hand up and they quieted. "I've found my true mate. I need to dedicate my time to her. She's the most important person in the world to me, and I haven't proven that to her lately. Being king means I'll always feel pulled in different directions, and no male of worth should feel like that when it comes to his mate." He rose to his feet, the chair scraping slowly against the tile floor. "Get the articles of relinquishment ready and assign yourselves as interim leaders until a new king is chosen according to our laws. I'm going to speak with my mate. When I return, I'll sign the papers and we'll have an ambush meeting."

The males all spoke at the same time, each one voicing disbelief and concern.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I understand your surprise, but trust that I'm making the best choice for myself and my future. I'll be back in a few hours. Contact Romeo if you need to."

Without another word, he nodded and walked out of the house to the waiting car.

"Thanks for waiting," he said.

"You bet," the male said. The GPS screen pointed to Maya's home. Midas stared at the arrow as they drove away

from the house and then turned his attention inward to figure out what he was going to say when he saw her again.

This would be the most important conversation of his life and he didn't want to screw it up.



MAYA PARKED in the back of the store and hurried in. Her heart was pounding as she clutched the spell book to her chest underneath her coat to protect it from the freezing rain.

Lorene and the other Corners were waiting in her office.

“Hi,” she said, slightly out of breath. She set the book on Lorene’s desk and took off her coat, hanging it on a rack near the door. “Thanks for staying late to meet with me.”

“Of course,” Idurre said. “Now what’s going on?”

Maya opened the book to the page she’d marked with an old receipt. The women all gathered around her. “I want you to perform this spell on me as soon as possible. Tonight, if you can.”

The silence that followed her statement made her decidedly uneasy.

Lorene asked, “Where did you get this book?”

“An estate sale in Rhode Island. I glanced through it when I bought it, but never tried to cast any of the spells. I remembered I’d seen a spell that would help me and that’s why I wanted to meet with you all.”

She felt relieved at finally figuring things out.

“Why would you want to get rid of your power?” Gwen asked.

“Because I can’t have Midas and my power, and I’d rather have him.” She looked at each face, unease rising within her. They didn’t look happy. “What’s wrong?”

Bitty gently closed the book and rested her hand on the cover. “You don’t know what you’re asking for, Maya.”

“I do,” she said earnestly. “The spell will pull my magic from me and then I’ll retain my long-life, but otherwise I’d be mostly human. Like a fallen angel.”

A door creaked open in the store, and someone yelled her name.

Midas!



THE CAR STOPPED at the front of the Cleveland Mother Earth Store.

“You sure they’re open? It looks dark inside,” the driver said as he peered through the windshield.

“Yeah, I am,” he said. Well, he was mostly sure. The only thing he did know for certain was that Maya wasn’t at her house. “But maybe drive around the back instead.”

“Sure thing.”

The engine grew louder as the male accelerated, swinging in a circle in the empty lot and heading to the back. There were four vehicles in the lot, and one of them was Maya’s. He internally breathed a sigh of relief at seeing it.

The car stopped near the back door. “You need me to stick around?”

“No, thank you,” Midas said. He opened the car service app and rated the driver and left him a hefty tip. “You were great, thank you so much for sticking with me.”

The driver grinned as he saw the rating and tip come across his phone screen. “Anytime. Good luck with whatever’s going on.”

Midas thanked the male again and got out of the car. He strode swiftly to the door and opened it. He could smell Maya’s sweet scent in the hall, and he couldn’t stop himself from bellowing her name.

“Midas?” she called.

He followed the sound of her voice and found her in an office with the Corners. He only really knew Lorene, but he recognized the others from previous meetings.

“What are you doing here?” Maya asked.

“I fixed our problem.”

“What?”

“I rescinded my position as king.”

Her eyes went luminous. “I can’t believe you stepped down from being king for me.”

“I should have done a better job of showing you how important you are to me.”

She hugged him tightly, sniffing. “Please don’t step down because of me. I don’t want that.”

He leaned away slightly so he could look in her eyes. “I want to.”

She shook her head. “I’m giving up my power for you.”

It was his turn to be surprised. “Say that again.”

“I found a spell that will remove my power. I’ll still have my long-life, but I won’t be a wiccan anymore.”

“I don’t understand. Why would you want to stop being a wiccan?”

“Because you’ll always wonder if I’m with you because of what happens to my power when we’re together. If I don’t have magic anymore, then you’ll know I’m with you because I want to be.” She cupped his face and looked at him earnestly. Her eyes sparked blue for a moment and her cold fingers suddenly warmed. He could tell her magic was flaring because they were touching.

“Don’t give up your magic for me,” he said. “It’s part of who you are. And I do trust that you’re with me for me, I just overreacted to everything. I was mad that you compared me to your asshole ex, and I ended up proving you were right, that I couldn’t be king and treat you like you should be treated.”

“But I don’t want you to stop being king, Midas,” she said earnestly. “It’s part of who you are. You were obviously destined to be the leader of your people. I’m the one who overreacted. You’re not my ex, and I was foolish to get carried away by those thoughts.”

“You’re both idiots, actually,” Lorene said.

Midas lifted his head in surprise. “Excuse me?”

She shook her head. “Maybe idiot is a strong word.”

“It’s not,” Bitty said.

“We need to chat,” Lorene said.

Midas wanted to tell the North Corner that they were in the middle of an important conversation, but she caught his gaze and he felt like he was getting called to the principal’s office and couldn’t refuse.

“All right,” he said.

He and Maya moved to the table. He grabbed another chair and sat next to his mate, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze.

“What’s this about us being idiots?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Maya added.

“First of all,” Lorene said, “what you think is going to happen with the spell, Maya, is not at all what will take place.”

“I translated it right, I know I did,” she said, frowning.

“I’m sure you did,” Bitty said, “but the spell comes with a great price.”

“I know. The loss of my power.”

Midas snarled. He didn’t want her to give up such an important part of her. Not for him.

Lorene sighed softly. “Trust us, Maya. This spell is not only inherently dangerous to the wiccan under the spell but also the Corners. And it simply wouldn’t work. Your power is part of you, it’s deep within the cells of your DNA and a magical part of who you are. Without your magic, you’d cease

to exist. This spell won't take your power so much as it will take your life."

"Are you kidding me?" Midas demanded. He looked at Maya.

She shook her head. "No. No, that can't possibly be true."

"It's one of the main reasons this book isn't kept in our library," Lorene said. "Not only is this spell dangerous, but so are several others. The ruling wiccan council declared the book needed to be destroyed wherever it was found because the knowledge within is tainted with bad intentions."

"Someone wrote this book trying to hurt wiccans?" Midas asked.

"In a way, yes," Gwen said. "More likely, they were trying to make up their own spells, or they had a reason for making a spell like this. During the witch trials, wiccans attempted to remove their power to make themselves mortal, but the spell killed them and often one or more of the Corners who attempted to help."

"Maya," Midas said, real fear gripping him. "Please put the thought from your mind. Even if the spell would work without hurting you, I wouldn't want you to do it."

"You gave up your kingship for me," she said. "It's part of you too."

"You're both trying to do something selfless for each other, but you're not listening," Lorene said. "Stop being idiots and listen to each other."

Midas didn't particularly like being called an idiot, but he'd jumped to conclusions with Maya and wasn't going to do that again. Not when it came to her.

"I'm all ears," he said.

"Me too," Maya said.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-THREE**

**M**aya couldn't believe that Midas had stepped down as king. She'd never had someone do something so selfless for her.

Midas looked at her and smiled. He was so damn sexy.

And he was powerful, and she did like that her magic flared around him. It was like her magic actually liked him and wanted to be near him as much as she did.

"I wish I could take it all back," she whispered.

"Me too. Especially the part where I hit you with the door." He brushed his fingers over her forehead where her injury had been, and his light touch made her shiver.

"All right," Lorene said. "First of all, tell Midas and us why you wanted to get rid of your magic."

She shrugged and chewed her bottom lip for a moment. "It seemed like the perfect solution. Midas accused me of using him because being around him fixed my power. So as long as I have power, he'll wonder why I'm with him, if it's really my feelings or if it's the magic. I don't feel that way of course, I really do want to be with you," she said looking at him again, "but I knew I couldn't prove a feeling. I had to show it."

"I never asked you to do that," Midas said.

"I know," Maya said. "Tonight I came home from the club, and I was so despondent and then I remembered this spell. I didn't want you to always wonder what my motivations were, so if I could take magic out of the equation, then you'd know I



want to be with you because I care about you.” She felt her emotions start to rise and she fought not to cry. “You had issues with females chasing you for your title and the power you wield. I didn’t want you to think I was just another female using you for what you could give me.” It had seemed so simple—lose the magic, get the guy.

She didn’t know that the spell would kill her and maybe the Corners as well.

“And you?” Lorene asked.

“If I’m not king then I can devote my time to my mate.”

Maya couldn’t believe they were both giving up something for each other. Her magic, his crown.

“Plenty of shifter group leaders are mated,” Idurre pointed out. “Why do you feel like you can’t do both?”

“Because of me,” Maya said. “I’m clearly insane because I demanded to be put first. You must think I’m the most selfish person on the planet,” she said, shaking her head.

“I don’t,” Midas said. “You’re right about me. The ambush has been the be-all and end-all for me for so long that I didn’t see how much emphasis I was putting on them. I didn’t have anyone in my life so I could devote myself to them twenty-four-seven. Now I have you. I should’ve stepped down immediately.”

“I don’t want you to do that,” she said earnestly.

“Well, even if it wouldn’t hurt you to do that spell, I wouldn’t want you to give up your magic.”

Lorene put her hand up. “All right, so you’re both very selfless and trying to be what you think the other needs. But there’s something larger going on.”

“What?” Midas asked.

“Your magic didn’t go on the fritz,” Lorene said. “It changed.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?” Maya asked.

“Yes and no,” Bitty said. She pulled a roll of papers from the pocket of her cardigan that were tied with a black ribbon. “What’s happening to your magic is definitely related to Midas, but not the way either of you think.”

She smoothed the papers open and passed them over to Maya and Midas.

“What language is that?” Midas asked.

“Ancient wiccan,” Maya said. She read out loud, slowly because she had to translate on the fly: “The phenomenon of the *saheer* occurs when a tiger shifter and a wiccan are true mates and join together. The wiccan’s magic changes to align with the tiger mages of the ancient times, to offer protection and blessings to the ambush. The tiger’s power will swell with the mating and changes will occur to the fur of the male and eye color of both. During times of ambush shifts, the *saheer* will have accelerated speed and strength to keep up with the ambush, and spell casting abilities to rival the mages of old.”

She looked at the Corners, who were smiling at them.

“I’m a...*saheer*? What does that...what is it?”

“I’ve never heard of that,” Midas said.

“Because it only happens once every thousand years,” Bitty said. “I knew when we heard about Maya’s magic going on the fritz that something more than a simple injury was causing it, but it took me forever to find the information.”

“The *saheer* is similar to the wolf pack *lygisa*, except while she can shift, you can’t. Whenever Midas, or the ambush shifts as a group, you’ll have access to enhanced speed and strength, which will allow you to run and hunt with them. You’ll be able to cast spells of protection for the ambush and blessings as well, like we do for babies and couples,” Lorene said. “Your magic changed when you met Midas, not because of your head injury, but because your *saheer* nature revealed itself.”

She frowned. “Are you saying I was always meant to be this...*saheer*?”

All the Corners nodded.

“So, you see,” Bitty said, “even if the magic removal spell wouldn’t kill you, it actually wouldn’t work anyway. You’re not really a wiccan anymore, you’re a tiger mage. Or, rather, the feminine term we’d use which is tiger mages.”

“You’d never be a wiccan again,” Lorene said gently. “If you and Midas never got together because of all these misunderstandings, you’d never be able to cast spells again. You’d be in some hellish limbo of feeling like you have magic but not actually having any.”

“Geez,” Maya said. She sat back in the chair and brushed a hand through her hair.

Then she looked at Midas and started laughing.

He joined in.

She hugged him when she’d laughed until her stomach hurt and rested her head on his shoulder. “Holy shit.”

He kissed her cheek. “You’re special, Maya. Not because you’re my mate, but because you’re unique and amazing. We were meant to be together.”

“Yeah,” she said. She leaned back and said, “But you have to take back your retirement. I want you to be king because you’re the right male for the job. Your people need you.”

“You need me and I need you,” he pointed out.

“It’s okay,” she said. “That you wanted to give up something so important to yourself for me lets me know just how unreasonable I was being.”

“It’s not unreasonable to want me to put you first.”

“I think our work here is done,” Lorene said. She rose slowly to her feet. “Bitty’s going to give you the scrolls so you can read through everything about being the ambush *saheer*. It also means that you can’t really be part of our coven any longer because your magic will clash with ours.”

“How do I even claim it?” she asked. “It still acts up when I’m with him but disappears when I’m not.”

Bitty tied the papers with a neat bow and pushed it across the table once more. “You need to have a good tumble in the sheets, and he needs to mark you as his mate. That will solidify your magic and it will be available to you at all times and not just flaring when he’s near. Then you’ll be able to cast spells, but only those that are meant for the ambush. There are some spells on the scrolls, but you’ll have to do some research into the ambush history to find the others. And when I say research, I mean a seriously deep dive. If I come across anything related, I’ll let you know.”

“Wow, okay,” Maya said. She and Midas stood, and she hugged each female tightly, thanking them for their help and support.

“I knew you were meant to be here,” Lorene said. “I’ll miss you being part of the coven since we hardly even got a chance to know you, but I’m so glad you’ve found your purpose.”

“Me too.”

“Ready to go?” Midas asked. “We have to take your car, I had someone drop me off.”

“I am.” She looked at Lorene. “Can I have a few days to pack the house up?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll call Lulu and let her know. I’ll miss hanging out with her.”

“She’ll miss you,” Bitty said. “We all will.”

The other two nodded.

“You’ll handle destroying this dangerous book?” Maya asked as she walked past the desk to grab her coat.

“Yes, we’ll deal with it right now,” Lorene said.

“Thanks. Thanks for everything.” They said final goodbyes and headed outside to her car.

“Why didn’t you drive here?” she asked. She handed him the keys to her car because she didn’t know how to get to

Whisper Creek without using her GPS.

He opened her door, shut her inside, then climbed behind the wheel. He told her about the tire slashing at the club.

“Holy crap,” she said. “It’s the anti-shifter people? The ones you think set the bombs and also abducted me?”

“That’s our guess.” He pulled out of the parking lot. “He’s not like Jason Finnegan against the vampires who always made public statements so everyone knew he was behind any attacks. The vampires had details on Brent because the polar bears who work for the coven knew of him, but I had my people do some research on Brent Foley, and he never officially lets people know what he does, it’s always speculation. Probably because he doesn’t want to get busted by law enforcement.”

“Has he been successful in hurting shifters?”

“Definitely. He took out an alpha wolf a while ago, ruined the pack.”

She mused on that. A human took out an alpha wolf? That was truly unheard of. “Why would he focus on you?”

“I’m not sure. But the dragons are really fierce and dangerous. The falcons and white lions live in a walled city, and the bears live underground. That leaves the wolves, who have a lygisa, and us. For him to target us at the construction site means he was watching for a while and knew when to strike, not to mention when he abducted you and also slashed all the tires.”

“The bombs at the bank and my abduction definitely are targeted to the tigers,” she said, “but the tire slashing seems more like a general declaration of war. Like he’s coming for everyone now.”

“Yes, it does.”

“I’m sorry you were targeted tonight too,” she said. “I should have stuck around to talk to you.”

He took her hand and brought it to his lips. “First, there’s nothing to forgive about tonight. I didn’t give you any reason

to stick around, I was a total ass. But generally speaking, I forgive you for everything, but you have to forgive me for everything too.”

Relief twined through her. “I do.”

“Good. We get to have a second chance with each other.”

“It might be our fourth or fifth chance.”

“Still,” he said with a laugh. “We’ll get it right this time.” He glanced at her, his eyes flashing. “I’m crazy about you, Maya. You drive me wild, and you keep me on my toes.”

“I’m crazy about you too.”

They drove in silence for a little while, then he said, “Are you okay with everything?”

“Which part?”

“Losing your wiccan power.”

“Yes. Because I don’t feel like I’m losing anything. I get you and I get a new kind of power that will allow me to keep our people safe.”

“I like that you called them our people, because they are.”

“Are you certain you can take back your leadership?”

“Yeah. It’s not official until I sign the decree the elders were putting together. Actually, I should call them. They were in a tizzy when I left.” He leaned to the side and fished his phone from his back pocket. He pressed the side button.

“It was off? What if someone needed you?” she asked.

“I told you that you’re the most important person to me and I meant it.”

“You’re the best guy I’ve ever met.”

“I’m trying,” he promised. “I messed up a lot, and I might occasionally piss you off, but I promise to do my best to be everything to you.”

“I want to be everything to you too.”

Something amazing had happened tonight. They'd nearly lost everything because they hadn't been able to communicate properly, and their pasts had become tangled up in the present and clouded everything. But it was all clear now: they belonged together.

And she was going to make sure that nothing ever got in the way of them being together again. Whatever this new power was, she was going to master it and be the best *saheer* in history.

No ambush in the world would be so well protected than Whisper Creek, because Midas was her whole world, and the tigers were important to them both.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-FOUR**

“Wow,” Maya said as she looked at his phone screen. “You have a ton of missed calls and texts.”

Midas grinned. He knew shutting off his phone was the right choice. He hadn’t wanted anything to interrupt him getting to Maya. “Okay, who texted me?”

“Um, Romeo, Dell, Larry, Antwan, and Calvin. And Cyrus.”

“Okay, the four males are the elders. Who called?”

“Just those six males. Are Cyrus and Romeo elders too?”

“No, only the four are elders. Romeo is my number two, and Cyrus is high ranked. What do the texts say?”

“Cyrus asks if he heard correctly that you’re stepping down as king. His text reads: Why the hell would you do that, Midas? Romeo asked the same question but more colorfully, and he actually sent you ten texts. He’s a little pissed, I think.”

She hummed.

“What?”

“Wouldn’t Romeo get to be king if you stepped down?”

“Maybe, if he was chosen according to ambush laws. But I’m pretty sure he doesn’t want to be king.”

She read him the texts and then put the voicemails on speaker so he could hear, since her car didn’t have a plug-in system to use the vehicle speakers to listen to the phone.



They reached his home right when the final message from Antwan ended.

“They really like you being king,” she said. “I think it speaks volumes that they’re not happy.”

“It wouldn’t matter though,” he said. He turned off the engine and faced her. “If I needed to step down to prove that I want to be with you, then I would do it in a heartbeat.”

“That you offered is enough for me though. I appreciate the gesture. I would be crazy about you no matter your rank.”

“Even though I’m king and you don’t like high-ranked males?” He arched a brow.

“I like one of them,” she countered.

The look she gave him back was half vixen, half queen, all sex and power mixed up together. Her eyes sparkled with blue electricity and the sweet scent of her arousal spiked in the air between them.

He reached for her as someone pounded on the passenger window.

“Have you lost your ever-loving mind?” Romeo demanded.

Midas kissed Maya swiftly. “Stay put.”

He got out of the car and then tackled Romeo, the snow fluffing up around them as Romeo hit the ground on his back, the breath whooshing from his lungs.

“I’m not going to step down,” Midas said, levering himself off Romeo and rising to his feet. “Are the elders still here?”

“Yes,” Romeo said, taking Midas’s offered hand. He pulled him roughly to his feet. “Sorry.”

Midas grinned. “Don’t be sorry, it’s nice to be appreciated. I’ll tell everyone together. Get Cyrus on the phone.”

“He’s here, inside with the elders.”

“Wow, I really pissed everyone off.”

“Yeah, you did. But you’re not stepping down?”

Maya got out of the car. “Hi, Romeo. He was going to for me, but I convinced him he should stay king since he makes such a sexy one.”

Midas let out a soft purr at his mate thinking he was sexy. He certainly thought she was.

Romeo made a gagging sound and Midas slugged him in the shoulder.

“Ouch, shit, sorry.” He rubbed his arm. “Hi, Maya. Welcome to Whisper Creek.”

“Let’s get inside before my mate freezes,” Midas said.

“The sooner the better,” she said, hooking her arm through his.

Romeo walked ahead of them. Midas stopped and turned to face her. “Are you okay?”

“I’m wonderful. Why?”

“Because we nearly screwed everything up. Again. I don’t want to take anything for granted.”

“What we did reminds me of the Gift of the Magi story. We both tried to show the other we cared by giving up something that was important to us. At least what you tried to give up wouldn’t have killed you.” She grimaced.

“I definitely wouldn’t have let you give up your magic for me. It’s part of you. And I’m excited to see what happens after we mate.”

“Me too. And I’m glad you’re not giving up being king. Your people clearly love you, and I know that together we’ll figure everything out. It’s not about them versus me with your time, it’s about you and me navigating our relationship and leadership responsibilities together.”

“Spoken like a true queen.” He kissed her, drawing her a little closer so he could feel the press of her body against his. “Let’s go inside, soothe the beasts, and kick them the hell out. We’ve got plans.”

“That involve a bed, right?”

“One hundred percent.” He took her hand. “After you, my queen.”

A lightbulb went off in her head. “Oh my gracious.”

“What?”

“You called me *my queen* from the beginning. It’s because I really am your queen.”

He smiled and brought her hand to his lips for a gentlemanly kiss. “You’re not just my queen, Maya, you’re my everything.”

She inhaled sharply and the scent of her arousal made his whole body respond.

“Let’s make them leave. Quick,” she said with a husky tone.

“On it.”

He led her into the house. It was no longer his house, but theirs, and he couldn’t wait to christen every room. Again and again.



“THERE YOU ARE!” Cyrus bellowed.

“Watch the tone,” Midas warned. “I appreciate that everyone is here, and I understand the upset, but I’ll remind you that you’re in the presence of my mate and I’m still king, so toe the line.”

Cyrus clamped his lips together, his beast simmering in his gaze.

“Now, everyone, please have a seat so I can speak.” He led Maya to the head of the table and pulled out a chair for her, then took the one next to her. “This is Maya Freehold, she’s a wiccan and my truemate.” Without going into too many details explaining why he’d been such a jackass from the beginning with her, he told the males in his kitchen that he’d thought he needed to step down as king to be with Maya, but that she was

instrumental in helping him realize that he could be king and mate. “But she’ll always be my priority,” he said, bringing her hand to his lips and kissing her knuckles.

She beamed at him.

“So, you’re not stepping down?” Calvin asked.

“Nope. And I have some amazing news. Maya’s magic has been on the fritz since we met, and it’s because she’s our ambush’s *saheer*, my destined mate and the magical protector of our people.”

Romeo and Cyrus looked confused, but the elders all looked at him in shock.

“Are you serious?” Antwan asked. “That’s... our ambush has never had one!”

“You’ve heard of it?” Maya asked.

“Yes, of course,” Antwan said. “It’s legendary. An ambush with a *saheer* is destined for great things, protected and cared for by a fearsome magess with powers unlike anything else.”

“There’s a book in our archives,” Calvin said. “If I could think of the name.”

“I believe it’s *Saheer* Chronicles and Charms,” Dell said.

Calvin snapped his fingers. “Yes, of course! We’ll bring it to you. I believe there’s also a journal that contains more spells.”

“That would be wonderful,” Maya said.

Midas cleared his throat. “Tomorrow.”

“Yes, of course,” Calvin said, chuckling. “Late tomorrow I’m certain.”

“We’re glad you aren’t stepping down,” Larry said.

“We never started the paperwork,” Antwan said. He stood, the chair scraping loudly. “We all agreed to do our damndest to get you to reconsider.”

“Turns out all we needed was his truemate,” Dell said.

The elders came to them and introduced themselves to Maya and congratulated them both on their mating.

After they left, Cyrus and Romeo congratulated them.

“I’m glad you’re not leaving,” Cyrus said. “I was pissed as hell, you’re the best king I’ve ever known.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I’ll be even better with my queen by my side.”

“Maya, you’ll have your hands full with him,” Romeo said. “He can be an ass.”

Midas growled softly and Romeo grinned. “No way you’re going to tackle me two times in front of your mate.”

“Watch me.”

The color drained from Romeo’s face and then Midas laughed. “Get out of here you two. I need to make up for lost time with my mate.”

The two left them alone in the kitchen, and when the front door shut, he grabbed the arm of Maya’s chair and pulled it around to face him.

He rested his hands on the chair arms and leaned in with a purr. “When we made love at your place, I wanted to mark you so badly. I’m sorry I didn’t. I think I would’ve solved a lot of our problems if I had.”

“I wanted you to.” She linked her fingers behind his neck. She leaned in and feathered her lips over his. “No one has ever made me feel like you do.”

“Pissed?”

She chuckled and kissed the corner of his mouth, then his jaw, then she nibbled her way down his neck. “Yes. But I mean your touch lights my whole body up. You make me feel things I’ve never felt before, and I adore it. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me, head-bonking aside.”

She sucked a bit of his flesh into her mouth and bit gently, sending a riot of shivers down his spine. He grabbed her hips

and drew her into his lap. “You’re the best thing that ever happened to me too.”

She slipped from his lap. “Where’s the bedroom?”

“Up the stairs, last room on the right.”

“You better hurry or I’ll start without you.” She drew off her coat and chucked it at him, hitting him square in the face. When he peeled it off, she was gone, her giggles echoing through the stairwell.

The chase was on!

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-FIVE**

**M**aya had never felt so bold, but there was something electric in the air, and it wasn't her morphing powers. She hit the bedroom door with both hands, sending it cracking against the wall. She paused for only a heartbeat at the doorway, taking in the large suite. There was a four-poster bed against one wall, with a matching side table, and tall chest of drawers. One wall was floor to ceiling built-in bookshelves, and she was momentarily tempted to check out the titles. What did a tiger king stock his shelves with?

But then she heard his heavy footsteps on the stairs.

He wasn't rushing to her, he was taking his sweet time.

She could hear the soft growl of his tiger, her heart tugging at the connection that bloomed between them.

Entering the room, she toed off her shoes and set them aside, then stripped to her bra and panties as she made her way to the bed. His growl got suddenly louder as he reached the room, and she spun to face him.

He filled the doorway, grasping the top of the doorjamb and leaning in slightly. His whole body was tense, his eyes a shining, simmering golden color as his tiger rose to the surface.

"My queen," he said, his voice a low rumble. The doorjamb creaked as he squeezed it, his arms flexing.

Her skin erupted in goose bumps.

She sat on the bed and bit her bottom lip.

“I feel like I’ve been waiting for this moment forever,” she whispered.

“Me too.” He released the doorjamb and stalked slowly to her, making her feel deliciously like prey, like he was going to catch her and do whatever he wanted, and she was going to love every second.

His shirt hit the floor and his boots were kicked off. And then he stopped a few feet from her and rested his hands on his waistband.

“If you want me,” he said harshly, “you’ll take me on your knees, the way we should have done it in the first place, so I can mark you. Mate you and fill you, fuck you until you can’t walk right and you’re fully sated.

She shivered at his tone.

She’d had him frantically in the bank. Then slowly in her bed.

And now?

Submitting to him as his truemate and the other half of his heart?

Hell yes.

She scooted back on the bed and twisted the hooks of her bra, sliding it off and tossing it aside. He watched her with hooded eyes, the scent of his arousal sweet and heavy in the air. That he wanted her so much he had to hold himself back? It was heady knowledge.

She played her fingers across the edge of her panties, and he snarled, his body tensing more, his muscles bunching and his knuckles turning white as he gripped the button of his jeans.

“Don’t tease the cat,” he all but growled the words.

It was so damn tempting, but she was too keyed up to tease him, likely to drive herself crazy too.

“I’ll tease you later,” she promised.



She slid her panties down her legs and then rose to her knees, stripped bare before him.

He shoved his jeans down his legs, revealing his thick, hard cock. A chill slipped down her spine and her stomach twisted as heat and anticipation coiled through her.

No one was as sexy as Midas, standing before her, framed with the soft light from the hall.

He was on the bed a heartbeat later, moving so fast she didn't even see him move.

He cupped her face, his calloused fingers making her skin tingle as he tilted her head and kissed her. They were inches apart, but she could feel his heat. She reached for him, but he stopped her immediately, gathering her hands behind her back, deepening the kiss with a growl in his chest.

Every time he danced his tongue against hers, she tried to extract her hands from his grip, aching to touch him, but he held her hands in place so easily. She let out a frustrated moan as she failed once more to get out of his grip and touch him.

He had the nerve to chuckle.

He sucked on her bottom lip for a brief moment, then spun her to the headboard, placing her hands on the smooth, cool wood.

Swiping her hair to one side, he kissed her neck, dragging his blunt teeth down, as he slid his hands in a slow caress along her sides. He swiped them upward and cupped her breasts, pressing against her back and holding her close.

He caged her nipples with his fingers, squeezing and releasing. "You're the sexiest female I've ever met," he said roughly. "The things I want to do to you..."

She closed her eyes at the sexy threat, gasping as he pressed his fingers and thumbs to her nipples until she arched back against him.

Her whole body was tuned to him, aching for his touch.

"More," she said, dropping her head back against his shoulder.

His hands slid down her stomach and grasped her thighs, putting pressure on them. She wiggled her knees farther apart. He swiped his hands a little lower, kissing her neck, and then he rested one hand against her heated flesh, his fingers teasing her.

She moaned his name and felt him smile against her neck.

“Did I tell you you’re addictive?” he whispered, his breath fanning her skin. He dipped a finger into her slowly then rubbed her silky heat around her clit.

She wanted to tell him that he was addictive too, but she couldn’t do anything but moan as he made the same motion again, his finger pressing into her, then rubbing her, over and over, faster and faster. He bit her neck with his still-blunt teeth.

He used his free hand to cup her chin and turn her head to kiss her, eating her moans as he drove her to the edge of pleasure and then backed off. It wasn’t until her nails were digging into the headboard and she growled his name that he finally let her come, pushing her right over the cliff into sweet pleasure.

He drove himself into her as she came, his thick length hitting all the right spots inside her. She pressed back against him, meeting his thrusts, as he drove her to another great height of pleasure. Her first orgasm slid into a second, making her vision blur and her throat raw at the cry she let loose. He roared as he came, and she closed her eyes in bliss at the sound.

He snarled against her neck and then sank his fangs into her, the thick points blazed like fire, but a delicious warmth spread through her in its wake.

She inhaled sharply as he pulled his fangs free and tenderly licked the marks. She smelled the slight tang of copper, and knew he’d also cut his tongue to mix their blood in the wound so it would scar and not heal entirely with her accelerated healing.

He squeezed her hips and then pulled from her, dropping to the bed with a happy groan and holding out his arms. She

curled against him, her body still humming from the climaxes, her skin tingling.

He linked their fingers and lifted their joined hands.

“Maya, look,” he said.

She’d forgotten she’d closed her eyes. Opening them, she saw her skin was covered with tiny blue lines that glowed like electricity. They flared and faded, then flared again.

She closed her eyes and searched for her magic. She could feel that it was there fully now and very different from what she was used to. Her wiccan magic had felt like fresh air, like sweeping winds across the plains. But this magic felt like the jungle, like heat and passion and moonless nights filled with prey.

She pulled on his arm and rolled to her back. He loomed over her with a growl, his eyes glowing once more.

“Mine,” she said, feeling something change in her mouth. She let out a snarl, a sound she’d never made before, and tilted his head roughly. With a growl of need, she struck, sinking her teeth into his neck until she tasted his blood, sweet and rich like red wine.

He caught her leg with his hand and pulled it up roughly, sliding into her heat. She managed to score her tongue with her teeth and lick the mark, before he fucked her so hard she had to let go and press her hands against the headboard to keep from getting a concussion.

When they came together the second time, they both roared, and something wild and free slipped into her mind, a tigress with soft orange fur and solid black stripes appeared, letting out an approving purr.

“Holy crap,” she said as she breathed heavily against his chest, curled up at his side and listening to his heartbeat.

“One hundred percent,” he said with a chuckle. He kissed the top of her head.

“No, I mean I can see a tigress in my mind.” She went up onto her elbow and looked at him.

His brows rose. “Your eyes are gold.”

“Really?”

He grabbed his phone and opened the camera, pressing the button to make it face her. She saw her eyes were indeed gold, flecked with bright blue. And there was something else: she had fangs.

They were small, but there.

Leaning over she looked at his neck and saw the already-healed scar, a perfect mating mark.

“Okay,” she said with a laugh, “that’s fucking amazing as hell.”

He leaned up to kiss her and then cuddled her close. “My sexy, sweet, powerful mate. You never cease to amaze me.”

Well, she did think the changes to her were amazing, but it was because of him.

“You’re amazing too,” she promised.

She kissed him and then settled once more with her head over his chest. She loved to hear his heart beating, the steady sound soothing to whatever her changing magic had done to her. She didn’t feel like she could shift, but she could definitely feel something different within her.

Mating Midas—truly mating him—had changed everything.

She might have lost the wiccan coven and her power over the air, but she’d gained him and the ambush, plus whatever the new magic had done to her.

She definitely got the better end of the deal. Before she’d met Midas she’d felt alone and useless. Now she knew exactly who she was and her purpose: Midas’s truemate and the ambush’s *saheer*. She couldn’t wait to see what the future held.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-SIX**

Brent Foley waited at the temporary headquarters for Humans Against Shifters, pacing. “Where the hell is Ashley?” he demanded.

Buck looked at him apologetically. “Her flight was delayed.”

“I told you to get her here a couple days ago,” he pointed out.

“I know, I know. But she’s almost here,” Buck said.

Brent hated to be kept waiting. Ashley was an integral part of his plan to take out the tigers, and her not arriving until today was a kink in the plan he didn’t like one bit.

The tigers attacking them at the remote cabin had taken out some of his best people. Thankfully he hadn’t lost Buck, but he’d lost his tech guy and his demolitions expert, which meant he needed to recruit once more.

“Fucking tigers,” he muttered.

An alert pinged and he looked at the tablet on the table, showing a vehicle approaching. They’d had to leave their other temporary headquarters because he wasn’t sure they hadn’t been compromised because of the fiasco at the cabin involving the witch. Now they were holed up in an abandoned warehouse a few miles from downtown. It had offices that he’d converted into bunkrooms. The rest of the people in the group stayed together in apartments they rented around the city.

“Finally,” Brent said.

They’d set up security cameras around the parking lot and building and had people who patrolled during the night.

She parked and got out, rolling her neck and then glancing at the security camera. Striding confidently to the front door, she knocked loudly three times.

“Let her in,” Brent said.

Buck hurried to comply, opening the door and ushering her in quickly before closing and locking it again.

“You’re late,” he said, setting the tablet on a dusty counter.

“Sorry.”

She didn’t sound sorry. But he wasn’t going to call her on it, because she was the best spy he’d ever had in his ranks.

He waved a hand dismissively. “Did you read the dossier?”

“On the tigers, yes. I got about halfway through the one for the wolves.” She unzipped her leather jacket and hung it over a chair, then sat. He followed suit and sat next to the counter, pulling a laptop over so he could see the dossier on the tigers he’d sent over.

“Midas is married now,” Brent said.

“I think you mean mated,” Ashley said.

“Right,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Same difference.”

“You know it’s not, but I’ll play along. If he’s not my target, then what or who is?”

“He’s still your target, but I think it’ll be tough to get to him or his mate.” They’d failed to kill either of them in the cabin. Brent knew he was lucky to escape with his life. He’d underestimated the tigers, and he wasn’t about to do it again.

“So?” she asked.

“So I want you to spy on them. Find a way to infiltrate their ranks and take them out. I want an actionable plan in a week.”

She stared at him for a long moment, then nodded. “Where am I staying?”

Buck appeared with a key and notecard with an address. “I’ve got a place for you in Goshen, it’s about ten minutes from Whisper Creek.”

She took the key and card. “Anything else?”

“No. You know the drill. I’ll expect a report in twenty-four hours.”

“Of course.” She stuck out her hand and he shook it.

When Buck had locked the door behind her, he turned to Brent. “Can she really help take them out?”

“She’s the reason the wolf pack fell,” he pointed out. “She’s got a knack for being able to blend in.” He sighed and scrubbed a hand through his hair. The bomb at the remodel downtown had been a failure of sorts. The vampires had bottomless pockets when it came to financing and things were back to normal within a day, plus no one had been hurt by the explosion. The abduction and subsequent battle at the cabin had not garnered one tiger life lost, but many of his people had died at their claws.

The tire slashing at the shifter club hadn’t done anything but inconvenience the shifters, but that was the point. He didn’t want the tigers to think they were the only ones being targeted, he wanted them all worried and on edge. Because that’s when they made mistakes.

Like when an alpha wolf had gone on a date with a seemingly innocent human woman, who turned out to be Brent’s number one spy. She hated shifters as much as he did, and it was a pleasure to see her in action.

“She’ll find a way for us to attack the tigers and we’ll put Midas, that witch, and everyone else down once and for all,” Brent said.

He was sure of it.



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Midas made breakfast for his still-sleeping mate and carried it on a tray up to the bedroom. As he passed by the empty rooms on the second floor, his mind immediately filled with thoughts of children with his tiger and her magic, plus her sweet smile. It filled him with great joy at what the future would bring.

She stirred when he set the tray down on the side table.

“I think you said you liked coffee with milk and sugar, right?” he said.

She hummed and stretched.

“Was that a yes or a no?” he asked with a chuckle.

She rose onto her elbows and brushed the hair from her face. “Definitely yes. Oh, you made me breakfast in bed? You’re adorable.”

He made a face. “Adorable is for babies and puppies.”

“And sexy tiger kings.”

She sat up and he handed her the mug. She wrapped her hands around it and inhaled with a happy sigh before taking a sip.

He picked up his own mug and sat next to her.

“Feel different?” he asked.

“Very much so. You?”

“One hundred percent. I feel complete now, like the part of me that needed you is finally whole.”

“Aw,” she cooed. “See? Adorable.”

He couldn’t help but grin. Kissing her, he said, “You’re pretty damn adorable too.”

“What’s the next move?” she asked. She shoved a pillow behind her and leaned back, tugging the blanket under her arms.



“For what?” he asked. He set his mug on the table and picked up the tray, maneuvering the legs down and setting it across her lap. He’d made enough for both of them but wanted her to eat her fill first.

“Our mating. We marked each other. Am I part of the ambush and queen, or is there a ceremony?”

“There is a ceremony. The elders will preside over it. For the anointing of the queen, there’s no particular time for it to happen, but we do have to prepare for it.”

“What kind of preparations?” She put her mug on the tray and picked up the fork, spearing a bite of scrambled eggs.

“You need to read the first volume of our laws, which details not only the ceremony but also your duties. I think there are a dozen volumes of laws, but the first one is the one you need to read ahead of the ceremony.”

“How big is it?” she asked with an arched brow.

“Big enough you can’t read it today I suspect. We can plan the ceremony for next week, although there’s no true rush. We’re mated and that means you’re the ambush queen, even though it’s not official yet.”

“Anything else?” she asked.

“Well, we haven’t talked about getting married or having kids yet, but that’s not part of the ‘becoming queen’ chat.”

“I’d like to get married,” she said. “You?”

“Definitely, I’d love you to have my last name.” He paused, thinking of the empty bedrooms. “Kids?”

“Since I’m an only child, I’d love to have as many kids as we can.”

“I love that idea since I’m an only child too.”

“I’m not on birth control, so maybe we started our family last night. Or hell, even before then.”

“Whenever it happens it’ll be right for us.” He leaned over and kissed her, then picked up a piece of toast smeared with blackberry jam.

They ate and chatted about the ceremony. He had never seen a queen anointing, but it was similar to what he'd gone through when he was anointed as king. They'd be first recognized as a mated pair, and then she'd be anointed with oil as queen, and the ambush would throw a big party to celebrate.

Tiny flickers of blue electricity flashed over her skin. "Can we go for a run with the ambush before then? I feel like whatever is going on with my power, with that tigress in my mind, needs to get out."

"Of course," he said. "We can go for a run tonight. I'll send out a notification to the high-ranked males, and have them gather anyone who wants to join in."

She looked thoughtful. "I'll have to look at the scrolls Bitty gave me and see if there's something I can try to cast."

"Could you cast a spell now? I mean, could you use your power now?"

She hummed and looked at her hands, where faint electric lines cascaded over her skin. "I don't know. I'm not really sure what my power actually does."

"Let's finish breakfast, get dressed, and go to the library. We can find the book the elders mentioned and look at the scroll the wiccans gave you too."

"Sounds perfect," she said.

When the meal was over, they headed to the shower first where they drove each other wild until the hot water ran out, and then they dressed and raced to the library. They spent the morning reading through the scrolls and the book that contained the history of known *saheers*. He left her to her reading and met with Romeo, the elders, and the high-ranked males in the kitchen.

"A group hunt is a great idea," Romeo said, cracking his knuckles. "I was going to get a few people together for a run today anyway."

Midas looked at his friend. "Feeling antsy?"

Romeo rubbed his chest and shrugged. “Feeling something.”

“Put out the word to have anyone who wants to shift and run with their new queen to be here by sunset,” Midas said.

“I found another book for you,” Dell said. “I reached out to Mishka and asked if his curators knew of any books related to the *saheer*, and they called overnight and sent a courier to bring it to me.”

Maya appeared in the kitchen and stopped next to Midas’s chair, bending to kiss his cheek. She greeted everyone. “That looks old,” she said, peering at the book.

“It is,” Dell said. “They’re going to keep looking for more information as they’re able. Mishka said to congratulate you on your mating, and to return the book whenever you’re finished with it. Normally they wouldn’t allow the book to be removed, but Mishka said he trusted Midas and his new queen to take good care of it.”

“We definitely will,” Maya said.

“We’re planning for a run tonight at sunset,” Midas said.

“Perfect. If you’d like to join us for dinner before the hunt, I’ll make my famous fried chicken. Well, it’s not famous, but it’s pretty dang good if I say so myself,” Maya said.

“We’ll be here,” Romeo said. “Thanks for the invite.”

She smiled, then looked at Midas. “I’d like to walk the territory before the hunt.”

“I’ll gather a group to go with us,” he said.

“It’ll take you forever to walk it,” Colyn, third ranked in the ambush said. “We have four-wheelers.”

“Oh, that sounds even more fun,” Maya said.

Midas grinned. “Perfect. We’ll meet at the garage in twenty minutes.”

They said goodbye to the high-ranked males and elders. Maya settled on his lap. “I talked to Tilly. She said she’ll come visit in the spring and to also say she wanted to video chat

with you so she can meet you even if it's not officially in person."

"Had she heard of what happened to your magic?"

"No, but she's not surprised. She said I was destined for great things."

"You definitely are."

"So, about this four-wheeler expedition?" she asked, leaning against his shoulder and kissing his ear. His tiger went on alert, catching the sweet scent of her arousal.

"Yes?" he asked, squeezing her thigh.

"Let's drive each other wild, even if it's only for twenty minutes."

He scooped her up in his arms and strode to the stairs. "They'll wait."

"I love how you think."

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-SEVEN**

As the sun set, Maya stood on the back porch of her new home and stared at the gathering crowd. Nearly everyone in the ambush was there, aside from those with young at home and those who couldn't shift, like her new wiccan friend Mari.

Midas stood next to her, surveying the scene.

She turned to face him, her heart swelling.

"Yes, my mate?" he murmured, facing her.

"You know how I said I was falling for you?" Her heart started to beat faster, the tigress in her mind roaring in approval.

"Yes."

"I'm already there. I mean, I love you. With all my heart."

He stared down at her for a long moment, and then he drew her close. "I love you too, Maya."

His lips crashed down on hers and the breath left her lungs as heat speared through her and everything within her went profoundly quiet. She'd never told a male she loved him. She'd never been with someone like Midas, who challenged her and encouraged her, who loved her. She could feel how much he loved her.

Saying the words was freeing, her heart soaring as the ambush clapped and cheered. She laughed and pressed her lips once more to his, then broke the kiss.

“I think they like us,” she said.

“Indeed,” he said. “They’re just happy their king is happy, and that they have such an amazing female for a queen.”

“I’m pretty damn happy too.”

He raised his hand and the crowd quieted. “Thank you all for coming. Tonight, Maya is going to run with our people. She can’t shift, but her new magic— a unique mix of tiger and mage—will give her increased strength and speed to be with our people. Next week, we’ll join together officially as the ruling couple and she’ll be your queen in truth, but for now, join me in welcoming her to our ambush.” He lifted his head and let out a joyous call from his tiger, the ambush echoing the sound. The tigress in her mind, the power of her *saheer* nature, let out that same sound in her head and she felt a sense of community and belonging that she hadn’t felt with the wiccan covens.

“Let’s go for a run,” Midas said.

The crowd split up as mated couples moved to more private areas to strip, while the others simply shed their clothes and transformed. But she wasn’t watching anyone but Midas, as he gave her a sexy little show and revealed his smooth skin inch by inch.

She took his clothes and set them on a table, then watched closely as he transformed from a big sexy man to a huge orange and black striped tiger. His eyes flashed bright blue like her magic, and some of the black stripes took on a blue hue.

She cupped his big boxy head and brushed her thumbs over his cheeks. “The wiccans said your eye color and fur would change to reflect our mating and my power, and it happened! Your eyes are blue like my magic, and some of your stripes have a blue hue. It’s so cool. You’re really mine, aren’t you?”

He let out a yowl that sounded a lot like yes and she laughed.

Kissing his nose, she scratched behind his ears and along his neck, and then patted his shoulder.

“I’m ready to run.” She stepped down onto the snowy grass and lifted her hands, reciting a spell she’d learned from the scrolls that would send a wave of protection over the tigers.

As the last word left her mouth, her fingers glowed blue and a shimmering veil of power slipped from her fingers and shot out across the yard, touching each tiger. She felt the connection to the tigers within her. They were her new family, her people, her friends.

She was their queen and their protector, and along with Midas she’d rule the ambush to the best of her ability.

Midas stopped next to her and nudged her shoulder.

“I’m ready,” she said. With a whooping holler, she raced off to the woods behind the house, Midas at her side. She’d never run so fast in her life, dodging trees and leaping over shrubs, chasing small prey and deer, and laughing to her heart’s content.

The ambush ran with her, their happy purrs and roars filling the air.

Her magic flared, and she paused, reveling in the woods and the tigers around her. Lifting her hands to the night sky, she let out a joyous cheer and the sound was echoed once more by the tigers. Midas roared beside her, rising to his hind legs and flexing his huge paws.

She hugged him with a laugh.

When she’d run her fill, her lungs burning and her cheeks chapped from the cold wind, they returned to the porch where Midas shifted and dressed.

“I’d like to wait for everyone to come back,” she said.

He nodded and lit the firepit, pulling chairs over so they could sit in the warmth of the flickering fire and wait for their people to return.

Romeo appeared and tossed a blanket at them, which Midas wrapped around her shoulders and then hugged her

close. He was so warm and smelled like spices and the jungle at night.

“You make me so happy,” she said.

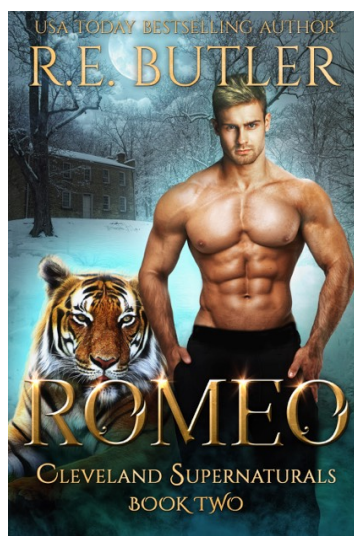
“Me too, my queen.” He kissed the top of her head.

She’d come to Cleveland for a new start and wound up with a mate. Without Midas coming to the store that night, which was only a few days earlier but seemed like an eternity ago, they might never have met.

But they did meet, kicking off a chain of events that culminated in this night, when she claimed her new magic and took part in the ambush in a way she never expected. Her life had changed completely the night she met Midas, and she couldn’t wait to see what the future would bring.



THANKS so much for reading MIDAS! I hope you enjoyed getting to know the tiger king and his people. The next book—ROMEO— will be out January 5, 2024. *What happens when a certain anti-shifter spy gets busted by the second-in-command of the tigers...and she happens to be his truemate? Can Romeo ever trust what she says when he doesn't know where her loyalties lie?* Click [HERE](#) to preorder exclusively on Amazon.



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Read on for an excerpt from [Romeo](#)...



# EXCERPT FROM ROMEO (CLEVELAND SUPERNATURALS BOOK TWO)

**T** [he man standing next to Midas](#) was positively the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen in her life. Dark hair cut short, broad shoulders, and the fact he was naked from the waist up, revealing muscles upon muscles, glowing golden in the torchlight? Holy hell.

She swallowed hard at the sudden lump in her throat.

Heat rose inside her, flushing her skin and making her feel sweaty even in the cold night.

Like moments earlier, she felt something feral inside her, like there were invisible claws gently stroking all her sensitive parts.

What the actual hell was going on?

She blinked slowly and focused on the man, ignoring her suddenly curious inner hussy. The man stood next to Midas with his hands clasped behind his back, his head slowly moving from side to side as he seemed to scan the crowd and woods.

She focused not on how sexy he was, but the information she could gather by watching him. He was clearly highly ranked within the ambush, and judging by the sharp-eyed gaze, he was also part of the security team. If he was standing with Midas, he was probably his second-in-command.

And damn was he sexy.

She mentally chastised herself for thinking he was sexy. Again.

He stopped moving, freezing in place as his gaze landed on her. Her breath caught in her chest, her heart suddenly pounding as she met his gaze. That feral something within her that she'd never experienced before, clicked again, and she felt like she'd been waiting her entire life to stare at this man, and have him stare back at her.

She could see his nostrils flare and his eyes flash with his beast, and the part of her brain that was ancient and feared the monsters under the bed, demanded she run. But she knew if she moved a muscle, he'd chase her, and she couldn't hope to outrun a shifter even if he stayed in his human form.

Carefully and oh-so-slowly, she leaned away and lowered the small binoculars, tucking them into the crossbody bag. She took a step back, keeping her ears turned for someone approaching.

It warred with everything inside her to walk away, but she was fully in danger at the moment. If she was caught by the ambush, she would *not* be rescued by Brent. Like the old Mission Impossible TV show, Brent wouldn't acknowledge her existence as part of Humans Against Shifters and she'd be on her own.

The more she moved away, the closer that feral-something wanted her to get. She literally felt torn in half, which didn't make sense. She had no clue why she wanted to get closer to that tiger, but she wasn't going to explore her feelings. She had to get away as fast as possible and figure out a way for Brent's people to infiltrate the ambush and take them out.

Without getting caught by Sexy McSexyPants.

Shit. She should not be thinking sexy thoughts right now.

Double shit. Was that a stick breaking she'd just heard?

Turning abruptly, she plowed right into the broad, lickably gorgeous chest of the tiger she'd been watching.

He grabbed her roughly and pressed her against the tree, her breath gusting from her lungs as her whole body responded to his touch.

“Who are you and why are you watching the ambush?”

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For a complete list of R. E. Butler books, visit

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R. E. Butler is a USA Today Best Selling Author of Paranormal Romance such as the Were Zoo and Cider Falls series. She lives on the water in New Jersey with her husband, kids, and an enormous furry pup.

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