



PARANORMAL COUNCIL ENFORCERS

PARKER

BOOK EIGHT

TAYLOR RYLAN

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SYNOPSIS

When a lion alpha finds his mate in a tiger omega, will they find harmony in their lives, or will the past get in their way?

Parker Sullivan enjoys his job as the head interrogator for the paranormal council, but he's realized it's become all that he has. His department is one of the last to be staffed, which means he has long hours and not much time for anything else. He sees the enforcers finding their mates and wonders if he will someday be as fortunate to be blessed by fate, but does he have time for a mate?

Markus Ross was thankful to be rescued by the powerful warlock and snarky vampire two years ago. With no desire to return to his birth pride, he's only too happy to move to Montana and hope for a new life. Just when he finally seems to have found his place with Alpha War at the sheriff's department, a sexy lion shifter walks into the place and throws his life into a tailspin.

Determined to be the gentleman his parents raised him to be, Parker misses some cues from his mate, and frustration grows on both their sides. With a little bit of push from his sexy omega, Parker and Markus find themselves mated sooner than either of them really anticipated. But they say fate always gets her way. Does that ring true for the new couple? Will they have an easy mating and pregnancy, or will there be difficult times ahead?

Parker is Book Eight in the Paranormal Council Enforcers series. Each book in this series will focus on a different couple, but these books are not standalones and should be read

in order as there is an ongoing backstory that won't be resolved quickly. This is a fated mate story in an MPreg world, and there will be babies in this story. You should expect all the normal shenanigans, heats, biting, knotting, and remember that sometimes even fated mates need a little help.

WELCOME TO THE UNIVERSE OF DESTINED PARANORMALS

The Universe of Destined Paranormals is a world of interconnected series set in one universe. Because of this, it is recommended that you read the books in chronological order.

[HONEY CREEK DEN Series](#) - When the child of the created warlock goes searching for his mate, a domino effect occurs and the den is blessed by the Fates.

[TIMBER VALLEY WOLF PACK Series](#) - Magic is changing and the wolf pack is next to be blessed by the Fates. Does Edison have something to do with it?

[WARLOCKS OF AMHERST SERIES](#) - EDISON'S warlocks have finally been blessed by the Fates and it's their turn to find their fated Ones.

[VAMPIRES of the Beloved Gem Series](#) - Master Nikolai's vampires aboard the *Beloved Gem* realized that their time has come to find their beloved ones.

[PARANORMAL COUNCIL ENFORCERS Series](#) - The magic has shifted and the Paranormal Council has been formed. Will the

chosen enforcers be next to find their forever mates?

[DESTINED Paranormals](#) - It's time to meet new fated mates, both close and far from the Paranormal Council. New as well as familiar faces will be seen in this series. You can expect lots of HEAs, and very low angst in this series.

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CHAPTER I

PARKER



The thing I loved most about my current job was that I wouldn't ever have to leave because I wasn't aging and people had started to question that. The second thing was that I worked with other paranormals. I did miss my birth pride. Alpha Vincent was an amazing alpha, and the organized pride runs were always a welcome way to help clear my mind from the ugliness I experienced at work. That and finding a willing body to spend the night with.

I sighed, thinking about the last time I'd spent the night fucking someone. It had been...embarrassingly too long ago. I knew that I really needed to take a weekend away and fix that issue, but for now, a run would have to do.

I wasn't interested in joining the local pride in Lucky Lake. It wasn't that the alpha was evil or anything. He simply wasn't a great alpha like I was used to. So, I'd taken to running with the hellhounds. And by default, Brice. Which was why I was in Honey Creek. Brice was at work, as far as I knew, and I really needed to go for a run. I'd not seen Atticus or Damien lately. And I didn't know Warwick or Augustus all that well. I'd seen Warwick briefly at the council building, but by the time I'd gotten to where he was, he was gone, and nobody seemed to know where he had disappeared to.

That meant I needed to find out if the hellhounds were going to be running soon, another way. Hence, Brice. Since he was mated to Atticus, I figured he'd know. That, and he was another lion shifter, and I was sure that was one of the reasons why we'd so easily gotten along from the get-go.

I parked my SUV outside the sheriff's department and sat there for a moment before I turned it off. It was mid-June, and it was already promising to be a warm summer, and it didn't take long for the interior of the SUV to warm up now that the air-conditioning was off. I opened the door and slid out into the bright sun. With a touch to the door, I locked the SUV and hurried into the building. I saw Brice's SUV parked in the lot, boosting my confidence that he was actually here.

I had several things to do today, and this was only the first of many stops I had planned to make before I finally went home later this afternoon.

It had been a while since I'd been to the sheriff's office, not for several months actually, simply because there really wasn't much need. I could talk to Atticus most days at the council, but after a long couple of weeks, I finally had a day off and realized I really needed to go for a run. I wasn't working today, and since I was in the area anyway...I figured why not drop in and ask Brice if they were going for a run soon.

I opened the door to the sheriff's office and almost hit my knees. I'd never scented anything so amazingly wonderful. I somehow managed to stay on my feet and make some sort of noise, getting the attention of Brice, thankfully.

One look from him and he knew something wasn't quite right, and he was up and out of his chair and rushing over to me in seconds. He glanced back at the others in the room, but all I could do was pant and try to continue standing up.

"What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

"Out...side," I whispered. Brice nodded and helped me back out the door I'd just entered, and when I was in the fresh air, I took a deep breath and held it for a moment. My lion was pissed that I was washing away our mate's scent, but I didn't care. I knew for a fact that I couldn't react like that or how he wanted to in the sheriff's office. They had an uninformed human that worked with them, and talk of mates and us having the ability to change into powerful beasts, as well as omegas

being able to carry our children, was something he knew nothing about and wouldn't understand.

“What's wrong?” Brice asked again.

I took another breath, and then the door opened while I was letting it out. I glanced over and saw Alpha War standing there, concern all over his face. He joined us, his support unspoken but reassuring.

“What's happened?”

“My mate is inside there somewhere. Or they were,” I whispered, still taking deep breaths and hoping to clear my lungs enough to be able to function normally.

“Your mate?” Alpha War asked.

I could only nod while taking several deeper breaths. My lungs were clearing, and when I was finally able to stand fully and on my own, I looked at first Brice and then Alpha War.

“Who is new? I know it's not the human. I've scented him before. And I would hope that the fates wouldn't be so cruel to mate someone with a human that was already married and had children.”

Alpha War looked at Brice, who was smiling a cheesy grin.

“What?” I asked, wondering what was going on. It didn't seem as if it was overly bad. They didn't appear to be wincing or anything of that sort. Did that mean they were happy about my claim?

“The only difference since you were here last is Markus. He's a new addition who I'm a bit surprised you didn't already know about or meet,” Alpha War told me.

“Markus?” That name didn't really ring any bells. Should it?

“He was rescued quite some time ago,” Brice said.

My heart immediately fell. My mate had needed to be rescued? By the council? I rarely questioned those that had to be rescued. The ones that had been holding others captive? All the time. But not the omegas that had been pulled from

horrible situations. I had a list of questions that I had the doctors ask, but beyond that, I didn't have much to do with the omegas.

“Yes, Dad was able to get him out before he was taken away from the café. Markus was able to give a lot of information about what was going on with Marcel and the others. His information was quite pivotal in the beginning and led the council to knowing just how big the issue was down there.”

“He wasn't trafficked?” I asked. It wasn't that I wouldn't still desire to claim my mate if he had been. I would. Nothing would be able to keep me from my mate now that my lion had gotten his scent. But if he'd been trafficked, that meant I'd have to be much more careful when it came to starting our relationship.

“No. He was rescued before that could happen. I would imagine it was probably an imminent thing though,” Alpha War said. “Would you like to meet Markus? I can have him come to my office, and then Brice can bring you back, and we can set something up where the two of you meet each other.”

I nodded. It was the best I could do at the moment. I did manage to get my thoughts together for a moment though. “Thank you. I really appreciate it,” I said.

“You know we're all about mates here,” Alpha War said as he smiled and then went back inside.

I was left outside with Brice, trying to come to terms with how much my life had just changed. It took a moment for me to be able to look away from the front door of the sheriff's office. My mate was inside there somewhere.

“Well, I would imagine that whatever you were here to talk about has completely left your mind at this point.”

I nodded when I looked toward Brice. “He's inside?”

Brice gave me an understanding smile. “He is. I think the two of you will be a good match.” Brice's smile grew. “Markus is a tiger shifter, so the two of you will have a lot of

opportunities to run often.” Brice’s face changed in a blink. “Well, until he gets pregnant. He won’t be able to shift then.”

It was my turn for my face to change. I felt it heat while my eyes grew. Children. That’s right. I was an alpha, and my mate was obviously an omega. “He’s an omega. We’ll have kids someday.”

“Well, unless you two decide to not. I know there are things that Markus can take to prevent pregnancy.”

My lion did not like the thought of that. I must have made a noise because I suddenly felt Brice’s lion push against mine. Brice and I were both fairly aggressive alphas, but since mating with his hellhound mate, Brice’s lion had become even more so.

“It’s my understanding that a pregnancy is most likely when it comes to claiming your mate. So if that’s something that the two of you don’t want, you might need to hold off on claiming him.”

I scoffed. I wanted children. My parents would love nothing more than to finally have grandchildren from me. I had three siblings, and I was the only one not mated. Hopefully, that would change soon and Markus would be willing to allow me to claim him.

“I want kids. But I want my mate more. Can we go?” I asked, tilting my head toward the door.

Brice chuckled. “Anxious, I see. That’s probably a good thing. Markus is a great guy. He was going to college in New Orleans, but then things happened, and, well...he ended up falling for the wrong person. He was smart enough to get out of it though. He saw the signs, and he got away, thanks to the others. He’s back in college here though, and he’s been a huge asset to the department. It’ll be a bit of an adjustment again to have him not be here.”

I followed Brice the short distance to the door. When he reached it, I stopped him before he could open it. “What do you mean? I won’t keep him from working if he wants to.”

Brice shook his head, glanced around, then leaned closer. “He won’t be able to work if he’s pregnant. Max isn’t aware of shifters and most definitely knows nothing about omegas and the fact that they can carry children.”

That made perfect sense. I’d gotten so used to being completely surrounded by the members and others associated with the council that I had to remember that there were, in fact, those that didn’t know about paranormals.

I took a few deep breaths and then followed Brice inside the building. Once again, I was hit with the amazing fragrance that was my mate’s scent. I was prepared for it this time though, and I didn’t react as I had before. That was a good thing since Max was now sitting just beyond the reception desk, talking to Gage.

I followed Brice through the office to the doors that were at the back of the building. They were open, and as we neared the one on the left side, I heard voices. My mate’s scent grew stronger, and my heart suddenly started racing. I was about to meet my mate—I was going to come face-to-face with him.

Brice knocked on the doorframe, stuck his head inside, and announced our arrival. “Boss, Parker is here to see you.”

“Send him in.”

Did Alpha War not tell my mate? Was this going to be a complete surprise? Although it had been for me, I didn’t wish that for my mate.

I took a deep breath to steady myself and realized too late that probably wasn’t the wisest thing to do at the moment when my lungs were once again filled with my mate’s scent. I steadied myself anyway and stepped into the doorway, then through. I had to look to my left to see the pair, and when I did, the air that had been in my lungs suddenly left my body.

I was vaguely aware of the door being closed behind me, but my only real focus was the gorgeous man standing against the wall, not far from where Alpha War was leaning against the side of his desk.

“Parker, this is Markus. He’s been working as our office manager. He’s been an asset to the department,” Alpha War said. “Markus, this is Parker. He’s with the council. He’s their lead interrogator but is originally from Seattle.”

“Seattle? But you’re here now? That has to be a drastic change.”

I grinned at my mate. He was adorable. He was leaning against the wall, so I couldn’t quite tell his exact height, but he appeared to be close in height to my own six two. That would certainly be interesting. He was slender, much like many omegas, but even I could see his muscles under his clothing. I myself wasn’t quite as muscular as some alphas, but I more than made up for that in my shifted form.

Markus’s hair was light brown and his eyes dark. I would guess they were a deep brown, but it was his lips that drew me. They were made to be kissed. I couldn’t wait to get that opportunity. If I were so lucky.

“You’ll have to forgive him. It’s obvious that Parker is quite affected by the fact that he’s met you.”

It took me a moment for those words to sink in. When they did, immediately, I felt embarrassed.

“I apologize. I...it’s obviously not every day that one meets their fated mate.”

Markus nodded while smiling.

“I agree.” Markus stood up and walked the short distance between us. When he was standing just inches from me, it took a great deal of effort to keep from reaching for the gorgeous man. His eyes I’d discovered were the color of dark chocolate. I could certainly get used to staring into them. “If you give me your number, then we can find time to get together this evening after work and class. Maybe have supper at the diner here in town?”

My brain was certainly running a bit slow where my mate was concerned. Especially since he was now standing close enough that I could feel his body heat.

“I’m sorry, what?” I asked. My brain refusing to function properly.

“Your number? If you give it to me, or I could give you mine. Either way, I figured we should exchange numbers. That way, we can figure out when works for us to have a date.”

A date? What? “You want my number?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“Well, yeah. Did you not want to have the ability to call me? I mean, you know where I work. I can’t get up onto the mountain. I don’t have council access. But I figured if we exchanged numbers—”

“A date? You want to go out on a date?”

Markus looked as if I’d slapped him. He flinched and took a step backward. He glanced toward Alpha War, then nodded. “Yeah, never mind. I don’t want a mate that doesn’t feel like I’m even worth taking out for a meal.”

Markus moved around me, then opened the door and slipped out before I could get my legs to move. When I did, I was stopped in my place by a strong hand on my shoulder.

“Let him be,” Alpha War told me. “You should know that Markus is quite independent. He’s going to want a mate that won’t enforce his will over him simply because he’s an omega and his mate is an alpha.”

I shook my head, those words immediately registering. “I’m not...I wouldn’t. I very much have no issues with him having his own life. I want to be part of it, and I hope he agrees to claiming each other. I have no issues with taking him out for dates. None. I’ll date him as long as he wants. My hope is that eventually he’d accept my claim.”

Alpha War looked at me for a moment before slowly nodding.

“That’s good to know. Markus was raised in a household without love. You’ll have to get the rest of the story about his parents from him. But I’ll give you his number, and you can hopefully convince him to go out on a date with you. I’d

recommend tonight. He leaves here at three. He's in class until five, and he's staying in one of the cabins on den lands."

That was...a lot of information all at once. I quickly pulled out my phone and waited. Alpha War gave me the number, and I quickly saved it under Markus's new contact. Once I got to know him better, I would most likely come up with some sort of term of endearment for him, but for now, he seemed more spitfire than anything, and I wasn't sure that really fit.

"Thank you, Alpha War. I'll..." I glanced toward the door, which had been quietly closed. "I didn't mean to offend him in any way. Will he talk to me, do you think?"

"Possibly. Just be careful around Max. He's become a nosey Nelly lately, and I'm wondering if I'll have to get Dad to somehow relocate him because of it."

I nodded. "I will. Thanks again for the help. I'll fix this. I didn't mean anything negative. It's difficult to think when he's so close and my lion is pushing to come out and rub all over him."

That earned me a chuckle from the bear shifter.

I left the office, immediately locating Markus. He was leaning against a desk, his legs crossed in front of him and his hands wrapped around the edge. From someone who wasn't used to observing others, he would appear to be relaxed while talking to his coworkers, but I could tell he was anything but relaxed.

Deciding to take a chance, I crossed the room and stopped just to the side of my mate and stared at him.

"Perhaps you'd like to have dinner tonight and then maybe go for a run?" I asked. "I know of some amazing trails around that are perfect for evening runs," I said. Immediately, Markus's shoulders relaxed, and a smile started to appear.

"Why would you run after eating? Wouldn't you want to eat after running?" Max asked. I rolled my eyes because I knew that only my mate could see me.

"Some of us like to work off a large meal after we eat too much. And runs usually start out as walks but become more

after a bit,” Markus said to his coworker before he looked at me. “I’d love to. Let me give you my number, and you can call me later?”

I nodded as I unlocked my phone and handed it over to my mate. His eyes glanced up at me briefly before he looked toward Alpha War’s office. I was certain he’d realized that the bear shifter had already given me his number, and when I heard a vibration close by, it only took a moment for me to realize it was his own phone in his pocket. He’d texted himself. He now had my number as well. Perfect.

Markus handed the phone back, and I saw it was still on his contact. I closed the app and slid the phone back into my pocket.

“Just like that? You two just met what? Five minutes ago? And you’re going to let him take you out? Just like that?” Max asked. I looked to the human and somehow managed to keep myself from growling at him. It was a close thing though.

“Just like that. Brice has been talking up Markus, and I have the day off and came by to meet him. It’s not much different than using a dating app, is it? Except a mutual friend set up the date? How is that a bad thing?” I asked.

Max looked like he wanted to argue, but instead, his name was said from across the room. The rest of us were all shifters, and we knew that Alpha War had heard every bit of the interaction from across the room. Max got up from his chair and crossed over to Alpha War’s office. After he entered, Alpha War nodded at us, then followed the deputy into his office, quietly closing the door behind him.

I took that opportunity to move a bit closer to my mate. “I will always be willing to take you out on dates, Markus. I want nothing more than to show everyone that you are with me and how lucky I am because of that,” I whispered while staring into those gorgeous eyes. “You absolutely will not be a secret, nor will you be hidden. Don’t ever think that. But forgive a man when he meets his fated mate unexpectedly and his brain short-circuits and he can’t think straight or fast enough.”

I grinned at Markus, took a huge chance and leaned in and kissed his cheek quickly. When I stood up, I met the surprised eyes of my mate. I winked and then left the building. I didn't look back or even stop until I was opening the door to my SUV. When I slid behind the wheel, I took several deep breaths of hot air. My plans for the day just got railroaded, but I didn't mind even one bit. I had met my mate, and that meant it was time to prepare for not only my first date with him but trying to earn his trust and affection. Time to call my mother and get as much advice as I could.

I started the SUV and pulled out of the parking lot, headed for the store. I knew I would certainly need a whole lot of groceries, as well as a few other things. I had a few hours before my mate would be finished for the day. I would make myself busy in order to distract my lion. Hopefully, it worked.

CHAPTER 2

MARKUS



I'd seriously hit the jackpot when it came to mates. Parker. He was...sexy as fuck. And of course, my tiger wanted to immediately run off and let him claim us. Not that I really wanted much different. Not really. But I was going to be cautious. Despite the fact that Parker had the perfect amount of facial hair. Like...it wasn't too long, nor was it so short it was going to be painful. And his hair...it was short on the sides and back but several inches long on top. It was going to be perfect for hanging on to while he...yeah.

I cleared my throat and tried to refocus on my tasks. I still had several hours of work left to get through, and I was taking an English class this summer term. I had been avoiding it, and I couldn't any longer. It was a requirement, and I hated the prospect of writing all of those essays. I groaned out loud at the thought. I already didn't like English. Now I was going to be completely distracted by the fact that I'd just met my mate.

"Something wrong?" Gage asked.

I looked over at the older bear shifter and shook my head. He was the only one left in the office. Well, besides Alpha War. But he was in his actual office, dealing with paperwork. I wasn't sure why he hadn't "retired" from his position yet. Gage would be a perfect replacement sheriff. It would also leave Alpha War with more time to focus on not only his growing den but his mate and their several children.

"No. Just thinking about trying to focus on writing all of the essays and the one small paper I have to this summer for my English lit class. It's not exactly my favorite subject. I suck

at commas.” I thought about it for a moment. “And tense. And grammar in general.”

Yeah, I was probably going to end up failing the class. That sucked because I’d been putting it off this long. This was going to be the summer I got caught up, and I would finally be able to graduate by the end of the year. What were the chances that my mate would wait until January to claim me? That was six months from now. My own tiger growled in my mind. He didn’t like that thought any more than I did, really.

It was times like this that I really wished I had a closer relationship with my family. I could use some advice at this point, but sadly, I didn’t. They had raised me, but I knew it was more out of what they felt was obligation and expectation of the pride than actual love for me. My parents were...yeah, they were dead to me. I wanted nothing to do with them and never would.

I was such a disappointment to them. How could my father’s only son be an omega? And then “seduce the alpha’s son”? Such a disgrace. I rolled my eyes, thinking about the entire thing. My parents knew how fated mates worked. They were fated. I wouldn’t be here if they weren’t. But here I was. And now I’d met my own fated mate. But I wasn’t the only omega in the pride. So why was it that I was treated as I was?

I thought about my new “family” I’d had since coming here. Perhaps I could ask Wallace for advice? I liked the tiger shifter. He was immensely powerful, and yet, he was one of the most down-to-earth people I’d ever met. As the created warlock’s fated mate, Wallace could easily be the alpha of his own pride, yet he was happy and content being the mate of Master Edison. I’d immediately felt comfortable with him, and he had proven on more than one occasion that he was a great listener. I needed that right about now. And some advice.

After glancing at the clock on my desk, I pulled out my phone and quickly looked at the class message board for tonight’s class. I wasn’t sure if it was fate once again being on my side or if it was simply coincidence, but the class board had a message from the instructor that tonight’s class was canceled. Apparently, the instructor’s wife had gone into labor,

and he was at the hospital. The assignment had been posted and would be due next week. I wrote myself a quick note on a sticky and put it in my pocket. I would need to look into that later once I'd gotten home.

With the class situation sorted for the evening, I wondered if Wallace would be available later for a quick chat. I wouldn't disturb him now, but I would find Arik after work and see if he knew if his alpha father was free.

I liked Alpha War and his mate, Arik. They had several children, and I loved to shift and run with not only Arik but his older children. But even with the welcome they had all shown me, I still felt a bit like an outsider. That was a me issue and one I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to overcome. It was ingrained into my brain from years of treatment from my family.

I closed my eyes tightly against the painful memories. Now wasn't the time to bring them up. Instead, I got up from my desk and went to the small break room. I filled my cup with water from the water cooler, and after taking a long drink, I topped it off once again before going back out to the desk. There was paperwork to sort, and despite having met my mate earlier, I still had a job to do.

I'd just set my cup on my desk when movement outside the door drew my attention. I saw Brice standing there, and he was talking to someone over his shoulder. When they entered, I saw it was actually his mate, Atticus. With them was the teenage hellhound they'd basically adopted, Ansel.

"I cannot believe you're still here," Atticus said to me as he walked up to the desk.

"What? Why?"

"News has already spread through the council that Parker met his mate and who it was. I'm not sure the council knows what they're going to do for the next month or so while you two strengthen your bond and Parker is off of work. He's the lead interrogator, and they really don't have a good backup yet."

What did that even mean? Would my mate never get time off? What if I were to go into heat? What would that mean? Would he have to work, and I'd be left alone at home? Thinking about going into heat gave me a moment of panic. I grabbed my phone and quickly checked the dates. It had been a while since I'd had a heat, but I'd not been too worried about it because I lived alone. I knew there were several alphas in the area that would be incredibly accommodating in helping with that if I wanted. But I'd been taking suppressors since shortly after I arrived. I also knew that now that I'd met my mate, they wouldn't do jack shit for stopping my heat, especially not after I'd been claimed by my mate. We were going to become parents a few months after Parker claimed me, and although I'd love nothing more than to have my own little one to care for, I honestly knew next to nothing about children.

"Shit," I said and quickly dropped my phone. I needed to talk to Arik. Now. Not later.

"What's wrong?" Gage asked, concern in his voice. I looked to the bear shifter and grimaced. The door opened again, and I groaned internally. Max was back.

"Could you please let the sheriff know I had to go see his husband?" I asked.

Gage nodded slowly, but before I could leave, he stopped me with a hand on my shoulder.

"Everything all right?"

"Yeah, just...not sure how long I'll have. You know..." I said. I didn't want to mention heats and anything like that with Max in the office. He had become incredibly nosey lately, almost like he was just waiting for us to slip up.

"I understand. I've been *married* for quite some time, you know."

I nodded. I did. I'd met Linus several times. He was the sweetest little fox shifter. Together, they had several beautiful children, and I knew that Gage certainly would understand what I was saying without having to state it. He was mated to

an omega. And why would an omega need to see a shifter doctor shortly after meeting their fated mate for the very first time? Yeah, Gage understood.

“I’ll tell the sheriff. Why don’t you take the rest of the afternoon and evening off. Get ready for class early and everything? I’m sure the paperwork is caught up enough for the day.”

I heard a noise, and we looked to the side just in time to see Brice pushing Max away a bit. Atticus and Ansel were now talking to Alpha War on the other side of the room, just outside his office door.

“Thanks, Gage. I appreciate it. I’ll see you tomorrow,” I whispered before I gathered my things.

“If you need time, we understand. Trust me when I say we do understand.”

I nodded slowly. I knew what he was implying. I’d met my mate. I was supposed to go for a run with Parker this evening. When two shifters got together and their animals were in such close proximity, things often led to sex. It was just how we were. It wasn’t a bad thing. Not at all. But even I knew that if Parker and I ended up having sex tonight, I’d be wearing his bite mark by morning. That meant I’d go into heat within days.

“Thanks again, Gage.” I nodded as I glanced around the office. This felt a bit final, to be honest. “I’ll be sure to keep everyone up to date. I don’t anticipate anything like that happening, but I also know that sometimes we can’t exactly control ourselves.”

Gage grinned. “Very true. Just remember—” Gage looked over his shoulder, and when I saw we were the only two left in the room, I wondered where the others had gone. “—Parker might be the alpha, and he’ll be your alpha in a sense, but you are in charge. If you don’t want his bite yet, you have that right to say ‘not yet.’”

That was reassuring. “Understood. I just want to get to know him a bit. That’s all. I have my reasons.”

“That’s reasonable. Now, go spend some time doing what you need in order to relax a bit. Linus likes hot baths and a mug of tea. That might not be your thing, but it’s what he says puts him in the best headspace.”

Huh. A bath and tea. I’d not ever tried that, but I was willing.

“Thanks. I’ll have to go see if the tub in my place is big enough. It’s not the largest cabin, and I’ve really only ever used the shower.”

Gage squeezed my shoulder and just grinned. I went back to the desk, and after shutting down my computer for the day, I straightened up the papers and locked them in the top right drawer. After I grabbed my bag and my water cup, I left the office and had to squint at the afternoon sun. It was bright, and I wished I’d thought to bring in my sunglasses. They were in the vehicle though. I walked around the building, feeling a bit like I was being watched, but when I glanced around, I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.

I unlocked the vehicle and climbed in. The first thing I did was put my sunglasses on. The instant darkening of the world around me was so much better. I tossed my backpack onto the passenger seat, then started the engine.

It was hot outside, so I rolled the windows down to let some of the heat out while the air-conditioning caught up. After buckling my seat belt, I pulled out, heading back to the den’s land, where I had a small cabin that they had given me for as long as I wanted.

I thought about the day and realized that although I liked my little cabin, it was definitely too small for two. Add in a child, and it simply wouldn’t work. I was most likely getting ahead of myself. I had no idea if Parker even wanted children. Maybe he didn’t. Perhaps he knew of some sort of magical birth control that would work for shifters claiming their mates.

I drove back to my place, my motions almost on autopilot. That wasn’t necessarily a good thing, but we were in a small town, and there was honestly still very little traffic. The tourist

season was ramping up though, and I knew that the office would get busier in no time.

The May holiday that “marked” the beginning of summer had already passed, and the tourists had started to pick up, but we weren’t in full swing yet. No, that would happen in July, and things wouldn’t calm down until September.

I pulled into the long drive where Alpha War lived with his mate and children. It was technically the den house, but they were the only ones that lived there currently. I parked behind Arik’s large SUV and set the brake before I turned off the ignition. I had been told multiple times that the door was always open, and if Gage had told Alpha War that I was going to be with his mate, then perhaps Arik already knew I was on my way to see him?

I climbed up the three steps that led to the front door and knocked loudly. The door opened almost immediately, and Arik was standing there with a huge smile on his face.

“War said you were on the way here. Come in. The kids are all gone, and I’ll answer any and all questions you might have.”

I felt myself relax a bit. Arik was a doctor. He was also an omega tiger shifter, just as I was. But his fathers were much more powerful than my own parents were.

I followed Arik into the house and immediately felt a sense of welcome. That was something about the den house here—it was comfortable and welcoming. The pride house at my birth pride was anything but comfortable. It was a “showpiece” to display to other prides the “wealth” of the pride. I snorted internally at the thought. My birth pride was anything but wealthy.

I fully expected Arik to take me to his office, but instead, he led me to the back room, which was nothing but windows and comfortable furniture. He gestured to the couch, and I sat at one end and leaned against the arm and grabbed the pillow, pulling it onto my lap. Arik sat at the other side and stared at me, waiting.

After an awkward moment, I broke the silence. “I realized a little while ago that I’ve not had a heat in well over a year. How long am I going to have? I’ve been taking those suppressors faithfully, but even I’ve heard about what happens when fated mates find and claim each other. Fate is fickle and always gets what they want. I’m going to go into heat, aren’t I?”

Arik gave me a somewhat sad smile. “Yeah, you are. Is that an issue? Do you not want to? I know that Constantine could use magic and stop it. He’s successfully done it there several times now. The magic stays in place until the couple are ready, and things then progress as they have since we’ve been around.”

Did I want that? Not necessarily. Well, if Parker didn’t want children, then that was something I’d consider. But I just wanted to know how long I had until I was bed-bound for a week or more. My heats had always been intense, and I’d definitely been more than ready to not have one for as long as I could. Taking what was essentially a birth control pill daily wasn’t a hardship, really.

“We discussed your heats before when you first arrived, and we talked about the suppressors then.”

I nodded.

“You’ve not had a heat since, so I would expect that... from experience...you have no more than a week. The more time you spend in close proximity to your mate, the quicker nature will take over.”

That’s what I’d figured. I gave Arik a smile that I wasn’t exactly feeling. I knew I wouldn’t ask Parker to stay away during my heat. He was my mate, and we were fated. He was supposed to be absolutely perfect for me in every way. But we’d just met, and I was hesitant simply because I knew nothing about him and didn’t have any real good examples of mates until I came here. I’d not been in Honey Creek long, but in the short time I’d been here, I’d felt more welcomed than I had my entire life in my birth pride. Why? Simply because I was a tiger and not a lion. My father’s fated mate was a tiger

shifter, and that was already a strike against me. Then when I came out as an omega, that basically sealed my fate. I would never be good enough for them. I was a disgrace.

I couldn't help but chuckle at that thought. If only the alpha could see the paranormals here. Sure, there were some that were mated to the same species, but it wasn't necessarily the norm. Even some of the created ones were mated to other species. Look at Master Edison and Wallace. A warlock and a tiger alpha. I wondered if he would ever go against a created one. The created one who happened to be the carrier. An omega, if you would.

"Hey, do you know the created lion?" I asked suddenly.

"No. I've not met him. Why do you ask?"

I shook my head. "I don't even know his name, sadly. It wasn't something I really thought about until just this moment. I was thinking about my parents. How they weren't of the same species, and that was taboo in my pride. Then how my father's only son ended up being an omega to boot. An omega that wasn't even a lion like him. I was an oddity growing up."

Arik growled. "You are not an oddity. I'm a tiger shifter. I have all warlocks for brothers. That doesn't make us freak shows."

I snorted. He was right, of course. "True. It doesn't." I stared off into the backyard. It was bright out, but I wasn't really focused on any one thing. "My parents disowned me. You know that. Why? Because I was an omega, and as such, I was attracted to alphas. I was caught with *the* alpha's son. Forget the fact that he was the one that kept pursuing me. Now I've been given an alpha as my mate, something I knew would happen." I shrugged as I looked over at Arik and blinked several times before my eyes focused. "Do you know anything about Parker? His parents? Pride? Anything?"

Arik smiled. "Parker is from my nephew's pride. Well, my nephew-in-law's pride. Vincent and Louis have been the alpha pair for that pride for a long time. Longer than I've been alive. Vincent is a good man. One of the best. And he's honorable. I know that he doesn't put up with shit like what goes on in your

birth pride. Which, by the way, has had a change of command, as it were. The alpha that was there is no longer in a position of authority, nor are any of his former inner circle.”

I smiled and nodded. I’d heard that. I’d still chosen to not return. There was nothing for me there. I’d felt more at home here in Montana than I had ever in Nebraska. And, well, now that I’d met my mate...I would stay here. Or if Parker decided he wanted to return to his pride in Seattle, I could be up for that. I’d never been to Seattle. I’d heard that you either loved the area or hated it. I wasn’t sure which way I would feel about it.

“I still wouldn’t return. I mean it when I say there is absolutely nothing there for me. I have two sisters, and both of them got away as soon as they could. I honestly don’t even know where they are. It was always just safer.”

Which was a bit sad, but it was true. Our family was toxic. I was better off without them.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded, then smiled, thinking about my mate. “If anything, I would think that Parker would eventually want to return to his pride? I wouldn’t be against that.”

Arik grinned. “Don’t let my nephew hear you say that. He is all about being the best alpha mate he can, and if he hears that Parker has a mate now and it’s a possibility that you return to that area, he’ll be here in a blink and try to convince you.”

We both laughed about that. But after a moment, I sobered. I had a mate. Life had just drastically changed. I wholly believed that Parker found me now because we needed one another or would very soon. I had to trust that fate wouldn’t be wrong. But when I thought about my parents...and my birth pride, where had things gone wrong there?

“Are you good? Do you want me to call Constantine?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. I have a date tonight. I’m planning on talking to Parker before we do more than eat a meal and maybe go for a run. I would love nothing more than to run in fur with my mate. But I also know that can induce

heats quicker. I'll wait and see how the evening goes." I kept telling myself that I didn't have to worry any longer. My heats would be taken care of by my mate. Because I'd been gifted an alpha. A very sexy alpha. I couldn't keep the smile from my face when I thought again about Parker. Then again, I'd done little more than think about him since late this morning.

Arik and I talked for a little while longer before I left and drove around the property to the little cabin that I'd called home since I'd first arrived. When I entered, I saw it through different eyes. My days here were definitely numbered. This was certainly not a cabin for a mated couple. Not by a long shot. But that was all right. Maybe Parker's place was bigger? Hopefully?

I decided to try Gage's suggestion and see if my tub was big enough for a relaxing soak. If not, then I would take a long hot shower to distract myself.

CHAPTER 3

PARKER



Longest day of my life. I had no idea when I walked into the sheriff's department that I'd be meeting my fated mate. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a bit disappointed that he seemed so casual about the entire thing. I didn't exactly expect him to up and come with me and we'd immediately claim one another. But the fact that he planned on finishing out his shift at work and then attend his class this afternoon, it was a bit of a disappointment that I was coming third after everything else.

I knew I shouldn't be upset, and there was no way I would ever mention it to him, but that didn't change the fact that I was going stir-crazy trying to keep myself distracted enough to keep my lion from shifting and running off to chase after my mate.

It helped that I lived on Treasure Ridge and the only way I could get off of the mountain was with the help of either a warlock or one of the hellhounds. They, thankfully, were going for a run, and I'd been invited. It had been difficult at first, but once Atticus and Damien had started to run, my lion was more than happy to follow along, and we'd spent hours running in our shifted forms.

Running with Ansel was an experience. He was obviously smaller than the others, as he was still a teen, and his beast, much like his human half, wasn't yet fully developed. Despite that, he easily kept up with the rest of us, and we had what I would consider a very good run.

My lion was happy—for a time. Unfortunately, once I was back at my place, there wasn't much to do except clean or go shopping. The place was already clean, and since I'd not gone shopping when I was in Honey Creek, I decided to check out the council store. It was just behind the council building and was well stocked.

It was run by a tiger shifter and his two younger brothers. I'd not really paid too much attention to any of them. The two younger ones scented of fox, and although they were cute, they really weren't my type, so I'd only ever smiled, been friendly, and gone about my days when I'd had to stop in there for something.

Deciding to go and see what types of snacks they had, I left my house in single enforcer housing and went to the store. It wasn't a far walk, and I spent the time between home and the store thinking about what I could do to help possibly put Markus at ease. He seemed hesitant, and I'd been warned that I would need to find out what was up with his parents.

Instead of focusing on my mate and how to romance him, I thought about what could have happened with his family. I'd not been back to work to look into where Markus was from, but that was by choice. It felt wrong to snoop into my mate's past without his consent. I wanted to know everything, yes, but I wanted that information to come from him.

I found myself standing in front of the store before I realized, and when I entered, the cool interior was welcome. I didn't mind the heat, but it wasn't exactly what I was used to. Thankfully, it was cooler on the mountaintop than it was off.

I glanced at the baskets but instead chose one of the little carts. I still had to carry whatever I purchased back to the house, but I planned on checking out each of the aisles so I could see what they had to offer.

My mate was an omega. Not that I was expecting him to immediately spend the night and let me claim him, but I wanted to be prepared if I should get so lucky. An omega, when they met their fated mate, tended to go into heat shortly after. I didn't spend a whole lot of time at my place, so I didn't

have a lot of snack foods. If we should happen to be at my place and Markus went into heat...well...

I would, of course, take care of my mate. I made a mental note to talk about that this evening. I needed to know what Markus's thoughts were on claiming, heats, children, all of that. I, of course, was more than ready to have my mate. I would also love some children. I thought two or three for now would be ideal, but that would be more up to Markus than me. He was the one who would be carrying them. I would be as supportive as I could, but I knew he would be the one doing all of the hard work.

I turned down the cereal aisle and grabbed a few boxes of breakfast bars. I tended to have all three meals while at the council. When I was home, if I was hungry, I didn't snack. I cooked full meals because as a shifter, a snack usually didn't cut it. But even I knew that cooking a proper meal and then getting an omega in heat to actually eat it wasn't going to be possible.

After I found the cereal bars, I went looking for the protein bars. They weren't far, and although they weren't really my favorites, like the cereal bars, I could break them up and get Markus to eat them. Next was fruit. I needed some fresh fruit. I wasn't sure what Markus ate—that was also something we needed to discuss—so I grabbed some of my favorites.

After fruit was in the cart, I went to the meat counter at the back. I looked around the store, wondering where any of the brothers who ran it were. I'd not seen any of them when I came in, and it was unusual that none of them were out and about in the store when there were people in here. I shrugged it off and hoped they wouldn't stay hidden when it came time to check out and pay.

I smiled at the selection at the meat counter. I picked two thick steaks, placed them in the cart, then headed to the front. I was surprised to see a familiar smiling face standing by the register. I couldn't tell you which twin it was, but I had to wonder where he'd come from. I'd, of course, scented them when I entered, but this was the first time I'd seen any of them.

“Did you find everything all right?” he asked as I started putting the items on the counter.

“I think so. I’m not exactly sure what all I need.”

The twin grinned again and started ringing up my items.

“Well, judging your selection, you’re either going on a trip, or you have a date. Looking at everything, I’m saying it’s a date.”

I chuckled.

“Something like that.” I pushed the now empty cart back over by the door and returned to the counter.

“Serious date or casual?”

“Serious. My first date with my mate,” I told him. I tilted my head to the side. “Which twin are you? I know there are two of you because I’ve seen you together.”

That earned me another smile. “I’m Phineas. Philip is over in the produce, putting out fresh vegetables.”

“Do you sell a lot of fresh produce?” I asked, trying to make conversation. I wasn’t sure what everyone else liked to eat, but I knew that I preferred red meat. But I would eat a salad. It helped keep my human side happy.

“We do. There are several on the mountain that like more than just meat.”

I should have known that. There were warlocks and vampires, although I’d seen Garic out-eat a hellhound when it came to red meat, but it made sense that there needed to be a little bit of everything.

“And your other brother?”

“Roman is over in housewares, putting out stock the last time I saw him.”

I nodded and handed over my card. Phineas took it and slid it into the reader before handing it back to me.

“He’s a good guy. I don’t know what all has been going on, but he’s only trying to protect me and Philip.”

I was lost and confused and shook my head. “I don’t know what you’re referring to.”

“Roman got into trouble. If you could maybe spread it around the council to stop complaining about him, we would appreciate it. He’s protective for a reason. But if Roman has to leave, Philip and I will go with him.”

Phineas handed me my receipt and then two large bags. “I still don’t know what you’re talking about. I can ask at the council if you want.”

“That would be nice. Enjoy your date with your mate. Hopefully, things work out well for the two of you.”

“Thanks,” I told him. I took my bags and left the store, wondering what that was all about. I hadn’t heard about any issues with the store, but I didn’t really spend a whole lot of time outside of my office at the council. When I was finished with work, I usually went for a run once I got home. Then I spent the rest of the evening relaxing until it was time to go to bed. In the morning, I repeated everything. It was a bit sad that I basically didn’t have much of a life since joining the council. There just wasn’t a nightlife here like in Seattle.

I glanced around the pathway as I walked back to my place. There were a few others out here and there, and there would be even more within the hour. The workday was almost over, and that meant others would be heading home. My date with Markus was getting closer, but it still felt so very far away. I would have to figure out something to keep myself occupied.

I walked up the walkway to my building and noticed that whereas my neighbor to my left had planted some flowers in pots, my little front porch was completely bare. I would have to ask West for some pointers, I guess. As I opened the front door, I realized that most likely I’d be moving soon. Well, soonish. I hoped that at some point, Markus and I would be able to claim each other. That meant we’d either go into mated enforcer housing, or we’d find somewhere in Honey Creek or Timber Valley to live. I really hoped he was willing to stay in

the area for a while. I liked it here, and I wasn't really ready to go back to Seattle or wherever it was that he was from.

I took my purchases to the kitchen and quickly put them away. That took all of five minutes. When I checked the clock again, it was still hours yet before I'd be able to see my mate. My lion was already pushing at me, but I pushed him down, and he reluctantly agreed with my decision to wait somewhat patiently.

My phone vibrated in my pocket for a second before it rang. A quick glance at the screen showed Master Edison's name, and I swiped to answer the call.

"Hello, Master Edison. What can I do for you?" I asked as I walked to the back room of the house and sat in the oversized chair that had quickly become my favorite.

"I had a question for you. I've heard the news that you found your mate, and first, I want to offer congratulations."

"Thank you, Master. I appreciate that. We're going to have a date tonight, and we'll see how things progress from there."

I was too keyed up to sit back and relax, so I sat on the edge of the chair with my elbows resting on my thighs.

"If you need assistance with anything, please let us know."

"I will. I have a feeling that things are going to take a bit with my mate though. Not that he's not worth it. I'm willing to wait as long as he needs," I told him.

"Perhaps. You never know what will happen once the two of you actually get to spend time together," Master Edison told me. I hoped he was right. I meant it though. I would wait for my mate as long as I needed to. That didn't mean I would sit back and not do whatever I could to earn his affection though. "I did call for another reason. I wanted to know what you felt about adding Marc to your team. He doesn't have a whole lot of experience when it comes to questioning others, but perhaps more of an investigation partner?"

That sounded quite agreeable, actually. I often spent a lot of time looking into backgrounds, and having someone to help with that would be a relief, actually.

“I could agree with that on the condition that he’s willing to work. I’ve heard about the situation with his field team and how he left them in a difficult position. I wouldn’t want to rely on him and then have him complain about having a mate and therefore he shouldn’t have to work,” I told Master Edison. I’d known the created warlock for quite some time. He and his fated mate, Wallace, had visited the pride frequently to visit their grandson, our alpha mate, and great-grandchildren.

“He has assured us that he won’t. He has found that the field enforcers aren’t exactly willing to team up with him for fear of a repeat. Ambrose, Sergei, and I have been asking if any of the core council employees are willing to accept him.”

I definitely understood that. I also understood Marc’s side of things. He had a new mate, one that was pregnant. Well, he’d given birth at this point, but at the time, he was pregnant, and Marc and his bear simply weren’t ready to leave their mate. I wasn’t yet mated, but I could understand how it could be difficult to leave your mate behind.

“I’m willing to have him on my team. If we pick up the pace any more than we already have, it would be quite useful to have someone that can help with research when there are multiple people we’re investigating and questioning.” I wouldn’t have an issue with saying something to Marc if he pulled the same stunt he had on his team right before they were supposed to go out on an assignment. Again, I understood his reasoning, but his timing was poor and could have put the rest of his team in jeopardy.

“Good to hear. I’ll be sure to let the others know what you’ve shared.” Master Edison cleared his throat. “Do you want the next while off? We usually offer a month to strengthen the bond.”

“Thank you, Master Edison. I’ll have to let you know after our date this evening. I’m not expecting to claim my mate anytime soon. Markus seems to be quite busy, and I have no issues with him having a life outside of our relationship. Which, ironically, doesn’t yet really exist.”

There was chuckling now. “If you say so. Enjoy your evening, and I’ll be in touch.”

Master Edison ended the call, and I was left wondering if he possibly knew something that I didn’t. I wasn’t sure if he could see the future or if he was privy to it, but I was going to go into my date this evening with an open mind.

I didn’t get to put my phone back in my pocket before it pinged in my hand. I looked at the screen and saw I had a text message. When I opened it, I was quite surprised.

Markus: Hey! I know we said this evening, but class was canceled. Whenever you’re available, so am I.

I glanced around the house and quickly dashed upstairs. My bedroom was as I’d left it this morning. It was tidy, and the bed was made.

Me: Hi there. I’m incredibly happy to hear that. It will take me just a little bit to get down there to you. Unless you’re here on Treasure Ridge?

I grabbed my keys from the bowl on the counter and slid them into my pocket while Markus typed a reply to me.

Markus: No. I don’t have access to the mountain. Beyond when I was there when I first arrived, I’ve not been back. Do you know where I live? Did someone tell you?

Me: I do. I’m on my way now, then, if that’s all right? I was trying to figure out something to keep myself busy for the next couple of hours.

Markus: Now is good. I’ll see you soon, then?

I couldn’t stop from smiling.

Me: You will.

I was out the door and took off running toward the transport building over by the council building. It was actually

good timing because I was most likely going to run into others that were leaving work for the afternoon, and I wouldn't feel bad about calling whoever was on duty to take me down off the mountain.

The short walk took half as long as I couldn't force myself not to run. Probably not the best thing since I was hoping to make a very good impression on my mate in just moments, but I would blast the air-conditioning in my vehicle and hope that was enough to cool me off.

I arrived at the transport building just as others were, and once we entered, the warlock that had been there earlier to take me down off the mountain smiled, and then we were suddenly in the house at the base of the mountain.

I didn't say anything to the others, but I recognized most of them. My mind was too focused on getting to my mate, and once I slid into the driver's seat of my SUV, I started it and turned the fan up on high. I didn't wait and was off, heading toward Alpha War's place as quickly as was legal.

It didn't take long before I pulled onto the driveway of the den house where Alpha War lived. When I got to the split, I went left and headed to the small cabin that I'd been told was where my mate lived. When it came into view, my first thought was that it was incredibly small, and I had to wonder how he had managed to live there as long as he had. It appeared to be smaller than my apartment in Seattle, and that was saying something because that place had been small.

I wasn't surprised to see Markus standing out front by the time I turned off the SUV and exited the vehicle. He had a hesitant smile on his face, and I wondered what I needed to do in order to put him at ease. I closed the distance between us slowly, and when I was only a few feet from him, I gave Markus a smile.

"You're even more handsome than I remembered," Markus blurted out. Immediately, his eyes widened seconds before he covered his face with his hands.

I took the opportunity to step forward and reached out, gently lowering his hands. When Markus's eyes met mine, I

smiled. “Thank you. You’re incredibly easy on the eyes as well.” I let my arms drop but didn’t release Markus’s wrists. “Did you want to go inside? Or are you ready to start our date? We can head to the diner whenever you’re ready.”

“Dinner would be good. Then maybe we could go for a run? Would that be all right?” Markus asked.

“That sounds perfect,” I told him. My lion was in agreement.

CHAPTER 4

MARKUS



I could not believe I'd just blurted that out, even if it were true—my mate was incredibly good-looking, and I knew for a fact that he was going to get attention when we were in the diner in town. I wasn't a jealous person, though, and knew my mate would only ever have eyes for me. I felt it would be interesting to see how he interacted with others.

Immediately, I gave my mate points for opening the door for me. He didn't have to—I was perfectly capable of opening my own door—but it was a nice gesture. It showed that he had manners and knew how to be polite.

I easily climbed into his SUV, and once I was settled, Parker closed the door, and I couldn't help but watch as he rounded the front of the vehicle before he slid in behind the wheel.

“So, did you wish to go to the diner here in Honey Creek? Or perhaps the restaurant in Timber Valley?” Parker asked as he started the SUV. The vents blasted warm air toward us immediately, but it only took a moment for it to cool though, which was a relief.

“Where do you prefer?” I asked. “Do you eat at either often?”

Parker shook his head. “No. Actually, I usually eat all three main meals at the council. The cafeteria there is amazing, and it's free for us to utilize. If I'm hungry later in the evening, I'll cook at home. Since I've been in Montana, I've not spent a whole lot of time down off of the mountain.”

He hadn't? What did he do after work? Then again, I'd not been up on the mountain for quite some time. Perhaps it had changed quite a bit since I'd last been to Treasure Ridge?

"Oh. I've not been up on the mountain since I first arrived. And actually, I was only up there for maybe an hour. But that was when we first came back. We traveled with Master Edison, and he brought us back up there. Then I was down here, and I've been here since."

"Well, if you'd like to go to the council and have a meal, we can. The cafeteria is open until around eleven at night. We're well before that. And I know for a fact that there we can speak freely about any and everything." Parker shook his head slowly before continuing. "But I don't want you to feel pressured. I want you to know that I am more than willing to take things completely at your pace. We can go up there and have a meal and come back here for a run if you'd like. Or we could run there. The mountain is completely secure, and we don't have to worry about others seeing us."

I sighed at the thought. That sounded so wonderful. I was a Bengal tiger shifter. We weren't native to Montana. If I was spotted by a tourist, it would cause massive amounts of hysteria.

"Okay, I'm all for the mountain. I would love to ask you questions that we can't really discuss around humans. And going for a run where I don't have to worry about being spotted by a human that is somewhere where they're not supposed to be sounds wonderful." It really did. I couldn't imagine having the freedom to do such a thing with my mate.

That was what prides were for, and although Alpha War had den lands and Alpha Forest had pack lands, they were both able to shift and not really worry too much. Their animals were from the area, and if there happened to be a human that was trespassing and they spotted one of them or their pack or den members, it wasn't too big of a deal. A Bengal tiger though? Yeah, I didn't belong anywhere here except in the zoos, and that was an entirely different can of worms.

“Then to Treasure Ridge we’ll go.” Parker put the vehicle in reverse and backed away from my tiny little cabin. “Did you want to eat at the council? Or I could cook for you. It’s completely your choice. I don’t want you to feel pressured in any way.”

I didn’t. I knew that Parker was going out of his way to reassure me, but he didn’t need to. He was my mate, and I knew he and his lion both only wanted to make me happy. At least, I really hoped that he was such a man. He was part of the paranormal council, so I hoped that he was a good man.

“I can’t get into the council building, so maybe you could cook for me? Or we could cook together?”

Parker glanced at me, then refocused on the road. “Well, I can get you into the council building. That won’t be an issue in any way. But if you wish to cook together, that can be arranged. I’ll let you decide what you ultimately would prefer.”

I knew exactly what I wanted to say. I really wanted to see Parker’s space. He lived on the mountain, so he had his own place, right? I knew that there was enforcer housing. Did he live there too?

“Do you have an apartment there or something? Or a roommate?”

“I’m technically not an enforcer, but I do live in what’s been dubbed single enforcer housing.” Parker gave me a killer smile, and I couldn’t help but return the expression. “I do have a neighbor, but only on one side because I live in an end unit. We can either eat at the council, which I honestly recommend because they have amazing cooks, and there’s several different things to choose from. Or I can cook for you.”

“The council sounds good. As long as I can get in.” I shrugged. I’d definitely give it a try.

“You won’t regret it. I’ll need to stop by my place to grab my badge. I can’t get inside the building without it. They’re looking into other options, but for now, the chipped badges seem to work the easiest. But once inside, I just have to sign

you in.” Parker pulled into a different driveway, then parked around the back of a large garage. There were several other vehicles parked there, and I was curious about them. Was this a public parking area that I didn’t know about?

“Where are we?” I asked, looking around. There was a gorgeous house not far from the garage that was connected by an enclosed breezeway.

“We’re at the dragons’ cabin. They don’t live here, but for quite some time, they used to come down from the mountain and needed somewhere to suddenly appear. They have a warlock in their family, and he’d bring them down, and they’d do their shopping and stuff. Then take them and their things back up to the mountaintop. They’ve offered the property for us to park and then use the buildings to be transported.” Parker turned off the vehicle and undid his seat belt. “Come on, you’ll see.”

I did the same and slid from the SUV and stood there waiting as he locked the doors. I knew that although the vehicle was on private property, that wouldn’t stop humans or even other shifters. There were dishonest ones in every bunch; it wasn’t saved for just humans.

Parker joined me on the passenger side, and when he touched the middle of my back, I couldn’t help but shiver just a bit. It wasn’t because I was cold. That was almost impossible with how warm it was. No, it was because my mate was touching me and being an absolute gentleman. He guided me into the garage, using a code to unlock the door. Once inside, he picked up what looked to be a landline phone that was on the wall and waited.

“Yes. Two. My mate and myself will be spending at least part of the evening on the mountain,” Parker said into the phone. He nodded, then hung up.

“Claude will be down in just a moment. There are a few that are coming from the council building, and he’ll be bringing them down to us.”

I nodded, then glanced around the building. There were several very high-end SUVs in the garage. Not a single one of

them was small either. Then again, dragons. They were large in both forms.

“Does he just—” I was cut off by the sudden appearance of several people appearing in the garage with us. Parker smiled at them, even waved to one, before he once again touched my back and led me over to where a tall and slender man was standing.

“Is this your mate, then?” he asked. I couldn’t help but smile.

“He is. This is Markus,” Parker told the warlock. “This is Claude. He’s part of the dragon thunder that settled the area,” my mate told me.

I held out my hand in greeting. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Claude said.

I wondered what it would be like to be in an area for so long. I knew that the dragons had settled on this mountain a long time ago. Centuries ago. But it wasn’t until very recently that the council formed here. I had wondered on more than one occasion why here. Why not somewhere more exciting? But then I would get to thinking that perhaps somewhere in the middle of nowhere wasn’t exactly a bad thing. It made it easier to hide at times.

I felt that funny stomach roll, and we were suddenly in another place. This was a much smaller room, one that would most likely only hold maybe a dozen people at most.

“Enjoy your evening, gentlemen. If you need to get back down off of the mountain, be sure to call. I believe one of the hellhounds is on duty this evening,” Claude told us.

“I will, Claude. Thank you,” Parker said.

“It was nice to meet you,” I managed to get out. I was still holding my stomach though. It suddenly didn’t know if it was happy or not. Mostly not. Perhaps a short walk would help; I couldn’t be sure though. I didn’t particularly care to travel the warlock way. I’d done it a few times, but I happened to be of the same mind as Alpha War, and I didn’t care to go poofing around, as he put it.

“Are you all right?” Parker asked suddenly.

I nodded. “Just a bit of a flipping stomach still. Do you think we could go for a short walk?”

“Of course,” Parker said. He once again placed his hand on my back and gestured me through the door. It was a bit cooler up here on the mountain, and the air smelled amazing, which helped my stomach immensely. One couldn’t miss the council building. It was rather large and full of windows, despite being on top of a mountain in Montana.

“It’s about a ten-minute walk to my place, where I left my badge.”

Ten minutes there, ten back, that was more than enough time to give my stomach a rest. “Sounds good.” We started walking along the paved path, and I got a sense of déjà vu. I’d been here before, but it had been quite a while ago, and the paths then were dirt. Now it was paved, and they were definitely wider. “It’s changed a lot since I was here last.”

“It’s a bit funny, really. With Master Edison being as powerful as he is, we’re still making slow progress on a lot of things here. The council has to be sure that if by some chance the place is discovered by humans, we have everything covered. To suddenly discover an organization on top of a mountain would certainly raise marinara flags, and knowing the human government, they would immediately accuse the takeover route.”

As scary as that thought was, I knew that Parker was right. If not some sort of governing organization, then what else could this place possibly be?

“Do you like it here?” I asked. “On the mountain, I mean?” I remembered Parker mentioning that he’d not left the mountain often. I saw a couple of buildings behind the council building as we passed around it and wondered what they were. I remembered they definitely weren’t here the last time I was. But that was some time ago.

“I do. Don’t get me wrong, I love my family and do miss my pride in Washington, but there is a lot more freedom here. I

work only with other paranormals or humans that are informed. We don't have to hide who we are, and it's not an issue to strip and go out onto your own back deck and shift before taking off and running. My lion isn't exactly small, and he's not naturally found here. Or in Seattle, for that matter."

I snorted, and Parker looked at me in question.

"I was just thinking something very similar on the drive to the cabin. There are no tigers here. Not in Nebraska either. Not unless one escapes from a zoo or wildlife place." I didn't wish to think about either of those places.

"No, there wouldn't be. But up here, you could easily see a hellhound running, a dragon flying, or even a gargoyle flying."

"Gargoyle? I didn't know the council had gargoyles."

Parker chuckled, then gestured for me to take the path to our left.

"We have a few. There's all kinds. And Treasure Falls has the dragons flying every evening. It's a truly moving sight to see. If you'd like, we can run that direction, and they will most likely be there." Parker smiled over at me.

"That would be nice. I don't think I've ever seen a dragon shifted. Maybe, once or twice...possibly."

Parker sent me a questioning look.

"In Nebraska, there was more than once I would have sworn that a dragon was flying around in the sky at night. But when I sat and waited, I couldn't see more than a fleeting glance."

Parker smiled. "They're large but stealthy. You wouldn't think so, but yeah, they are amazing at hiding while in the sky. Especially at night."

In front of us were several large buildings, and it was obvious that there were multiple units in each. They were two stories, and when Parker took me to the far right of one of them, he pulled out his keys and unlocked the door.

"You're welcome to come in. My badge is in my bedroom. But you can come in if you want."

I nodded because I definitely wanted to. I was immediately engulfed in my mate's amazing scent once we moved through the door. I closed my eyes briefly and somehow managed to keep from moaning at the scent of my mate's place.

"Come on in. I'll run upstairs quick and be right back. But my space is yours. I have nothing to hide from you."

I walked in a bit farther but didn't necessarily feel comfortable enough snooping around. There was a somewhat hallway that I could see led to a larger room. I did happen to notice several things on the walls, and when I looked at them, I realized they were pictures of my mate with several others. There was definitely a family resemblance, and I couldn't help but smile at the pictures. I was getting a little bit of insight into my mate's family, even if I didn't know who any of them really were.

"That's my parents. They'll love you, trust me," Parker told me when he rejoined me. I tore my gaze away from the picture of Parker with a man that looked exactly like my mate except for his eye color. That I'd seen had come from his mother, who had beautiful long blonde hair.

"Do you miss them?"

"Yes and no. I keep busy and don't have a whole lot of time to really miss them. But we talk at least once a week. They understand that I needed to move and why."

Did my mate being too busy to miss his family mean he wouldn't have time to spend with me? I didn't want to be in a relationship where I was an afterthought. Sure, I was forty-four and working on my degree still. But I lived in a tiny little cabin and didn't really have much else to do. I didn't really have family anymore.

"You're close to them, then?"

"As close as distance will allow. I'm eighty-eight and the youngest. I have my oldest brother, Will," Parker said, pointing to another picture. In it were two men and several others. I wasn't sure who all was whom, but maybe Parker

would elaborate? “The guy with him is his mate, Jesse. Those are three of their kids.”

“Wow. They’ve been mated a while, then?” I asked. The adults all looked to be about the same age.

“Yeah. Since before I was even born, actually.” Parker moved to another picture. “This is my only sister, Nelly. Her mate is Chris. The little girl with them is their only one. They’ve been mated for four years. Nelly is happy with just the one, despite my parents’ grumbles.”

I didn’t understand that. Why did parents always push for children to have a bunch of offspring? Sure, I wanted kids. But I was an omega, and therefore, I knew I’d be the one carrying them. Despite that though, I didn’t want a dozen kids.

“Are your parents pushy?” Parker looked at me, a bit confused, I could tell. “About grandkids? If they want more little ones running around, why don’t they have more?” I asked.

Parker shook his head. “Mom wasn’t able after me. Nothing happened, from what I understand. She just wasn’t able to have more after me. I know they tried, but it just didn’t happen.”

I nodded in understanding. I knew that, eventually, I would stop having heats. It wasn’t that I’d had centuries of them yet, but I knew I wasn’t going to want to have them for an indefinite amount of time.

“This last picture is Martin and his mate, Kara. He’s closest in age to me. Martin was only twelve when I was born, which means he’s a hundred now. Kara is almost twice that, but they only have the twins there.”

The twins in question were identical-looking girls. They were probably around fifteen or sixteen, and they looked exactly like their mother, right down to the red hair and freckles. Parker pointed to a family picture that looked very relaxed and informal. They were on the beach somewhere though, and I smiled at the happiness that could be felt through the image.

“Your family sounds amazing. Don’t expect to meet mine though,” I said, sighing. I tried not to let my mood drop, and I had gotten over my family being how they were a long time ago. But that didn’t mean it didn’t sting a bit when I was faced with such a beautiful family like my mate’s.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Parker asked, his hand gently touching my shoulder. I reached up and grabbed his fingers, giving them a squeeze before I gave him a forced smile.

“Not much to say. I have two sisters, both older. They left the pride as soon as they could, and I’ve heard they are mated now. We don’t have contact.” I shrugged, thinking about my family. “I was the only son and a disappointment because I’m an omega and my father wanted an alpha son.” I met Parker’s gaze. He was my mate, and he would know soon enough, so why not just put it all out there? “The final straw was when I got caught with the alpha’s son. He had been relentless in his pursuit, and I finally caved.” I snorted, thinking back to that night. “That was my mistake, I guess. I had enough time to pack my things and then left. I haven’t been back since.”

I could tell that Parker was upset. His scent changed. I took a chance and reached out for his hand. I easily laced our fingers together and gave his a squeeze.

“It’s all right. I really don’t miss them. And although I’ve made a few mistakes along the way, I like to think that they’ve made me a stronger person. I’m almost finished with my degree, and I have a job I really like. My coworkers are great.” I thought about the office. “Well, except for Max. He’s a bit of a busybody, but I think that’s because he’s the only human and, apparently, the only straight one in the office.”

Parker chuckled. “Does he have issue with any of you all?”

I shook my head. “Naw. He just feels like we’re part of some secret club or something because we’re so much closer to each other except for him. But he’s married and has a couple of kids. He’s asked to get together for playdates with Gage’s kids, but Gage always puts him off.” Not that I blamed

him. It wasn't really a good idea to put human kids around shifter kids when older siblings were just starting to shift.

"We'll worry about Max and everything else later. Are you ready for a meal?" Parker asked, bringing our joined hands up. He brought them to his mouth and quickly kissed the back of mine, sending shivers through my body.

"Food is probably good." And in all honesty, it was probably better if we got out of here. I wanted to explore Parker's place more, but what I really wanted to do was explore Parker. Food first, I kept telling myself. We would need food for energy, right?

"Then food it is." Parker gave me one of his gorgeous smiles, and I couldn't help but return it. We left his house, holding hands, and it felt completely normal.

CHAPTER 5

PARKER



I just wanted to wrap my mate up and protect him from all of the ugliness of the world. It took a lot to not react when he told me about his parents and birth pride. I'd been warned, and honestly, I'd expected to have to wait to know more about them. We'd not even had our first date yet, and he was already sharing with me how he'd been treated.

We left my place at exactly the wrong time because, of course, West was walking up the walkway to his own place. I wanted to groan but didn't. He wasn't a bad man. He was certainly trustworthy and a good enforcer. But I wasn't quite ready to share my mate with others just yet. Now that I thought about it, maybe I should take Markus back inside so we could have some privacy.

"Hey, Parker!" West called out, immediately cutting across the grass toward us. I couldn't completely keep my quiet growl in, and I knew that Markus heard it, at least. If West had, he didn't let on because the smile never dropped from his face.

"Hi, West," I said as I pulled Markus just a bit closer. I really hoped he didn't mind. I couldn't quite help it. My mate was still unclaimed, and my lion was going to be a bit irrational until Markus was wearing our claiming bite.

West glanced between us before he tilted his head to the side. "You're not one to normally bring others here. He must be important?"

I rolled my eyes and looked over at my mate. “Markus, this is my nosy neighbor West.” I looked back to the wolf shifter and narrowed my eyes. “West, this is my mate, Markus.”

“Mate?” West said, his eyebrows rising. “So it’s true, then?”

I wasn’t sure what that meant, but I was about to find out. “What’s true?”

“That you found your mate. It’s been big news all day at the council. Lots of the unmated enforcers are upset because here you are, finding yours down in Honey Creek while they’re going out to all of these assignments, and still nothing.”

I sighed. Markus leaned into my side a bit more.

“Well, from what I understand, we get paired when the timing is right,” Markus said. “It was nice to meet you, West, but we’re about to go get something to eat.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” West warned. Markus had started walking away, tugging me with him, but stopped.

“Why not?” I asked.

“You aren’t going to get much peace if you two go to the cafeteria. Especially not with how cute he is.”

I did growl that time. West immediately raised both hands out and took a step back.

“Dude. I’m not after your mate. But you two are going to be stared at during the entire meal.”

“Didn’t you say we could cook together?” Markus asked.

I looked at my mate, a bit surprised because he hadn’t really seemed all that comfortable in my place.

“We can but don’t have to. There’s always the diner or restaurant down off of the mountain.”

Markus shook his head, then tugged me back toward my door. “It was nice to meet you, West,” Markus called out. I looked over my shoulder at the enforcer, who threw me a

cheesy grin and gave me two thumbs up. I rolled my eyes and had to wonder if what he'd said had been true or if he was simply trying to help by getting me and my mate back into my place.

“Are you sure?” I asked as I pulled out my keys again and unlocked my door.

“I am. We can cook here, then we can go for a walk, and you can show me around the mountain. When I was here, the council had just formed, and there wasn't anything except the council building, from what I could tell. I'm sure there were enforcers though, so maybe these houses were here then?”

I shrugged. The door opened, and I pushed it all the way open for Markus to enter. I closed it behind us, and since my mate didn't take the initiative, I led us inside. We went down the hallway, and this time, he followed me out into the large back room. It was an open floor plan, and there was only a counter breaking up the space between the kitchen and living area.

“I did buy steaks,” I told Markus as I moved toward the kitchen. Immediately, I opened the fridge and pulled out the pack of steaks I'd picked up earlier.

“Steaks are always good. I eat everything, and so you know, I love pizza. I'm a bit lazy at times and pick up a pizza on the way home from work because as far as I'm concerned, it's all of the food groups, and I save time by not having to cook and then clean.”

I chuckled at that. “It used to be super easy for me to do that in Seattle. I didn't live on the pride lands, and I had an apartment there. I would stop and pick something up frequently, so I understand where you're coming from.”

I held up the steaks in one hand and a bag of vegetables in the other.

“What are those for?” Markus asked, pointing to the produce.

“Salad? You said you eat everything.”

My mate nodded. “I do. Did you want me to do salads? What else did you want? I’m not sure where anything is though, so you will need to help with that.”

I grinned. I could certainly do that. I set everything on the counter and quickly pulled out the cutting board, as well as two bowls. “I’ll go get the grill started,” I told him. “It won’t take long to cook the steaks, unless you like yours well done or something.”

I really hoped that wasn’t the case, but it was always a possibility. The face Markus gave me was actually a relief though.

“Who eats their steak well done?”

I shook my head slowly. “So many people,” I said. I didn’t get it either, but people liked what they liked, and I wasn’t going to be the one to tell them differently. They weren’t hurting me by liking their meat overcooked. “I’ll be back in a few,” I said and hurried to the back door. I had a small deck—we all did—and I’d chosen to put a lounge on it on one side, and the other had my small propane grill. It didn’t take up a lot of space since it was small, which was a good thing. I didn’t need a massive grill. It was just me.

I pulled off the cover, checked the grill for anything amiss, then started it. Once it was going, I used the scraper to scratch at the cast-iron grate and then went back inside to prep the steaks. I found my mate humming while he sliced up the head of lettuce. He had the tomatoes and the cucumber laid out on the counter in front of him to prep next.

“Do you like your steaks seasoned?” I asked.

“Yep,” Markus responded, looking up long enough to offer a quick smile. I tried to calm my lion. Even though I was in agreement that I could definitely get used to my mate being in our space, it was still very early days yet, and this was only our first date. There was no guarantee that my mate would be on board with claiming each other anytime soon. We’d not gotten to know one another yet. That was why we were having a date.

I washed my hands and quickly got to seasoning the steaks. I took them and a pair of tongs out to the back deck, leaving the back door open so I could listen for my mate. The meat immediately started sizzling when I dropped them onto the grate, and I set the tongs on the side space and went back in for a clean plate, which I'd forgotten. Markus had seemed to get over his shyness and was rummaging through my refrigerator. He turned and held out a pair of beers. "Do you mind?" he asked.

"Not at all. I didn't know what you would want, and I got a bottle of wine earlier. It's in there as well," I told him as I pulled down a trio of plates, one for me to bring the steaks in and one for each of our meals.

"Naw. I'm more of a beer guy, to be honest. I like wine just fine, but none of it really has much of an effect on me."

It was the same for most shifters, sadly. But that didn't mean I didn't enjoy the taste of a good beer every now and then. Mostly I drank water or coffee, but I definitely enjoyed beer from time to time.

"Is the bread for us?" Markus asked, pointing to the fresh loaf that I'd picked up earlier.

"It is. And there's potatoes that will cook in three minutes somehow. I'm not sure about that exactly, but I guess it has to do with how they're packaged." I pointed to the potatoes, and Markus nodded. He went to the cupboard and pulled down another plate to put the potatoes on before placing them in the microwave.

"Are the steaks all right?" Markus asked.

"Shit," I said, hurrying off to the grill. They wouldn't be burnt or anything, but I didn't want to overcook them. I quickly flipped them, trusting that my mate would work on everything else in the kitchen. I felt bad about that because he was obviously doing so much more than I was, and we were supposed to be cooking together.

I couldn't keep away from the door and kept peeking inside, stealing glances at my mate. He was completely

wrapped up in what he was doing. I leaned in so I could peek toward the small table I had. He'd set it already; there were the plates and salad bowls there. When I looked back to Markus, I saw he was slicing the bread and tossing it into a bowl.

I went back to the steaks, and after waiting for several minutes that felt like an eternity to me, I finally deemed them finished and turned off the grill before I pulled the steaks off. I placed them on the plate and carried it into the house. Markus was bringing another plate to the small table, and I quickly realized I was going to need a larger place for us to eat. I'd left a lot of my furniture in Seattle in storage with every intention of going back and bringing it here once I was settled. Except that hadn't happened. The place had come with a lot of basic pieces, the small table and two chairs one of them.

"Here you go," I said, placing the larger steak on Markus's plate and then taking the other for myself. I took the now empty plate and tongs to the sink and placed them inside with the other items that Markus had used. When I returned to the table, I found my mate standing beside it still. I went to the chair and pulled it out, hoping he would sit. "Did I forget something?" I asked.

"No, I just didn't know which side you usually eat at."

I nodded, gestured to the chair, and helped my mate sit. Once I was settled across from him, I grinned. "I usually either eat standing in the kitchen or on the couch if I'm eating here. Otherwise, it's at the cafeteria, and I'll sometimes sit with others, sometimes alone. It just depends."

Markus nodded once, then picked up his silverware. I watched as he cut into his steak and took his first bite. Was I professional chef level? No, but I didn't care to be either. My mate closed his eyes and groaned around his bite of steak, and that was good enough for me. I couldn't help but smile. It pleased both me and my lion that our mate was happy with the food I'd helped prepare for him.

"This is so good. I need to grill more," Markus said.

"Personally, I think grilling is so much easier than all of the inside stuff. You did so much more than I did, and I feel

bad because we were supposed to be cooking together.”

Markus made a face, then snorted. “You are my mate. Do you really think that we won’t have lots of opportunities to cook meals together?”

I sure hoped we would. “So, tell me about you. Other than you want to cook with me, which I’m more than willing to make happen.”

Markus shrugged. “Not much to tell. I’m close to finishing my degree finally. I had thought I would be a teacher or something along those lines. I know that the shifter school is still looking for teachers. But now that I’ve met you...” Markus trailed off and shook his head.

“Hey now.” I reached for my mate’s hand, and when he met my gaze, I gave it a squeeze. “If you want to finish your degree and become a teacher, I’m completely supportive of that.”

Markus shook his head again. “Not really, no. I just knew I needed to have a job so I could support myself. I hate waiting on tables. The tips weren’t terrible, but it’s just not really what I wanted to do. And I actually really like my job at the sheriff’s department. It’s not difficult, and it pays well.”

“Then why leave there?” I asked, confused.

Markus appeared surprised. “Seriously?”

“Well, yeah. Why would you need to leave?”

“Because we...” Markus stopped abruptly, then pulled his hand from mine. “Oh. I just thought we would...”

I was becoming a bit frustrated with the half sentences.

“We would what?”

“Nothing.”

Markus picked up his fork and stabbed at his salad with a bit too much force. We both cringed when the fork hit the bottom of his bowl.

“No, not nothing. What? We can’t have a conversation unless you tell me what you were going to say.”

Markus set the fork down to where it was resting in the bowl and looked at me. "I'm an omega."

I nodded. That was obvious to both me and my lion.

"The only thing I've really ever wanted was to have a family. One that I could love and would love me back. My own never did, and I want that."

I wasn't really seeing that as being an issue. "Why is that a bad thing? There are lots of omegas that raise families. Most of them to some extent, to be honest. It's how we get more little alphas and omegas." I wasn't sure what was going through Markus's mind right now, but I needed to.

"It's not really a bad thing, I guess. I just didn't expect to find my mate so soon." Markus shrugged again. "I didn't get to take much when I left my pride."

From the sound of it, he hadn't left his pride. It sounded more like he was kicked out, but I wasn't going to mention that at the moment.

"That's all right. We all start somewhere," I said, hoping to reassure him.

"Yeah, but I have almost no savings. I'll need to work."

I nodded slowly. I was trying to follow along and was struggling a bit until it finally hit me. He was worried about being a burden. I reached for Markus's hand again and waited. When he finally noticed, he glanced at me before he relented and placed his hand in mine once more.

"Markus, I'm not worried about any of that. I'm eighty-eight, and I've had a while to save up funds. Not only that but each of my siblings and I were given a good amount from my dad's parents. They're gone now, and we were all gifted quite a bit of money." Most didn't know it, but I didn't have to work. I only did because I needed something to keep my mind occupied. I loved the idea of working for the council and bringing those that did wrong to justice.

"I don't...I wouldn't want you or your family to think that I'm after your money."

I rolled my eyes and gave Markus's hand a squeeze, grabbing his attention when he looked outside. "I'm not worried about it. If you want to quit your job and raise kids, which I really hope you want, then I'm all for it. If you wish to work, there's a daycare here that is open now, and several of the mated enforcers are putting their kids in there. If not, I'm all for you staying home. You don't have to do a thing. I'm more than capable of taking care of you and our children."

I was and would be incredibly happy if he chose to work or stay home. Just as long as he was happy and it was what he wanted.

"Yeah?"

I nodded. "Yes. If you want to spend your days working, I'll meet you for lunch as often as I can. If you want to stay home, I'll come home and join you for lunch if I'm not busy. My work seems to either be crazy busy or incredibly slow. Right now, we're working on investigating a pack in Mississippi, a pack in Utah, and a den in Alaska, off of the top of my head." I tried to think about all of the files that had come across my desk in the past week, but there were just too many. "Oh, and a coven in Florida. Of the vampire variety. Those are always fun to deal with."

"You're busy."

I nodded. We were, which was why I didn't have any issues with giving Marc a place on my team. I could definitely use his help.

"We're always busy, it seems. But when people like those in Mississippi need to be questioned, a lot of time they're really not nice people, and I end up working odd hours." I hoped that wouldn't be an issue. I knew that I would get time off of work to strengthen our bond once we claimed each other, but we weren't there yet. Hopefully soon.

"You want kids? You mentioned that you hoped I wanted them."

I nodded. Markus smiled.

“I do too.” Markus bit his lower lip. He was nervous about something, but until he told me, I wouldn’t know. It would be such a relief once we claimed each other and I would be able to talk to him through our bond. “I want a couple. Not a whole football team or anything, but I’d like two or three.”

I couldn’t help but smile at that. The thought of having a few children with my mate had my lion rumbling in my mind. He was definitely on board with that idea.

“We can have them whenever you wish. You are the one who has to carry them, so I am of the mind that you get to say when.”

Markus nodded. “We’ll have the first right away,” Markus told me. I knew what he meant. It was just how things worked for us. We were simply wired differently than humans. We were fated; we knew that we were a match and that the timing was supposed to be right. Things had changed drastically when the fate Thomas had found his own mate finally.

“We will. I’d say that we can try to prevent that, but even I know that rarely works.”

Markus snorted again. “Yeah, Arik said the suppressors that I’m taking will work next time, but my first heat after you claim me, they won’t really work.”

I wasn’t sure I cared for my mate taking suppressors, but again, it was his body, and he could make those decisions. As long as they were safe.

“Right away isn’t an issue.” I glanced around the house I’d called home for the past couple of years. “This is single enforcer housing. We will be given the opportunity to pick a house in mated enforcer housing if you want. Or we can find somewhere off of the mountain.” I didn’t want my mate so far away from me during the day, but I wasn’t going to be controlling. We would live wherever he was most comfortable.

Markus shook his head. “Here is probably better. You were saying it’s safer here.”

I nodded. It was. We could be completely open here. There were pregnant omegas that would walk from their house to the

council building to join their mates for the midday meal. It wasn't an issue. There were hellhounds and wolves running side by side. We didn't have to worry about being seen here.

"If you want here, we can do here."

"That sounds good," Markus said. The silence between us stretched for a moment before he shocked me. "When?"

"When what?"

"When will we claim each other?"

Oh. That. I wanted to say now, but I knew that wasn't the proper thing to say. "Whenever you want. I'll be given a month off to strengthen our bond. But when it all happens is up to you. I don't want you to feel pressured or anything. I'm willing to wait because you're worth it, Markus."

"Okay," Markus said, then picked up his fork and went back to eating. Okay? Okay what? I really wanted to claim my mate so I could know exactly what he was thinking. I picked up my own fork and winced a bit at the now cold steak. It was my own fault though. We should have talked before we ate. But since Markus wasn't complaining even a little, I wasn't going to say anything. I even caught a grin from my mate while he was chewing a bite of food.

This was turning into one of the oddest days of my life. I couldn't wait to find out what else would happen with my mate.

CHAPTER 6

MARKUS



I kept telling myself that it was best to let things happen naturally. I wasn't going to push. Things would happen when they were supposed to. Forget the fact that I was already falling for my mate. How sad was it that I'd never been treated as Parker was treating me? He was kind, courteous, and such a gentleman. He always seemed to be checking in on me, and I most definitely noticed he gave me the larger steak.

We finished our meal, and although it was cold by the time we both took our last bites, it was still the best I'd ever had. I would forever remember this time with Parker. I knew we would have many more moments, but this one would always be the first.

I had to argue a bit and insisted I helped clean up, but in the end, I conceded, and we left the dishes in the sink and went out the back door to go for a walk.

"Do you like living up here?" I asked as we rounded the house and ended up going toward the council building.

"I do. It's secure, and we can be ourselves. I love that. Even in Seattle, we had to be careful while on pride lands. The actual pride lands are outside of the city, but it is such an overly populated area, and the air traffic is a serious threat."

That made sense. "Nebraska wasn't anything like that. Our pride was literally in the middle of nowhere. I know that the state police always assumed we were some sort of cult or something. We were just there, in the middle of hundreds of

acres. I'm not even really sure how the pride earned money, but they always seemed to have plenty of it."

Parker looked as if he wanted to say something but held himself back.

"What?"

"It's nothing too serious. I was curious if you'd like me to look into it?"

I shook my head. "I wouldn't want you to get into trouble or anything."

Parker touched my shoulder, and I stopped walking, but unfortunately, he quickly dropped his hand. "I wouldn't get into trouble."

I shook my head again. "I've already been told the alpha and his inner circle have been replaced. They're not going to come after me or anything, and honestly, I'm just happy they can't hurt anyone else. I appreciate the offer though."

I thought about it for a fraction of a second and took a chance. I moved closer to Parker and wrapped my arm around his waist and held on. Immediately, his arm went around my shoulders, and I had to fight back a moan at the scent of my mate. Why did he smell so incredibly good?

"You're welcome to look into them if you want. I'll answer any questions I can, but I didn't really know much about what was happening with the pride. I just tried to stay out of the way and go as unnoticed as I could."

Parker pulled me a little closer before he loosened his hold on me. I smiled at the subtle hug. We had made it to the paved pathway, and I wondered why it was as wide as it was until I heard a noise coming up behind us, and Parker immediately pulled me over to the side. I watched, completely fascinated, as an off-road vehicle came by. There were two men in the front and one sitting in the back. The one looked vaguely familiar, but I honestly couldn't tell you who they were.

"Umm...who was that?" I asked.

“That was Reinhold driving, and in the passenger seat was his brother, Emmerich. In the back was Emmerich’s mate, Master Ambrosius. They’re obviously finished for the day and are on their way home.”

Master Ambrosius. That’s why he looked familiar. I’d met him in New Orleans when I was basically rescued. They were at the café and were the ones I’d left the note for.

“I met him once,” I told Parker. “When they rescued me.”

“Yeah? Did you want to meet him again?”

I shook my head. I didn’t need to. Not that he wasn’t nice. He truly was. But I didn’t have a thing in common with the created vampire, and I didn’t feel like I was worthy of hanging out with the created ones.

“Hey, do you know who the created tiger is?” I asked suddenly.

“I do. His name is Alpha Emir. Have you not met him?”

“No. I didn’t even know his name.” I thought about my birth pride. “I don’t know who the created lion is either.”

“That’s Alpha Amari. He, too, is incredibly nice. You’ll get to meet both of them and their mates in time.” Parker pulled me back onto the path, but I shook my head and tugged against him. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t need to meet them. I’m good with just knowing their names.”

Parker brought his hands up to my face and gently held me in place. I thought for sure I was finally going to get a kiss from him and even licked my lips in anticipation, but it wasn’t meant to be. There was another noise from our side, and Parker immediately dropped his hands.

“I apologize,” my mate told me.

“Why?” I asked as a pair of wolves came trotting out of the trees not far from where we were.

Parker and I watched them walk away, but it wasn’t until they were out of sight that he finally answered me.

“I apologize because I shouldn’t have done that. I shouldn’t have put us in that position that things could get out of hand.”

I couldn’t help but growl a bit. I loved that my mate was a gentleman, but I was beginning to think he was a bit too much of one.

“Can we go for a run now?” I asked, trying to mask my frustration.

“Sure,” Parker said after staring at me for a long moment.

I took the initiative and started heading back to his place. I knew where it was, and we’d not gotten too far from it, and it only took a few minutes to get there.

“I have a feeling that you are upset. Specifically with me,” Parker said as we rounded the building where his place was.

I shook my head. “Nope. Just anxious to go for a run. It’s been quite some time since I could run freely, actually, and I’d really enjoy it.” I climbed the three steps that went up to his small deck. It wasn’t really large enough for the two of us, but we weren’t going to be here long. I pulled my shirt off over my head and tossed it onto the lounge chair. I glanced at Parker, who was staring at me. I smirked and toed off my shoes, then reached down and pulled off my socks. I shoved them into the shoes and then undid my jeans, but that was as far as I was going to go until my mate started stripping. “So the entire mountaintop is fair game?” I asked, suddenly feeling like a game of chase. My mate was a feline. He should be able to keep up with me.

“Yes. There are several created ones that live in that direction, and we usually give them a wide berth unless we are on patrols, just in case. But the scent of dragon will be strong near them.” Parker pointed in the other direction. “There are a couple that also live close to the falls. Again, more dragon scent.”

I nodded. “Got it,” I said and pushed my jeans down. I stepped out and quickly picked them up, tossing them on top

of my shirt. I winked at Parker, who was standing there with wide eyes.

I went down the few steps, knelt on the ground, and called for my tiger. He was only too happy to come out, and once I was in my fur, I did a good stretch before I looked over my shoulder at my mate. He had pulled off his own shirt, but that was as far as he'd gotten. I gave a little chuff, then trotted off toward the trees. Once I was hidden in the coolness of the canopy they provided, I picked up my speed.

Parker called out behind me, but he didn't sound worried. I kept moving along the downed twigs, pine needles, and the other debris that had collected on the ground.

My movement stumbled just a bit when I heard a loud roar call out. If I had been in human form, I would definitely be laughing at my mate. I might not be a lion, but I definitely knew the roar of one. I grew up being the only tiger, aside from my mother, and it was pushed on me at every opportunity that I wasn't like the rest and would never measure up. I'd since learned that they were right. I wasn't like them. But I could certainly measure up, and I had friends in very good places.

My tiger huffed, wanting to stop in our tracks and wait for our mate so we could get to know each other, but I wanted to run a bit more, so I veered toward the left slightly and put on a bit more speed. My tiger wasn't nearly as large as Wallace's, but he was an alpha, and I was an omega. My small size gave me the ability to squeeze into tighter areas, and I had just leapt over a fallen tree when I heard heavy feet on the forest floor behind me.

A quick glance showed that my mate was closing in fast, and I was an incredibly lucky man. He was gorgeous in not only his human form but his shifted one as well.

There was a brightness coming up ahead, and I took off for it, knowing that if I got out into the open, I would easily be able to outrun my mate. I heard him, even closer now, just as I hit the clearing and saw that it was filled with rocks and grass. It was absolutely perfect for running in at the moment, but

after a good sprint or two, it would also be ideal for taking a quick nap in the warm sun.

I felt Parker touch my tail, and that was all it took for me to put on the speed. I easily sprinted away from my mate, earning another roar from him. This one was quieter but still close.

It felt amazing and so very freeing to be here with my mate. We weren't yet bonded to one another, but that would come soon enough, I was sure. For now though, I was in my own little bit of paradise.

I came to the edge, seeing that it led to a rather steep drop-off, and turned to my right, heading back toward not only my mate but the direction we'd come from.

I found myself with a very large lion rapidly approaching me. I ran right toward him, diving to the left at the last second when he reached out for me. I gave a playful chuff as I trotted away. Parker quickly caught on, and we went back and forth playing tag and chase with each other.

When Parker conceded defeat, he let out a tired-sounding rumble, and I stopped. I saw him take a deep breath and sit heavily on the ground before he fell to his side. He lifted his head, glanced at me, then fell back down again. I did my best to convey laughter as I slowly closed the distance between us. I found myself standing over my mate, who was breathing heavily on his side.

My tiger rumbled a bit, and then I pushed my large head against his shoulder, then into his mane, and took a deep breath. My mate smelled wonderful, and I couldn't wait to be wrapped up in his scent all of the time. For now though, I settled for plopping down beside him and letting out a long sigh.

I was right when I thought that this place would be perfect for taking a nap in the sun, but unfortunately, my mate seemed to have other ideas. I felt him move behind me, and then his nose was pushing into the top of my head. I opened my eyes and looked up at my mate, who seemed to be quite expressive with his eyes.

I grumbled a bit but got to my feet and followed alongside Parker as he started back toward the trees. The opening where we'd entered the clearing was just ahead, and when Parker continued through it, I moved in behind him. I fully expected him to take us back to his place, but instead, he went to the right. Wherever he was leading me took us deeper into the forest.

It was only minutes before I heard water, and my tiger grumbled about how perfect a long drink would be. The water gurgling became louder, and then we were next to a rock formation that had water running down it, pooling at the base of the rocks. They ran off toward the left at a slow pace, the creek slowly getting wider as it got farther away.

I followed Parker over to the small pool, and when he lowered his mouth and started drinking, I moved up beside him and did the same. My tiger was correct—a long drink was perfect at the moment.

Once Parker had his fill, I lapped a few more times before I stood and then sat and stared at my mate. I would love to be mated already and to be able to communicate through our bond, but we'd not had that opportunity yet. I had to keep telling my tiger it would happen in time. He just needed to be patient.

Parker moved closer, his lion rubbing his head along the side of mine, marking me for all to scent. I grinned, doing the same to him. I could definitely get used to spending time together in our shifted forms. I'd never had this. Not really. Of course, I'd shifted with the pride, but I'd always been the outsider. My mother didn't join in the pride runs, and that left only me there as the oddball.

I was enjoying the head butting and had even started chuffing, but too soon, Parker moved back a bit and started to walk away. He took a few steps before he looked at me over his shoulder, then took another step.

I got the hint and stood, following him as he led us back to the trail that would take us wherever he wanted to go. It didn't take long for me to understand he was leading us back to his

place. I hadn't picked up on the aromas around us in the forest before, but the scent of wolves and bears was heavy in the area. The faint scent of my mate, as well as a few others, was in the area, but I couldn't quite pick up on what they were. Something I'd not scented before, which had me wondering who had been in the forest.

I followed Parker to the tree line, then across the small backyard that he shared with the others. There was movement to the right, and a quick look showed a bear that seemed to just be setting out on his way into the forest.

I was so busy staring at the bear that I hadn't noticed that Parker had stopped at the bottom of the stairs to his deck, and I ran smack into his backside. I did my best to appear apologetic, but it wasn't much use. I couldn't quite communicate the way Parker seemed to be able to. Instead, I took another deep breath, trying to commit my mate's scent to memory before I told my tiger to let our human half come back out.

I felt the familiar tingle across my fur, and in moments, I was kneeling on the ground just beside my mate. When I looked up, he moved closer, and I couldn't help but reach out and bury my fingers in his thick brown mane.

"You're absolutely gorgeous, Parker. In both forms," I told him. I found his ear with my right hand and gave it a little rub before I pulled my hands free, then stood.

I went back up the small deck and reached for my jeans. I heard Parker shifting while I pulled them up my legs, then carefully tucked certain parts before pulling the zipper up and buttoning them. He was on the stairs while I reached for my shirt. Of course, I stole a glance at my mate when he leaned down and reached for his own pair of jeans. I had to take several deep breaths and then quietly clear my throat before I could speak.

"Thanks for the run—I had fun," I said. It was safe. I didn't want to mention my mate's amazing body and how I really wanted to climb him like a tree and have some fun. It had been entirely too long since I'd been fucked, and I had a

feeling it was going to be painful while waiting for my mate to claim me.

“I did too.” Parker carefully pulled his own jeans up his legs, then fastened them. It was a pity that he was covering things up, especially since, like me, he was at least half-hard. But we were shifters, and we were used to ignoring things of that nature. “I’m sorry I tired so quickly. I’d gone for a long run earlier this afternoon with Brice, Atticus, and a couple of the other hellhounds.”

I slid my arms into the armholes, then pulled my shirt over my head. “Was that the scent in the forest there, then?” I asked.

“Just here?” Parker asked. I nodded. “Most likely. The hellhounds can mask their scent, but they also seem to be able to change it. It’s not quite the same as what they’re changing it to, but it’s close. But yeah, we all met here and then took off for a long run. When we got back, they went their way, and I came here and tried to keep myself busy until I could pick you up.”

I sent Parker a smile while I sat and picked up my shoes. I had my socks and shoes on in seconds, shoving my feet into them and then standing.

“I’ve had a lot of fun today. Thanks for the date,” I said.

Parker reached for his own shirt and quickly pulled it on over his head. “That sounds like you’re ready to get out of here.” Parker’s smile fell, making me feel bad.

“Not at all. I just figured you would need to get up early for work, and I do as well. Sure, we’re adults, but...work calls and all that fun adulting stuff.”

Immediately, I knew I’d said the wrong thing. Parker nodded once, picked up his shoes, then quickly entered the house through the door. He left it open, and I followed, quietly closing it behind me. He dropped the shoes beside the couch, then continued on to the hallway. I hurried to catch up, then did the exact same thing I’d done before when I wasn’t paying

quite enough attention when we first came back from our run: I ran into the back of my mate when he suddenly stopped.

If not for the door in front of us, I would have knocked him over. As it was, I somehow managed to pin my mate between me and the door, and I couldn't quite control my body when it pushed into him just a bit more. Parker moaned, and that seemed to be the only encouragement I needed. I leaned in and nipped at the back of his neck, following that up with a kiss.

In a blink, our positions were reversed, and I found my back against the door with my mate pinning me to it with his body. I sighed, but that quickly turned into a moan when Parker's mouth found my neck. "Tell me to stop," he whispered.

"Why would I do that?" I managed to whisper. Seriously. Why would I want him to stop? If anything, I wanted him to continue. Preferably with less clothing and us on a flat surface somewhere.

Parker took me at my word and moved his lips across my neck to the underside of my jaw, and then finally, they touched mine, and my world tilted on its axis. My mate was finally kissing me, and it was more than I'd ever dreamed it could be. His lips were soft yet firm, and his taste sent tingles through my mouth. I moaned as his hands ran down my arms until he found my hands and laced our fingers together. When he brought them up above my head and held them to the door there, I groaned and pushed my hips forward, really hoping he understood what I was asking for.

CHAPTER 7

PARKER



I was going to be a gentleman. I'd been doing so well with that too. Until Markus had pushed into my back and pinned me to the door. Immediately, my lion pushed to just below the surface to let me know my mate was close, and it certainly seemed like he was willing to get horizontal.

It had been a struggle to keep my hands to myself all evening, but now, all bets were off. When I flipped our positions and then had Markus pinned in front of me against the door, I simply couldn't resist. He was too much of a temptation, and when he didn't deny me, I knew we would be wearing each other's bites before the night was over.

My first taste of him was addicting, and I knew then that I'd continually want to kiss him. His eyes were the perfect shade of brown, and I'd gotten an amazing view of his toned body when he shifted earlier.

I felt my canines tingle but didn't bother to try and fight them. My mate was a shifter, and he knew what we were doing. But still, in the back of my mind, it was there, telling me I needed to make sure my mate knew exactly what was about to happen.

I broke the kiss, staring into those chocolate eyes that I already loved. I was about to ask to make sure Markus was on the same page when I felt his fingers on my waist. They pushed upward, and it took my fuzzy brain a bit too long to realize that he was pushing my shirt with his hands. I raised my arms, letting him remove my shirt. It was tossed somewhere, my worry for it minuscule when Markus's mouth

latched on to my collarbone. I felt his own canines and grinned. He was here with me, and yes, he was definitely of the same mind.

When he somehow slid down my body, his lips and tongue trailing down the center of my chest, I had to reach out and hold myself against the door when his tongue circled around my belly button, then went lower.

“Markus,” I warned. Hands slid up my thighs, then to either side of the painful bulge in my pants. I felt them at the button and closed my eyes when the pressure on my dick suddenly lessened as he freed it from my pants.

I gasped when there was almost immediately hot, moist suction around the head, and I had to force myself to open my eyes and look down at my mate. I reached for his sandy-blond hair with a shaky hand as he worked his way farther down my shaft, and when my fingers threaded through his locks, I couldn't help but want to hold on and guide him exactly how I wanted him.

I was both surprised and a bit disappointed when Markus wrapped a hand around the base of my dick and pulled his mouth off it. That was until he looked up at me and grinned.

“Take me to your bedroom, Parker. I really need you to fuck and claim me,” Markus said. That was all I needed to get this moved to my bedroom. I reached down and grabbed Markus's arms, pulling him to his feet. I had intended on rushing to the bedroom he'd requested, but instead, I pinned him to the door once more and covered his mouth with mine.

Markus moaned and thrust his tongue against mine, giving as good as he was getting. It was going to be interesting to see what type of lover he was. If I had to go by what was happening now, he wasn't going to be passive in any way. That was perfect for me. He was perfect.

When he pushed his hips into mine at the same time our canines hit, I reluctantly pulled out of the kiss. We were both breathing hard, and Markus's eyes were only half-open and full of desire. I was certain mine mirrored his.

I didn't say anything. Instead, I grabbed his arm with one hand, the waist of my jeans with the other, and hurried back down the hallway and turned to the left at the bottom of the stairs. I didn't stop until we were in my bedroom, standing beside the king-sized bed. It was my turn to reach for my mate's shirt, and I quickly pulled it off over his head and tossed it to the side.

My eyes trailed after my hands, taking in all of the smooth, warm skin that was on my mate's chest. He closed his eyes, moaned, and let his head fall backward. I couldn't resist the draw of his neck, and as my hands found the button on his jeans, I gently sucked on Markus's neck right where I wanted to put my mark.

With his pants open, I reached in and carefully pulled out his cock, giving it several slow strokes now that it was free.

“Gah, that's... It's been a while, Parker.”

My hand stilled, and I moved back just enough that I could look at my mate clearly. He was quite the sight. His lips were swollen from our kisses, his eyes full of desire and need, and his cock was standing out from his black pants, begging to be sucked or buried inside me.

I had a fleeting moment of curiosity, wondering if Markus switched. I really hoped so because although I was an alpha, I knew just how amazing it felt to have a lover moving in and out of your body. I had no doubts that Markus would be amazing at it and would know exactly how to move to bring us both intense pleasure.

“What are you thinking about? Your eyes...I swear they just got even darker than they already were.”

“You and me, naked and in bed,” I told him. That much was true. I reached for the bed, grabbed a handful of the covers, and yanked, tossing them toward the foot of the bed.

“Naked is good. And there's a bed right there,” Markus said as he moved closer once again. I grinned when his hands touched my chest, and when he gently pushed, I surprised him by grabbing his shoulders and pulling him down with me.

We were both still wearing our jeans, and Markus still had his shoes on, but everything could be removed easily enough. Needing to see all of my mate again, I flipped us, watching Markus's eyes go wide and then close as he moaned when our cocks lined up perfectly beside each other. I rolled my hips, closing my own eyes at the sensation of having my mate under me while bringing us both a bit of pleasure.

I felt Markus push back against my hips and nipped at his neck. That caused a sharp intake of breath, and I felt my mate jerk seconds before there was a sudden warmth between us. Markus moaned, but it wasn't what I'd expected. The scent of desire was suddenly gone, and he pushed against my shoulder. I wasn't going to have that though, and I ground my own hips down into him, then rolled them twice, and that was all it took for me to tip over the edge I'd been riding since he wrapped his lips around my cockhead.

I moaned, rolled my hips several more times, and sucked on his neck. I felt Markus's hands stop pushing on my shoulders; instead, they threaded into my hair, and I suddenly felt a yank. I looked down at my mate, his eyes wide and a bit confused. I smirked before I leaned down and pressed my lips to his. I kept this kiss soft, just a whisper of a touch before I grinned against his mouth.

"I told you it had been a while. It's been years, my mate. And you are so very sexy, and my need and want for you is more than I've ever experienced in my life." I kissed him again, hoping my actions and words made him feel better about what had happened.

"Seriously? Years?"

I nodded. "I've been busy, and really, there's not been a whole lot of desire for more than what I could do myself in the shower." I leaned down and kissed him again, this time getting a kiss in return.

I knew we needed to finish undressing and clean up at the minimum, so I broke the kiss before it could deepen and pushed up from my mate, then slowly lifted my hips from his.

Our combined messes were more than expected, and when suddenly cooler air hit our stomachs, I winced.

“Sorry. We really should clean up, at least. I’m nowhere near finished with you though, so don’t think I am.”

“I could definitely go for a shower. You. Me. Wet. Soapy. Yeah, that sounds like fun.”

I grinned again. It really did.

“Then shower we shall. Come on,” I said as I slid back and let my feet drop to the floor. I reached for Markus and was pleased when he took both of my hands. His stomach was quite a bit messier than mine, and when he was standing in front of me, it started to run downward. He pulled his hands away, trying his best to catch it, but I simply bent and retrieved his shirt and rubbed it on his amazing stomach.

“I don’t exactly have a change of clothes here,” Markus told me.

“That’s all right. I have a washer, and you are welcome to any of my clothes at any time.”

I was a bit wider and slightly more muscular than Markus, but he could certainly wear my shirts without swimming in them. My pants were probably a size or two too big, but sweats had drawstrings, and I had a drawer full of those.

“Come on. We’ll shower, then see if we can get messy again.”

I bundled the shirt into a ball and took it with me, dropping it on the counter on my way to the shower. I reached in, turning the water on before I turned back just in time to watch my mate pushing his jeans down his long, toned legs. He was absolutely gorgeous, and I was certainly going to enjoy staring at him as much as he would let me.

My own jeans were messy, so I pushed them down, then stepped out of them. I tossed them toward the sink with my foot, then reached for my mate and pulled him into the shower with me. He laughed as I did, and it made me happy to hear. Just moments ago, he’d been embarrassed because of his body’s reaction to mine. I never wanted that from him. We

were mates, and we were meant to be together. His body would always react like that. Mine as well.

But it was a bit of a relief that we'd taken care of at least one round before we got to the main event. I didn't want to disappoint him, and I knew that even with having had at least one orgasm, it would still be a fight to keep from coming the moment I got inside him.

I gave Markus a playful yank, his body crashing into mine, and I stepped under the spray, the warm water running down our bodies. It mixed with our cum, and the scent filled the air in the shower, causing my dick to twitch.

"Gah, I shouldn't be ready to go again already," Markus said. "I guess what I've heard is true though." Markus buried his face in my neck. I loved that we were the same height. It made things line up almost perfectly. I'd discovered that Markus's legs were just a bit longer than mine but my torso longer than his, putting us nose-to-nose in height.

"I'll always want you. But I'll be the first to admit that I'm glad we did what we did."

Markus stood and looked at me with wide eyes.

"When I said it's been a while, I meant it. Years, mate. I didn't have much interest in the past decade, really. There were a few here and there, but it was always more hassle than it was worth." I shrugged. I was most certainly not a virgin. I'd definitely had lots of partners when I was younger. But I'd focused on my career for the past ten years or so, and hookups had just lost their appeal.

"Seriously? A decade? You've not had sex in ten years?"

I shook my head. "I didn't say that exactly. But I'd say in the past ten years, it's been less than that many times. I have a hand that works just fine. And toys. Toys are a lot of fun."

Markus's eyebrows rose, and I couldn't help but laugh. I leaned in and kissed him quickly before I reached around him and grabbed the body wash. I poured a handful into my palm and then handed Markus the bottle. After moving out of the spray, I rubbed my hand against my chest and scrubbed away

the mess that we'd made. I made sure I cleaned my cock and balls and reached behind me to clean the backside as well. I noticed that Markus was doing the same and moved back into the water to rinse away the soap and mess. I grabbed the silicone scrubber, then repeated everything, this time soaping my entire body.

“Umm, I don't suppose you have another one of those? Or a cloth?”

I nodded. “There are cloths in the cabinet beside the sink. But if it doesn't ick you out, you're welcome to use this one. I don't think I have another though.”

Markus glanced at the sink, then down at his body before he held out his hand. I passed the scrubber to him and smiled as he added more soap. I grabbed the shampoo, quickly scrubbed my hair, and then rinsed. When I was finished, I found my mate standing to the side, waiting. I quickly let him have the spray. I couldn't resist another quick kiss before I stepped out of the shower and grabbed my towel.

I had finished drying and had placed a clean, dry one on the towel bar for Markus when the water turned off. He came out seconds later and pointed to the towel, and after I nodded, he picked it up and dried his face, then hair, before moving down his body.

Thinking ahead, and of the mess on the side of the bed already, I grabbed another towel and left the bathroom. Really, I should probably change the sheets, but the hope was that we were just going to get them messier. I placed the towel where it was covering the mess from earlier and could possibly catch any additional cum we might happen to get on the bed.

“You're prepared,” Markus said from behind me. His hands touched my ass seconds later, and I closed my eyes and sighed at the feeling of my mate being behind me.

“I try. But I was really trying to cover the mess. I'll need to change the sheets later before bed.”

“Hmm...and will I be going to bed with you?” Markus asked. His lips touched the middle of my back, and I flinched.

It tickled, and come to find out, my body was reacting to my mate in amazing ways.

“That is the hope. I want you here with me, Markus,” I told him. I wiggled a bit as he continued to kiss down my spine. “That really tickles.”

I felt hot breath against my skin. “I could tell. I like you squirming.”

I liked it too. I wanted to grab my mate and pull him onto the bed before climbing on top of him and working my way down his body with my own mouth and tongue, but I was enjoying his attention too much. I raised a leg, placing my knee on the bed, then the other to where I was now kneeling on the edge of the bed. There was an odd sound behind me seconds before I felt Markus’s hand on my balls. I’d spread my legs open, and they were now hanging between my legs.

“Tell me something, Parker,” Markus whispered against my back. I could hear him perfectly though.

“Anything.” I just wanted his amazing fingers to continue fondling my sac. It felt amazing and was doing wonders for getting me hard again.

“You mentioned toys.”

It took a moment for my brain to catch up.

“Yes. Top drawer of my nightstand. I have all kinds.”

Markus kissed my lower back, and then I felt his teeth nip at my right ass cheek.

“I’m not really interested in toys right now, but I love that you have them. Do you...” Markus trailed off, and after a moment, I looked over my shoulder at my mate. I found him staring at my ass, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“Do I what?”

Markus’s eyes met mine. I was almost certain I knew what he wanted to ask but didn’t quite feel comfortable enough to do so yet.

“Look in the drawer, Markus. You might get your answer there,” I told him. “Or you could just ask. I seriously have no secrets from you.”

Markus held my gaze for a moment before his hand moved back to my balls and rolled them again. I closed my eyes and moaned. I let my head drop and reached below me and grabbed my cock. I really needed more. I needed to be inside my mate, but I was going to let him explore and get to know me as much as I could.

“Will you let me...do you switch?” Markus finally asked.

I moaned loudly. “Yes. As often as you want. But I really need to be inside you at some point this evening. I want to claim you.” I let my shoulders fall to the bed, my left arm giving out and needing a bit of a break from holding myself up.

I gasped when Markus’s mouth closed around my hole, and then his tongue licked across the wrinkled skin. Fuck, he was going to turn me to putty, and I was never going to want to get out of bed.

“Will you claim me, then let me do the same to you?” Markus asked.

It took several seconds for my brain to work enough for me to be able to answer my mate. His tongue swiping at my hole had my mind focused only on the pleasure he was giving me and how much I really wanted him inside me.

“Parker?”

I groaned and somehow managed to let go of my cock I’d been slowly stroking to the same rhythm he was licking my hole. I pushed up onto my arms and crawled up onto the bed. When I turned, I looked at my mate. He was absolutely gorgeous and in desperate need if you looked at his cock.

“I will. Get up here so I can get you ready.”

Markus moved lightning fast, and when he was suddenly in front of me on the bed on his hands and knees, I bit my lower lip to keep from diving in immediately. He was wet, and I couldn’t wait to bury my cock inside him.

“Do you have toys, Markus?” I asked, curious when the last time was that he’d had anything in his ass. “Or a lover?” I asked. I fought my lion at that thought, but I really wanted to know.

“Toys, yes. No lover. Not for a few years.”

I grinned. Good. I gave his ass a playful slap, earning a moan from my mate. That grabbed my attention, and I did it again, earning another moan, this one a bit louder.

“You like that?” I asked, doing it again.

“Yes.”

I closed my eyes at the thought of all of the fun we could have. After a few deep breaths, I opened my eyes and slid my hand from his cheek to his crack. When it slid down, I went past his hole and slid my finger through the slick that had started to leak out. I trailed my finger back up, getting it nice and wet before I gently applied a bit of pressure. I was surprised it slid in easily.

Markus moaned, and when I immediately added a second finger, it too slid in easily. “Markus, have you played with yourself recently?” I added a third finger, and when it slid right in, I pulled all three out and looked at how wet they were.

“Last night. But I’m really achy. I want you inside me,” Markus said. I pushed my fingers back in, amazed at how easily they slid in. Markus wiggled, whimpered, and I decided to give it a try. If he wasn’t quite ready, I would stop and stretch him some more.

I used the slick on my hand to coat the head of my dick and then moved up behind my mate, lining up behind him. Markus moaned, then looked over his shoulder at me as I gently pushed forward. It took a bit of pressure, but I slid in easier than expected. He was incredibly wet, and when I met his eyes, they were filled with need.

“You feel incredible,” I told him as I pushed my hips forward a bit.

“So do you. I need all of you though,” Markus said just before he surprised me and thrust his ass back toward me. I

gasp ed while my mate moaned loudly.

CHAPTER 8

MARKUS



I wasn't sure what was happening with my body, but I wasn't going to complain. I hadn't really played with myself too much last night, but if I'd known that I was going to meet my mate today and now have him inside me, I wouldn't have done even the little that I had. But Parker's cock felt so much better than my fingers.

But I was extremely wet, and I had to wonder if it was because my heat was quickly approaching. Arik had warned me, and even I knew it was most likely going to happen soon. But would spending only a few hours with my mate bring it on? He'd not even claimed me yet, but that was about to happen.

I'd gotten a bit impatient and thrust myself back onto Parker's cock. There was only a fleeting moment of pain, and then I simply felt full, and it was wonderful.

"You shouldn't have done that. I don't want to ever hurt you."

"I don't want you to hurt me either. But trust me when I say that I'm definitely not feeling any pain. There's nothing but pleasure at the moment. It would be even better if you started moving though. And I'll let you know now that I like it all ways. Gentle, rough, fast, slow. I like it all, and I'm not one to keep quiet if you do something I don't like."

I hoped that reassured my mate. I knew he was worried, but he'd been nothing but a gentleman all evening. I really

needed him to let his lion come out a bit and get to claiming me.

“Good to know,” Parker said. He then pulled his hips back before he pushed forward. I moaned and let my head drop forward a bit. I felt Parker pull back again, but this time, he snapped his hips forward, and I wasn’t quite ready for it. If not for Parker’s hold on my hips, I would have fallen forward.

I stiffened my arms, ready for the next snap, but it never came. Instead, Parker leaned over my back, slid his arms under mine, and wrapped his hands around until they were holding on to the front of my shoulders. He pulled me upright, and I smiled. I loved it that he wasn’t afraid to get handsy.

“I want you,” Parker said next to my ear.

“Hmm...funny. It sure feels like you’re having me,” I said. “But you’re doing more talking than claiming, Alpha. Are you going to fuck me or not?” I asked. I was running out of patience. I really wanted his bite.

Parker kissed my shoulder, then pushed me forward. I wanted to complain when he pulled out of me, but I didn’t have time because I suddenly found myself flipped over onto my back, and my legs were pushed upward. Parker was inside of me seconds later, and his hips never stopped moving. He covered my mouth with his, the kiss uncontrolled but perfect.

Parker’s hands found mine, and when he laced our fingers together and brought our hands above my head, I moaned and wrapped my legs high around his waist. I was completely at his mercy, Parker instinctively knowing how to pleasure me despite the fact we didn’t yet have a bond.

My body starting to become overstimulated with pleasure, I turned my head to the side when I felt my balls start to tingle. Immediately, Parker’s mouth moved to my neck, and I tilted my head to the side a bit more when I felt sharp teeth there.

“Parker...I can’t...” I told him. That was all I’d been able to get out before my body overloaded, and I felt my channel squeeze down on Parker as he moved in and out of me. My dick throbbed once, then started releasing between us.

My moan turned to a shout when I felt Parker's cock tug at my opening, and then he had to force it back inside seconds before Parker's teeth bit down, and I saw spots behind my eyelids.

Somewhere in the midst of my pleasure, my tiger took over, and I turned my head, opened my mouth, and bit down. Parker grunted, and then he seemed to go limp above me. I let go of his shoulder with my mouth, licking out and sealing and cleaning the wound. When I opened my eyes, I had to blink a few times to focus. I'd not quite made it to the base of his neck, but the middle of Parker's shoulder now sported my claiming bite. It looked damn good there, in my opinion.

I turned my head the other way and met the drowsy eyes of my mate. "Hi there," I whispered.

"That was both amazing and yet not nearly enough. I wanted more for you."

I snorted. "I'm not really complaining." I wasn't either. I was happy, and honestly, I was ready for a nap. "I'm going to ask a stupid question, but I'm assuming that tug was your knot expanding, and we're now knotted together?"

Parker gently pushed up a little, moving enough that I could look at him better. "Yeah. I'm not sure how long it'll stay."

I nodded. "Do you think we can somehow turn?" I didn't know if it was even possible without things hurting, but I knew that a lot of mated couples liked the alpha behind because it allowed for a more comfortable position after the fact while waiting for the knot to go down.

"I could try. I don't want to hurt you though."

I nodded. Parker tried to sit up a little more, and I ended up hissing when his knot tugged at my opening. Parker froze, his eyes wide as they met mine. I shook my head at him—that wasn't going to work. Parker ended up pushing his hips forward a bit more, causing me to moan and my cock to twitch where it was lying against my stomach.

My mate took my right leg, lifted it as far upward as he could, and ducked his body under and to the outside of it. We carefully moved me to my left while he rolled to his right a little so we were both lying on our left sides. Only a little pulling this way, but Parker easily moved to where he was behind me, and I sighed when he wrapped his right hand around my chest and tugged me a bit closer.

“Thank you,” Parker said.

“What for?” I asked. I brought my own hand up and laced our fingers together, holding our joined hands together over the center of my chest.

“For accepting me as your mate.” Parker kissed the back of my neck, and I smiled.

“I could say the same. You didn’t have to accept me as your mate.” The thought of not being with my mate was painful. I knew that not all pairings worked out. I just couldn’t imagine having to live with being so unhappy with your fated mate. Everyone made mistakes, and yes, that included the fates. I’d heard of mismatched couples in Alpha War’s den. They weren’t born into it, but they’d joined, and although they had eventually worked things out, they hadn’t always been happy. I’d seen it in my own pride growing up.

“I will always want you, Markus.”

I grinned again. “Same here. We probably should have talked some more, but life seems to be fairly easygoing here.”

Parker’s body stiffened a little. “What did you want to talk about? We’re not really going anywhere for the time being.”

I chuckled but groaned when the movement caused Parker’s knot to tug again. My mate though, he moaned, and I suddenly felt a different kind of desire. It took a moment for me to pick up on the fact that I was feeling Parker’s desire through our bond.

“Markus?”

“Hmm?”

“What did you want to talk about? Is something wrong? Are you already having second thoughts?”

I snorted at that. “Why would I?” I wanted to roll over and be able to look at my mate, but that wasn’t possible. We’d been facing one another, but it wasn’t comfortable, and I didn’t think that either of us would be comfortable with me lying on top of Parker while knotted together.

“Because you said we probably should have talked more. Did you not...you had said you wanted me to claim you.”

I squeezed my mate’s hand. “I did because I did.” I turned my head enough to where I could sort of see my mate. He lifted his upper body up enough to where he could look down at me, and I could see him if I turned a bit toward him with my own torso. “I wanted you—don’t think I didn’t.”

Parker’s brow furrowed. “Then why the comment?”

“Because we’re now mated,” I said. “And we haven’t really discussed where we’ll live, how soon until I meet your family, things like that. I know you said I could work or not. But what do you like to do in your free time? Do you read? Play video games? Go for runs? Fish? Things like that.”

“Hmm...well, let’s see. We did briefly touch on where to live, but I hope you’re okay with being up here in the mated enforcer housing. You can meet my family as soon as you want. It’ll only take a single phone call and me agreeing, and my parents will be out here to meet you.”

Wow, that would be fast. I wasn’t sure I was quite ready to meet Parker’s parents, but I hoped to someday soon.

“I do read. I’m not overly big on video games, but I do have a console. I love to go for runs in my lion form. Fishing isn’t really my thing, but I do like to swim. I’m pretty good at target shooting. It was a requirement when I was part of the Seattle police department. I love steak but eat all foods. I’m not necessarily an early bird, but I don’t have issues with getting up for work.”

“Wow. Okay. That’s a lot of information.”

Parker chuckled as he relaxed again behind me. “What about you? Do you like to fish? Swim? Play video games? What does Markus do for fun?”

Immediately, my thoughts turned to what we’d just done.

“Well, I’ll say my new favorite thing to do to have fun is going to be having sex with my mate.”

Parker chuckled behind me, and we both gasped when his knot suddenly slipped free. I felt a sudden gush of our combined mess and winced. Parker gently pushed me forward a little before he once more moved me to where his hips were flush with my ass.

“You’re on the towel, and it’s not like the sheets didn’t already need to be changed.”

Valid point, but I still felt bad about the mess. It was a little bit of a new experience for me, and I wasn’t exactly a fan at the moment.

“I hate to be that person, but I really want to go to the bathroom and clean up a bit. Probably take a shower, actually.”

Parker kissed my shoulder, then swung a leg over my hips, and I looked up at my mate. His hair was a mess, he had a bit of blood on his collarbone that I’d missed when I closed his claiming bite, and his groin was definitely a mess. I cringed a bit at the thick white mess in the hair between his navel and his cock.

“I need another shower, so let’s get to it. Maybe we’ll find a new way to have fun in there.” Parker swung his other leg over me, then seemed to continue turning until he was off the bed and holding out a hand to me. I chose to roll over, my back landing in a cold mess that I had nobody to blame but myself for. I took Parker’s hand and let him help me to my feet. It was a good thing I had because I discovered my legs were a bit shaky at first.

We walked to the shower side by side, and while Parker turned on the water to warm up, I sat on the toilet to take care of a bit of our mess.

“You mentioned you were taking suppressors for your heat.”

I nodded. “I am, but they won’t work.”

“I know, and I’m sorry that things of that particular nature still haven’t been changed or adjusted. There are several mated enforcers, many newly mated, and children always happen along shortly after they’ve claimed one another.”

I finished up and opted to just dive into the shower after flushing. I stood under the water as I’d done not long ago. This time was different though. I’d been claimed, and I’d claimed my mate. I was no longer going to be alone. I had someone that was my life partner, and he already showed he was going to be an amazing mate. I happened to be the lucky one that had been paired with him.

Parker joined me, and I grinned. I simply couldn’t help it. He looked really good wearing my bite, and I was sure he thought the same of me.

“Sorry about your bite,” I told him.

Parker tried to glance at it, but he couldn’t move his head in that direction to see it. Instead, he reached up, his fingers gently touching it.

“Why? I’m proud to be wearing your bite. You’re my mate, and I want everyone to know we claimed each other.”

I reached for Parker and pulled him to me. I leaned in and kissed the bite, getting a quiet moan from my mate. I knew they were sensitive and would always be.

“I only meant because I meant to put it here,” I told him as I moved my lips across his shoulder and kissed his neck where it met his shoulder. After a gentle kiss, I nipped at it with my teeth, followed by another kiss before I looked at my mate.

“I don’t mind where it’s at. It’s just as sensitive there, I believe.”

“Still though. I meant to put it where you put mine.”

Parker shrugged, then leaned in, kissing my claiming bite. It was my turn to moan. Definitely sensitive.

“It’s there, and I’m proud to be wearing it. But we got sidetracked. Your heats. Are they difficult?”

So that’s why he brought up the suppressors.

“They could be. Some years they were; others, they were here and gone in a couple of days. Mine weren’t really consistent.”

“All right. I think we should be ready for one soon though. I know you’re taking suppressors, but so were a few of the other mates, and it didn’t matter after they were claimed. They all went into heat.”

I sighed. “You’re ready to be a dad, right?” I asked, needing to be sure. Parker gave me a concerned look.

“I am. But the more important question is, are you? You’re a lot younger than I am.”

“Not too much.” I thought about how much my life was about to change. It already had. I’d found my mate, and not even twenty-four hours later, we’d claimed each other. I didn’t feel the need to wait. Parker had been a complete gentleman, and if he was part of the council, I really hoped that meant he was a good guy and could be trusted.

“You’re thinking some deep thoughts there,” Parker said. He brought his hand up and ran it through my messy hair. I leaned back, letting the water hit my head, and sighed when my mate ran both hands through it, his fingers massaging my scalp.

“I don’t mean to,” I told him, lifting my head and looking into those gorgeous eyes. They were darker still, but I knew in the sunlight they were a brighter blue. They reminded me of sapphires.

“Care to share?”

I leaned my head forward, resting it on Parker’s shoulder. His hands ran up and down my back, soothing me and my tiger. I’d not even realized I’d become a bit anxious.

“I was just thinking about how much my life has changed since this morning.” I raised my head and looked at my mate.

“Yours too. And it’s going to change even more in a very short amount of time.”

Parker nodded at me. “That’s not a bad thing, is it?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I am ready to be a dad. I want kids. That hasn’t changed since earlier. But there’s going to be even more changes. I have to decide about my job, college, and I’m sure several more things.”

“True. But we don’t have to decide about those things right now. I think our next most pressing thing is what we want for breakfast in the morning.” Parker winked at me. I raised my eyebrows.

“Is there anything other than bacon for breakfast? Seriously now. Bacon is like candy,” I said. I was completely serious but joking at the same time.

“You won’t hear any arguments from me. But I’ll warn you that I don’t have any bacon here.”

I gasped. “How is that possible?”

“Because I don’t eat breakfast here,” Parker told me.

That’s right. He had said he ate all three of his meals at the council. I didn’t really feel like going to the council in the morning for breakfast. I tried to remember if I had any bacon in the freezer at my little cabin. I was almost certain I did. I’d gone shopping just a few days ago, and I knew I’d thrown some in the cart.

“Okay. Let’s get cleaned up, then we’ll get dressed and go to my cabin for the night.”

Parker tilted his head to the side.

“Why are we going there?”

“Because bacon, silly.” I reached for the soap and the scrubber.

“Why would we do that? All I have to do is message Atticus, and he’ll have the kitchen stocked with anything we could want to eat.”

I froze, only my eyes moving to look up at my mate. I'd been squeezing body wash onto the scrubber, but Parker had my complete attention now.

“Seriously?”

Parker nodded. “Just let me know what you want for breakfast and probably lunch and supper tomorrow as well. I did pick up a few things that would be good in case we ended up claiming each other and you happened to go into heat.”

“Aren't you just prepared for everything.”

Parker shook his head. “Not really. Hopeful, really. But we have friends that can help with other things. We won't have to leave this house for the next several weeks if we don't want to.”

I wasn't sure why, but that sounded perfect. I would love to be able to get lost in my mate for the next several weeks. Could that really be possible?

“Yes, it's possible.”

I heard Parker answer in my mind. That's right. We were bonded now. We could talk to one another through our bond.

“I want that. I really do.”

“Then we'll spend the next several weeks here, strengthening our bond. But right now, let's get you cleaned up, and we'll get some laundry started, and then I'll message Atticus and see about getting some food sent here with a little help.”

I handed Parker the scrubber when he reached for it. I felt it on my chest as I turned and set the bottle I'd still been holding back on the shelf. I could certainly get used to my mate taking care of me. It was nice and made me feel wanted, something I couldn't ever remember feeling.

CHAPTER 9

PARKER



Never let anyone tell you differently that fate seems to have a predetermined idea as to who your mating with your fated mate is to be. We had the best of intentions. We showered, then started a load of laundry with the sheets and our messy clothing from our very first round.

Then we grabbed a small snack in the kitchen, and that, of course, led to fun times in the living room. My couch had now been christened, as it were. I'd sent off the needed messages to those at the council that were required, which in hindsight was probably a good thing since by the time we went to bed, Markus's cheeks were deep red, and his energy seemed to be completely gone.

I had never spent a heat with an omega before. I was happy to be there for my fated mate, but I honestly thought something might be wrong with me because Markus's heat was incredibly uncomfortable and a bit scary.

I felt terrible for my mate. I wanted nothing more than to be able to take his pain and satisfy his need, but no matter what I did or how many times we lay in bed drenched in sweat while knotted together, it seemed as if it was no use. His need was insatiable, and even when he was sleeping, he writhed in pain. I was certain that wasn't normal, and after five days of doing my best to take care of my mate, he finally seemed satisfied and rolled away from me.

I passed out for several hours beside my mate, and when I woke, it was to the early morning light coming in through the

open blinds. Markus was still very much asleep beside me, his breathing even and deep.

I took a moment to wake up a bit before I got up and went to the bathroom. I checked in with Markus through our bond, and he was still very much asleep, so I decided it was probably safe to take a shower. It had been a few days since I'd had the time to do more than quickly clean us up. I would be sure to help Markus take a bath later, but for now, I needed to get clean and start on cleaning up things.

I turned the water on as hot as it would go and went to take care of morning business. After that was finished, I entered the shower and turned the water down to a tolerable temperature. For several minutes, I simply stood under the spray, letting the water not only massage my muscles but also rinse the days of grime from my body.

I spent probably longer than I should have just standing there before I got around to washing my hair and then my body. It felt so good I went back and did it a second time before I rinsed again and climbed out of the shower. I was thankful I'd had the foresight to keep a pair of towels for us once Markus's heat ended because I didn't want to use one of the others that I'd grabbed to clean us in a hurry.

Once dried, I brushed my teeth, then trimmed my beard and cleaned up around it, hoping it helped to make me feel human again. Wasn't that ironic? I wasn't exactly human, now was I? But the past several days had been difficult on me, and that had me worried about Markus and how he was going to come out of his heat.

With the towel now hanging on the bar on the shower door, I left the bathroom and stopped beside the bed and just stared down at my mate. He was adorable and completely conked out and was snoring quietly. It was cute.

The bedding all needed to be changed, but that would have to wait until Markus was awake and up to getting out of bed. I found a pair of sweats, pulled them on, and left the bedroom. I needed coffee, juice, and a very large breakfast. Probably not in that order, but my empty stomach was complaining, and my

lion was telling me I needed to replenish my energy so I could take care of our mate once he was awake.

The trip down the stairs seemed different this time. I wasn't quite sure why. I'd lived here since arriving in Treasure Ridge, and even over the past week, I'd gone up and down the stairs several times.

I was a bit surprised to discover a piece of paper on the counter, as well as a bowl of fruit. I leaned in, gave it a good sniff, and discovered that it was not only real but fresh as well. I picked up the piece of paper and couldn't help but smile. The guys in the council were amazing.

Parker,

*Congratulations on your mating!
All of the required people have been informed. There's lots of food in the fridge and pantry. When you finally come out of things, shoot me a text, and I'll provide any meal you want. Also, all of the laundry that had been tossed into the laundry room has been cleaned. I'll let you put it away though.*

Be prepared to move soon. Master Edison already has a suggestion for a house for you, but I'm not sure what exactly that means.

Again, congrats, man. And welcome to the mated club.

Atticus

My friends really were amazing. I grabbed an apple and bit into it, closing my eyes when the juicy tartness hit my tongue. Apples weren't exactly my favorite food, but for now, it would certainly do. Coffee was a must, and I could eat the apple while setting the pot up with one hand.

After coffee was brewing, I finished the apple with a few more bites, then tossed the core into the trash. I was surprised to find it empty, but maybe I shouldn't have been. Atticus had either been here while I'd been upstairs with Markus, or he'd used his magic to help us out while we couldn't.

A quick peek in the laundry room showed that there were indeed piles of towels, as well as a set of sheets. I grinned. Those were from when we had claimed each other. Markus and I had changed the sheets before we'd gone to bed that night. Already then, his cheeks were red, and I should have realized what was coming.

Locating my phone was easy enough; someone had been thoughtful and had plugged it into the charger that was near the counter. Since I wasn't sure what day it was exactly, I looked and was surprised to see it was an entire week after we'd claimed each other. A week? Really?

My stomach growled, now upset that I'd fed it what it deemed a tease of a snack, and it was more than ready for a solid meal. The coffee was finished brewing, and after I poured myself a mug, I took it and my phone to the table and sat. It was a workday, but it was still a bit early. I wasn't sure if Atticus was at the council yet or even at all. It had been a week. He might be on assignment somewhere. Rather than calling, I decided to text—just in case.

Me: Hey. I'm up and feeling somewhat coherent. Thanks for all of the help. We weren't quite expecting things to happen as quickly as they did, but I'm not upset about it in any way.

It only took a moment for Atticus's reply to come in.

Atticus: That's great. Congratulations again.
Brice wants to know how Markus is this morning?

I grinned, glad I'd had the foresight to text rather than call. He was probably still at home with his mate.

Me: He's not up yet. When I checked in, he's still deeply asleep, so I'm not sure when he'll wake.

I'd be sure to check in with him until he did, but until that time, I was going to find ways to keep myself busy.

Atticus: Are you up for a quick visit? Brice just left and I'm on my way there to go to work. But I have something for the two of you.

I glanced at the ceiling. Markus was there, but he was still very much asleep. I had no clue when he would be awake, but I didn't think he'd be upset with a visit from Atticus. Would he? It wasn't as if Atticus was interested in my mate.

Me: That should be fine. I have coffee if you want some.

Atticus: Give me a few and I'll be knocking. See you then.

Me: Okay.

I glanced down at my bare chest and figured I should probably at least put a shirt on. I'd shifted with Atticus frequently, but I wasn't quite sure how Markus was going to feel about things so far. I knew I had some sweats and shirts in the laundry room for visitors after runs, so I grabbed a shirt and was pulling it over my head when I heard Atticus knocking.

Pasting a smile on my face, I opened the door and found a grinning hellhound standing there.

"Aren't you a sight for sore eyes." Atticus gave me a quick once-over before he shook his head. "You've lost weight."

I scowled before looking down my body. I had, and I'd noticed in the mirror before my shower. There wasn't much I could do about that though. I would put weight back on once I got several meals in me. I was certain Markus had as well, and he had even less to lose than I did.

"I'll feed you if you let me in."

"Oh." I stepped back and away from the doorway, giving Atticus room to enter. "You don't need to feed me, but you're welcome to come in."

Atticus entered, closing the door behind him. "When was the last time you two had a full meal?"

I winced. "The night of our date. We had supper here, went for a run, things happened, we had a late-night meal again, and that was the last time either of us ate anything other than fruit, protein bars, drinks, or sports drinks." And if I had to eat or drink any of those things, besides fruit, again anytime soon, it would be too soon. They weren't really my favorites to begin with.

"Then I'll certainly feed you. That was a week ago. I wasn't aware of Markus's heat until Friday."

We went to the back of the house, and as soon as I left the hallway that led us there, I could scent the food. My stomach grumbled, and my mouth started watering. It smelled amazing.

"Is all of that for me?" Even if it was, I would save some for Markus. I hadn't been in the refrigerator yet. The note had said it was fully stocked, but I wasn't quite sure what that meant according to Atticus.

"It's yours. If you message me later, or even Benjamin, we'll help like this with food for Markus."

I sat, focused on the spread of food on my tiny table. I would definitely need a much larger one.

"I appreciate the offer, but I can cook for him."

"We know you are capable of doing so. We understand—well, Benjamin knows what you and Markus have gone

through. Brice is an alpha like me, so we don't have to deal with heats. I've heard they can be brutal though."

That was an understatement. This had been my very first with front-row privileges, and I wasn't sure I was a fan. I felt bad for my mate because until very recently, he'd had to deal with heats yearly and alone. I'd seen the memories, and it frustrated me that we hadn't been able to do something to help omegas with their heats before recently. My understanding was that it was more a council-known thing, but they were working on spreading the information, as well as sharing access to the meds that would help.

"I appreciate it, Atticus," I said. I picked up a fork and cut the sausage link in half. It was delicious, and with the first bite, my stomach protested more. It was letting me know I needed to feed it, and I could only agree. "What is it you needed to tell me?"

Atticus went to the coffeepot and poured himself a mug, bringing it back to the table, and sat. He stared at me while I tried to slowly eat the most amazing-tasting breakfast I could remember ever eating before.

"Not tell. Give."

Atticus held out his hand, and in it was a set of keys.

I wasn't sure what they went to but reached out and took them from my friend. "What are they for?"

"Your new house."

My new house? I hadn't picked a new house. I knew I wouldn't be able to stay here, and Markus's cabin was absolutely out of the question. It was two rooms. Well, three if you counted the bathroom. But it had an everything room, the bedroom, and then the tiny bathroom. Not a good place for a mated couple. Especially not when they were most likely going to end up having a child soon.

"Where is this house? I've been mated a week."

Atticus shook his head. "I know that. And Master Edison is going to explain why soon enough. But you and Markus he

wants in the other larger house that is on the other end. The one that is basically opposite from Benjamin and Eli.”

That made absolutely no sense. “Why?”

Atticus shrugged at that. “Not sure. He’s actually in Europe at the moment.”

That caught my attention, and my fork froze, the yolk of an egg dripping down to the plate. “Europe? Is everything all right?”

“As far as I know. He and Master Ambrosius have gone to Europe with their mates.”

Europe. With the mates. “Are the kids with them? Well, with Master Ambrosius?”

Atticus nodded. “They took Lucius and Giovanni and their two as well.”

I relaxed. It was most likely that Master Edison had taken them all to Italy for a little mini vacation. I knew they’d discussed it on several occasions.

“So they’re all in...Italy?” I hedged. “And I’m supposed to move into a house without picking which my mate or I want?”

Atticus held up his hands in surrender. “I’m just the messenger. He said he wanted you in that house for a reason. I’ve been to Benjamin’s house. It’s seriously nice, Parker. You should take it.”

I took the bite of food and chewed for a moment, contemplating my response. I’d seen all of the houses in mated enforcer housing. From the outside, I knew that Benjamin’s was much larger. I wasn’t certain why those two houses were bigger, but they were.

“I’ll take Markus by soon and see what he thinks. But I’ll have to respectfully decline the place if Markus doesn’t like it. I won’t force my mate to live somewhere that he doesn’t feel at home.”

“I believe that’s acceptable. You can message Master Edison about it. They are doing a bit of council work while in Italy. They’ll have to go to France before they come back.

There's some recruitment going on in both places. That's all I really know."

I wasn't sure why I was being given a house when the others were able to choose theirs after looking at several. I was sure the house in question was going to be fine, but it just felt odd.

"I'll be sure to take Markus by." I glanced up at the ceiling again. My mate was still fast asleep in the bed, but I wasn't concerned. His body had been through so much more than mine had. "I'm not sure he'll be up for it for a day or two though." I didn't want to share everything with Atticus, but I could share some. "He went through a lot. It was tough on both of us, but him especially."

Atticus nodded. "So I have heard. I also have this for you," Atticus said, pulling out a piece of paper. "It's Constantine's phone number."

I was trying to remember who Constantine was. I'd heard the name before, but it wasn't clicking at the moment.

"Again, I'm just the messenger. I'm sure Master Edison doesn't have anything against his son seeing Markus for some medical care, but he said you should probably give Constantine a call soonish."

It clicked. I set the paper down and shook my head. I wasn't good at my job because I couldn't analyze things. "What's going on, Atticus? What does he know that I don't?"

"Just the messenger. I'm to give you the keys and the phone number. That's all he said."

Atticus was telling the truth. I sat back in my chair and rubbed my stomach. Suddenly, the small amount of food I'd managed to eat wasn't sitting the best. Master Edison knew something about my mate. Immediately, my mind went to Raiden's mate, Alexander. He'd had an incredibly difficult pregnancy, and Raiden had almost lost Alexander and their son, Rowan, in the delivery.

I was trying not to jump to conclusions. I had just found my mate. I couldn't believe that fate would be so cruel to gift

him to me, then take him away in such a short amount of time. But if that were to be the case, why insist on the house? It didn't make sense.

“Why? What does he know?” I asked, even though Atticus had already said he didn't know more than he'd already shared.

“If I knew, I honestly would tell you. You could message Master Edison and ask. I would think he would tell you what he knows. That is, if he's able.”

I was torn. I wanted to know. Everyone in the council knew that the goddess and the fates at times visited the created ones and gave them a little bit of help. Even Atticus had been chosen to have a visit from the goddess once.

“I'll message Master Edison after I talk to Markus. His heat was difficult, Atticus. I don't think he'll be up for visiting a house anytime today.”

“I don't believe there is a rush. Just visit it when you're ready. And eat. You can't take care of your mate when you yourself aren't getting enough nutrients to keep up your own energy.” Atticus stood. “I'm off to work. Master Edison isn't due back until this weekend. It's only a weeklong trip. Enjoy your time with your mate, and please tell him Brice is happy for him.”

I rolled my eyes. “Only Brice and only for Markus?”

Atticus snorted. “I already told you congrats. Markus is great. I think he's a good match for you. I'm a bit upset I didn't think to have the two of you meet before now.”

I shrugged. “We meet when we need to and when we're ready. Maybe one of us wasn't ready yet.” I'd thought I'd been ready to meet my mate, but perhaps not. Markus, I'd seen his memories, and he was in the same situation. He was willing, but maybe there was something we needed to have done first. No matter. We'd met each other now, and we were already mated. Markus had gone through a heat, and apparently, he was pregnant. Why else would he need to see Constantine?

“I’ll eat. Please tell Brice hello, and I’ll have Markus call when he’s up to it.”

“Sounds good. But don’t forget, you need to spend your time holed up here strengthening your bond. I mean it. Message me, and I’ll have another spread for Markus when he wakes.”

Atticus waved his hand over the food, and I nodded. “Thanks again, Atticus. I appreciate it.”

“My pleasure. Enjoy your time with your mate. It’s a truly amazing thing.” Atticus gave me one curt nod, then was gone. I was used to that and had been for a long time, so it didn’t faze me.

I picked up my fork and went back to eating. He was right. I needed to be sure I built up my strength so I could take care of my mate. My lion agreed, growling low in my mind at me.

“All right. I’m eating,” I told him, shoving a forkful of hash browns in my mouth. They were hot, hotter than they should have been with as long as they’d sat here. I smiled at Atticus. He was a genuinely nice person, and I was lucky to call him a friend.

Thinking about the day ahead, I ate the breakfast Atticus had supplied but wondered how long it would take Markus to wake. Even then, I knew he would need time to recover. Question was, how long would that be?

CHAPTER 10

MARKUS



I'd had dozens of heats since puberty hit. They varied from year to year, but I knew this one was going to wipe me out. I'd been told it was often described how humans felt after a serious case of the flu. Of course, I knew what the flu was, but I'd never experienced it.

I felt myself waking slowly, but my body felt like there was a heavy weight on it. I couldn't move my limbs, and it took entirely too much effort to turn my head. I was on my stomach, my head turned to my left, but I was almost certain that Parker was to my right. Or he had been. I tried to focus on the room, and I discovered I was alone.

I wanted to call out to my mate, but there was no way I was going to be able to speak loud enough for him to hear. Taking a chance, I opened my left eye just a fraction, and when I was met with almost complete darkness, I opened my eye more. I was definitely in Parker's bedroom. The bed below me alone told me I was in Parker's room.

I took a deep breath, then another, and built up enough strength to roll over. I rolled toward the side of the bed that I was certain Parker normally slept on. Well, I hoped so because I was passed out on the left side. I was now in the middle of the bed, staring up at the ceiling, and that little movement alone zapped what little bit of strength I had.

I didn't want to think about how much I stunk. I felt grubby, but I knew there was no way I'd be able to stand to take a shower. Trying to get to the bathroom to use the toilet was going to be enough of an experience.

I closed my eyes, frustrated with life in general. I wasn't upset that I had a mate and we'd claimed each other. But the fact that omegas had to go through this however often they did was not fun and a bit unfair. I was excited about what it could represent though, and the thought of having my mate's child gave me a little bit of strength. I opened my eyes and looked around the room, finally turning my head to my now left. The door was toward the foot of the bed, but the bathroom was to my left, and I was trying to figure out how I was going to get to it.

"You're awake finally. Do you need my help getting out of bed?"

I looked toward the foot of the bed, then tracked my mate as he came to the left and sat on the side of the bed. He was so far away, and my tiger didn't really care for that.

"I'm..." My throat was scratchy, and my voice was certainly paying the price.

"I have water bottles here, but use our bond to talk to me? It's how I felt you wake. I've been checking in on you since yesterday now, and I was starting to get worried, to be honest."

Parker reached for something, and then I saw the water bottle in his hands. I wanted to cry in relief. I didn't know how I'd drink it though. I wasn't sure I'd be able to sit long enough to drink.

"I feel like I have no energy," I told him, thinking about the words in my mind. When Parker nodded, I hoped that meant he'd heard me.

"I can understand that. I talked to Constantine yesterday after I woke. He was full of information for me about the possibilities of the aftereffects of a long heat like you had. He gave me a tea."

I winced. I'd heard about that tea, although it had been shared that the tea no longer smelled and tasted like rotten feet. But still.

"Don't make the face. This tea isn't that tea," Parker told me. "Although he did give me a tin of that as well, just in case

you start experiencing morning sickness.”

“Did he examine me? Am I pregnant?”

“He didn’t, no. He wouldn’t while you were asleep, nor would I allow that.” Parker reached for something, then moved closer to me on the bed. “Here, can you open enough for a straw?”

He had a straw? I opened my mouth and felt the plastic move into the corner of my mouth. I closed my lips around it and sucked. And sucked some more. It felt like bliss. My tongue felt thick, my throat dry, and overall, I just felt horrible. But I wasn’t going to complain.

When I’d drunk my fill, at least for now, I turned my head to the side. The straw slipped from my mouth, a trail of water running down the side of my face. I didn’t care though.

“I’m going to start the water in the tub for you. It’s not an overly large bathtub, but it’ll fit you easily. I’ll be right there for you, but I would think you would feel a little better once you soaked and I washed your hair.”

That actually sounded amazing. It took effort, but I somehow managed to smile at my mate. That was still sinking in a bit. I had a mate, and he had taken care of me during my heat.

“Thanks for the water.”

“I’ll get you whatever you need. Right now though, let me get the water started, and I’ll be back to help you to the bathroom.”

Parker left, disappearing through the bathroom door. I heard the water turn on, and a few moments later, my mate reappeared. He had a smile on his face, and I fully expected him to go to his side of the bed again, but he came around to the side I was closer to.

Without any issue, he reached out, slid his hands under me, pulled me closer to the edge, then simply picked me up. Not that I had much of an option, but my body was completely lax against his chest, and I was thankful for a mate that could help me by simply carrying me to the bathroom.

It was a relief when he took me directly to the toilet. I wasn't even sure how it was possible to need to use it after spending so long eating and drinking next to nothing, but it never failed. It wasn't just me either. Other omegas that I had talked to about things that happened after their heats had similar stories.

Parker made sure I was stable on the toilet before he went to the tub and checked the water. He was right—it wasn't an overly large tub, but it would certainly fit me. Could he get in it with me? Probably not. That was all right though. Perhaps someday, we'd have a place that had a tub where we could soak in it together.

I finished my business, and with Parker's help, I moved to the sink. I washed my hands and then happily spent several minutes brushing my teeth. Parker stood behind me, holding on to my waist, making sure I didn't fall. I appreciated all of his help and wondered if I was overly lucky in the mate department or if most alphas were this attentive when taking care of their omegas after a heat.

Once my mouth no longer felt like a desert with a strange taste to it, Parker helped me to the tub, and when I sank down into the water, I sighed in relief.

“Oh, that's nice,” I said quietly. There was a scent to the water that I couldn't quite place, but it wasn't terrible. Parker had added something to the water, and I wondered what it was because it made the water feel absolutely amazing. I glanced up at my mate and found him smiling down at me.

“Are you all right for a moment? I could go get you something to eat and drink if you'd like.”

I shook my head. “I can wait. But don't feel you have to stay here with me.” I pushed my feet against the end of the tub, forcing my back and shoulders up and out of the water a little. “I won't sink under or anything.” The tub wasn't nearly big enough for that. Not that I was going to complain. I wasn't.

Parker surprised me by sitting on the floor beside the tub. “I don't have any issue with spending time in here with you.”

Parker sent me a surprised look. “Unless you want me to leave. I didn’t think about that.”

I shook my head. “I want to spend time with you. I just don’t think I’d be comfortable eating or drinking in here.” I sighed as the warm water seeped into my muscles. “My heats are often difficult. Sometimes it takes me a day or two to recover from them. This one feels like it’s going to take some time to feel like myself again.”

Parker nodded.

“What day is it?” I asked, curious as to how long this one lasted. I had felt it coming on the night we claimed each other as we were going to bed.

“It’s Wednesday.”

“Wednesday?” I was shocked about that. My heat had only lasted a day? That was difficult to believe.

Parker nodded. “Not the Wednesday you’re probably thinking about. It’s the next week. You went into heat on the night of the twentieth. It seemed to end on the twenty-seventh, which was yesterday. You slept for a solid thirty hours or so.”

I groaned. That was what they were like. And I’d slept an entire day away after, and I still felt like I’d been run over by a pack of large animals. “I’m sorry,” I said.

“Why? You have nothing to be sorry for.”

I wasn’t sure I felt that way. I scooted down as far as I could go and leaned my head back. The hot water felt amazing on my neck and scalp. I knew I stunk, but that couldn’t be helped at the moment. Thankfully, my mate didn’t seem to mind too much.

Once I was sitting back up a bit, I sighed again. Just that little movement zapped my energy again. “I’m so tired, Parker. Maybe that tea you mentioned? Will it help with energy?”

Parker was already getting up. “Constantine said it would, yes. I’ll be back in just a few minutes. Call out through our bond if you need me.”

“I will,” I said, then closed my eyes and leaned back against the tub. There was something soft behind me, and when I reached up, I felt either a washcloth or a towel. I knew it wasn’t there before, and I hadn’t noticed when Parker placed it behind my head.

I felt my body relaxing again, the energy slowly building up. A week. It was frustrating that I’d lost an entire week with my mate. I couldn’t remember much of anything except a burning need for my mate that seemed difficult to quench. How was that even possible? My mate had been with me. I knew he’d knotted me often. Why was it that the heat had gone on for so long, then?

I felt my body starting to regain some energy when I heard Parker in the bedroom. I had just turned my head toward the door when he appeared. He was carrying a mug as well as a small bowl.

“I brought you some grapes just in case you wanted a little snack. Since it’s closer to afternoon than morning, I thought we could have a good lunch. Unless you prefer breakfast foods. I can definitely do breakfast for you.”

I shook my head as I reached for the mug. “The grapes will be nice, thank you. And the tea smells good,” I said, taking a quick sip. It was hot, but not so hot I couldn’t drink it. “Change that to the tea tastes good as well.” I took another sip, this one a bit larger, before I carefully placed the mug on the edge of the tub. I reached for the grapes and was a bit surprised when Parker sat again and started feeding them to me. “Breakfast or lunch is fine with me. I like both. Whichever is easiest for you works for me.”

Parker grinned. “I’m not cooking either way. Atticus has offered. He was here yesterday morning when I was up and fed me breakfast. He told me then to be sure to let him know when you woke, and he’d do the same for you.” Parker fed me another grape before he continued. “I don’t think he expected you to continue sleeping as long as you did though.”

I winced. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be. Atticus has absolutely zero experience with omegas going through a heat. I asked Constantine some questions when you didn’t wake yesterday though, and he said it wasn’t unheard of for omegas to sleep for a day or two, allowing their bodies to recover. Especially when their heats were as long as yours ended up being.”

I had really hoped mine would be one of the shorter ones this time. Especially since I had a mate now. “I have long ones. And short ones. Arik warned this one would hit hard because of my suppressors.”

Parker seemed to want to say something but instead held out another grape, staring at it touching my lower lip. I opened, letting him push the fruit into my mouth. My lips touched his finger, and if I wasn’t so damn tired and weak, I’d do what I could to try and seduce my mate while he fed me. I chewed, swallowing before I reached for the mug of tea. Parker helped, holding the mug closer.

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

“So, what did Constantine have to say? I’ve met him a few times when he was out at the den talking to Arik. They do a lot of training together.”

Parker fed me another grape, then took the mug and placed it on the floor beside him. “I asked about heats, recovery, and basically pregnancy.” My mate seemed to be nervous. He took several deep breaths before he looked at me with a smile on his face. It was completely fake, and I laughed. The smile fell instantly.

“Sorry,” I finally got out. “It’s just that you looked so resigned about something.”

“I didn’t mean to.” Parker sighed again, then handed me another grape. I’d never had a lover feed me while I soaked in a hot bath, but it was nice. Not that I expected this to happen ever again. I knew that Parker was just trying to take care of me after my heat. We were mates.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, suddenly worried. “Did I not catch?”

Parker shook his head and looked at me. “No, that’s not it.”

“Then what?”

“I’m almost positive you did. It’s a little early for me to scent any changes like that though. But when I woke yesterday, there was a note on the counter from Atticus.”

I was confused. “What does Atticus have to do with me being pregnant?”

“Nothing. He had a message for me from Master Edison.” Parker told me. “He had keys for a house that Master Edison says he would like us to take.”

That was exciting. “A house? In mated enforcer housing?”

Parker nodded. “Yes. But that wasn’t it. He also wanted me to call Constantine and get you scheduled to see him soon.”

That seemed a bit odd, but I wasn’t going to complain.

“So I’ll have my care for the pregnancy in Amherst instead of Honey Creek? That’s not the end of the world.”

Parker tilted his head. “You’re taking this much better than I did or I expected you to.”

I shrugged. “I’ve spent a good deal of time with not only Arik but Wallace as well.” I sat up more, leaning forward so I was actually sitting up at this point. I put my hands in the water, bringing my cupped hands up and out of the water before letting the water trickle out of them. “Did you know that Master Edison can sometimes see the future?” I asked. I wasn’t sure it was common knowledge. In fact, I was almost certain it wasn’t.

“No. That’s not something that is shared around the council. How do you know that?”

“Because every so often, Arik can as well. Elliot too. When I asked them about it one day, they mentioned they got it from their papa.”

“Papa?”

“That’s what they call Master Edison. Wallace is Dad to them.” I could tell that was news to Parker. To him, they were most likely Master Edison and Wallace. But to Arik, Arin, and Elliot, they were Papa and Dad. Even Alpha War called them Dad at this point. Troy and Ryker as well.

“The things you never knew. Well, then I guess we should take his suggestions to heart because he wants Constantine checking you over soon.”

“All right. Why did you seem upset about the house? Did you not want to move into it?”

Parker sighed. He held up the bowl, showing me it was now empty. My stomach decided it wanted more food now that I’d started feeding it. Parker handed me the mug, and I took another sip. It had cooled enough that I could take a larger drink.

“We normally get a choice. But there’s a particular house that Master Edison said he wanted us to move into.”

I didn’t see the issue. “Is it bigger than my cabin in Honey Creek?” I asked.

Parker snorted. “It isn’t difficult to get a place bigger than there.”

“Then it’ll be fine. I just want to settle somewhere and make a home with you, Parker. I don’t really care where it is, honestly. And the idea of living up here on the mountain is appealing. I’ll be able to walk around while pregnant without having to worry about anyone seeing me. That right there is worth it for me.” I really hoped my mate agreed and would eventually be happy in the place that Master Edison wanted for us.

“Are you sure? I’m not sure why he wants us in that particular one. It’s larger than the others and has an extra bedroom.”

I froze with the mug halfway to my mouth. Instead of trying to take a drink, I held the mug out to my mate. He took it and set it back on the floor.

“I’m sure. Why would we need another bedroom, Parker. Think about that one.” What were the chances we were having twins? It wasn’t unheard of. Especially not in feline shifters. Arik had a set. Elliot was a warlock, and his bear shifter fated mate had given him triplets. Three identical boys. They were good kids and were shifting now. It was quite a sight to see, and I’d found that my tiger loved to run and play with them. But I was getting off topic in my mind.

“You don’t think we’re having two, do you?” Parker asked.

I shrugged. “Possibly. Why else would we be given the house with more bedrooms? Maybe it’s that we’ll have several more later? Time will tell?” I suggested.

Parker thought for a moment before he nodded. “Yeah, okay. Let’s get your hair washed, and then I’ll help you into the shower so you can get clean, and I can feed you. Even in the water, I can hear your stomach growling now. I need to feed you.”

I wasn’t going to complain about that at all. Not even a little. Food sounded amazing. Parker stood, taking the mug and bowl to the counter and setting them there before I grabbed a bottle from the shower. He moved in closer beside me and poured a generous amount of shampoo into the palm of his hand before he started washing my hair. It felt so damn amazing, and I wondered if I would be able to convince him to wash my hair every so often for me. I moaned when those talented fingers massaged my scalp. Parker chuckled but never stopped his ministrations. It was pure bliss.

CHAPTER II

PARKER



I wasn't sure how this was my life now. It took Markus two days to actually feel like moving around the house, and now we were packing to move. Well, I was. I had insisted that Markus stay where he was and get more rest.

"You're going to wear yourself out," Markus said from where he was basically pouting on the couch.

"How so?" I asked, my head popping up from where I had been packing up a box with books.

"You won't let me do anything to help. Why? I keep telling you that I'm feeling so much better. Whatever was in that tea Constantine gave you for me seriously helped."

I was sure it had. My lion was still insisting that our mate keep resting though. He was a bit pale, something that actually was starting to worry me.

I placed the next handful of books in the box and crossed the room to my mate. I knelt in front of him, reaching out and running my fingers down the side of his face.

"I don't want anything to happen to you," I told him. "You're my mate, and with everything going on, I'm not sure —" There was a loud knock on the door, and I scowled toward it. A low growl escaped, causing Markus to laugh.

"Go answer the door. I'll wait right here, not moving. Promise."

I leaned in, kissed Markus quickly, then stood. Whoever was at the door was impatient because they knocked loudly

again. I was going to chew out whoever it was. I knew for a fact that the news of my mating had gone around the council. Everyone knew to not bother us for a few more weeks.

I pulled the door open, ready to lay into whoever was on the other side, but stopped short when I saw Atticus and Brice standing there. Movement behind them showed Ansel coming out from behind Brice.

“Hey, guys. What are you doing here?”

“It’s moving day. Well, it will be if you let me in so I can help you pack and get things moved in a blink.”

I was completely stunned. I stepped back, letting Atticus, then Ansel, and finally Brice step inside the place I’d called home for the past couple of years.

“Did Markus like the house?” Atticus asked as we walked down the hallway and into the back room, where I’d left my mate.

“He hasn’t seen it,” I told him.

“What? Why?” Brice asked, sending me a glare.

Markus’s head popped up over the couch where he’d been lying, beating me to the answer.

“Because I’m actually still recovering from my heat, and Parker is being overly protective.” Markus sighed. “Not that it isn’t warranted. I’m feeling better but not one hundred percent yet. This one really hit hard.”

Brice went around the couch and sat on the coffee table in front of Markus. Ansel seemed to hesitate for a moment before he moved slowly into the room.

“Is he all right?” I asked, simply curious.

“Yes. Just a new place for him. He’s still a bit worried about upsetting any of us and getting sent back. We’re working with Dr. Bennett on that weekly now.”

I felt bad for the teenager. To have lived so in fear about everything and to not be able to enjoy life once you were put into a much better situation wasn’t a great way to live. I hoped

he was able to move past what had been his existence in the beginning.

“If you need anything from me, I’ll help where I can,” I told him. “I’m not sure what I can offer by way of helping with a teenage hellhound though.”

“Thanks. He has the pack, and they’re all spending a lot of time with us when not on assignment. He’s doing better, and he recognizes the issue and works on it actively. That’s why he joined Brice, although with some hesitation.”

“That’s good. I’ve seen some questionable things in my time in the Seattle PD, but nothing like I have since working for the council.”

Atticus snorted. “It takes paranormals to make things really messed up. Different realms, magical powers, all that fun stuff. Anyway, speaking of magical powers...” Atticus said, then looked around the place. “Just as is but in the new place?”

I nodded. “We can move things around there. I assume we’ll have to get more furniture.”

“What about all of your stuff in Seattle?” Markus asked, breaking into the conversation. He was up and off of the couch, walking toward us. I held out my arms, pleased that he walked right into them and wrapped his arms around my waist. When he sighed and laid his head on my shoulder, immediately, I was concerned.

“Are you all right?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“I’m good. I feel better every day.”

Atticus narrowed his eyes a bit while studying Markus. “Have you been to see Constantine? Actually, he’d probably come to you. He checked in with both Eli and Alexander frequently.”

I shook my head, but it was Markus that answered. “I’ve not talked to him yet. I know Parker did earlier in the week, but it’s only been, what...” Markus looked at me. “Four days?”

I nodded. “Tuesday. Yeah, four days.”

“Have him come out. I’m not sure, but you should be better by now?” Atticus said. We could hear the concern in his voice. Did that mean Atticus knew or sensed something we couldn’t?

“I will once we’re settled in the new place,” I said. I watched as everything in the back room disappeared, and the room was left as it was when I first looked at the place. It was hard to believe that, just like that, my time here was over. I wasn’t going far, and I was looking forward to starting a new life with my mate and our child or children.

“He’s carrying more than one baby,” Ansel said quietly. We all turned to look at the young hellhound, who seemed so hesitant to speak up.

“We actually assumed as much,” Markus said, a huge smile on his face. “I was going to call Constantine next week and get an appointment set.”

Ansel nodded. “That would be good. There are several heartbeats that I can hear, but I’m not sure if I’m picking up on yours and the babies or everyone else’s.”

“Several?” I asked, a moment of panic hitting before I was able to clear it.

“Just call Constantine,” Atticus said. “Did you want me to do my thing to take you to your new place, or were you up for a walk?”

“Walk,” Markus said before I could.

“Are you sure?” I was immediately concerned that the walk would tire him out. It wasn’t as if I couldn’t carry him, but I wasn’t sure he’d be up for that.

“Yeah. The walk would do me good, I think. And I know the fresh air would.”

“Well then, we’ll leave you to it,” Atticus said. “I’ll go get your things from your cabin if you want, Markus.”

My mate’s scent changed to one of happiness. “That would be great. Thanks. I’ve missed having some of my stuff. All of

the furniture and dishes stay with the cabin. Only the clothing, books, and other dust collectors are mine.” Markus moved to the counter, where our phones and keys were still lying. “Here’s the key. If you could give it to Alpha War for me?” Markus said, turning back toward us. “I’ll give them a call soon and get down to see everyone when I can.”

I needed to be sure to reassure Markus that he could come and go from the mountain as often as he wanted. Well, until he was showing. Then it would require a bit more secrecy to leave the mountain. Not that it couldn’t be done. There were omegas in Honey Creek and Timber Valley that moved around down there with the help of their mates and lots of oversized clothing when they were further along in their pregnancies.

“You can visit whenever you like,” I told my mate. “Don’t feel you can’t leave the mountain.”

Markus gave me a smile and nod but didn’t say anything. We would definitely have to discuss that on the walk to the new house.

Atticus took the keys and nodded. “I’ll give these to them and let them know you’ll be calling and possibly visiting in a few weeks.”

“Thanks for your help, Atticus. We were going to work on it over the next few weeks, but your way is definitely quicker.”

Atticus shrugged. “It was no problem. Now you can unpack in your new place and get settled. Let someone know when you decide on furniture. The funds go to the relocation funds for those that the council rescues. Not that the created ones really need anyone to add to that fund. They’ve all ensured it’ll not run out for decades to come.”

I grinned. That much I’d known. We all did.

“See you soon, Markus. We’re going to miss you at the department, but it’s completely understandable,” Brice said. He placed a hand on Markus’s shoulder, then walked off with Ansel, who grinned and waved. He was definitely at that awkward teenage stage.

We watched them leave, the trio disappearing suddenly before they even made it to the hallway that led to the door.

I turned my attention to my mate. “What did Brice mean?”

Markus bit his lower lip. “I’ve decided to not go back to the sheriff’s department.”

What? “Why?” I had thought Markus loved working with them.

“Yeah. It’s just...with you here and us expecting already, I want to focus on us and our family we’re starting. You had said it would be all right. I still have some money from my own relocation fund that the council gave me. I can help with anything I need.”

I shook my head and pulled my mate into my arms. “Markus, you don’t need to do that. I had said it was all right because it is. If you want to stay home and raise our family, I’m all for that. I’ll help any and every way I can. I do agree that it could become difficult for you to work around Max once you start showing.” I wasn’t sure how quickly that would be, but with him carrying more than one, chances were he would be showing quicker than expected.

“Good. Now that’s settled, then. How about you show me our new house? Especially since this one is now empty?” Markus turned around, looking at the empty space. I chuckled.

“Well, if you’re sure. I wonder if Atticus left our shoes,” I said, looking down at my mate’s bare feet.

“Well, if he didn’t, I’m sure a quick message to him will be all it takes to get some.”

He wasn’t wrong. I went to the front door, spotting two pair of shoes sitting there beside it, and smiled. He’d obviously noticed we were without shoes. I carried them back to the kitchen area, and after helping Markus up onto the counter, not that he needed it, I assisted him with putting on first the pair of socks that were tucked inside and then his shoes.

“You know I can do it myself, right?”

I sighed. “Yes, I do. I can’t seem to help myself though. My lion wants me to do everything for you. I fight with him about most things and win. I didn’t think helping with your shoes would be too much. I’ll work on it.”

I didn’t want him to feel that I believed he couldn’t do things for himself. I was simply trying to take care of my mate.

Markus slid off the counter and shook his head. He placed both hands on the side of my face and gave me a soft kiss. “I didn’t say I didn’t like it. You’ve been good at spoiling me. I like it. I’ve never had that from anyone before. It’s new though, and I’m working on getting used to it.”

I grinned and managed to steal a kiss from Markus before he dropped his hands and stepped away.

“Good. I intend on spoiling you as much as I possibly can.” I sat on the floor, pulled on my own socks and shoes, and stood. Markus was holding out our phones and a set of keys. I placed the one for this house on the counter and sent a message to Atticus, letting him know where it was. I wouldn’t be needing it any longer.

“Are you ready to go for a walk? It’s about twenty minutes at a slow pace. Ten if you’re moving along quicker.”

Markus grinned. “Well, then I figure it will take us somewhere between fifteen and twenty minutes to get there. I’m ready.”

We left the house, and I gave it one last glance before I pulled the door shut behind us. It locked automatically, and there was a moment of bittersweetness to it. This was where I’d claimed my mate. Not that we would have been living in Markus’s place if we’d happened to have been there. It wasn’t often that paranormals lived in the same place their entire lives. We lived for centuries until a few years ago when those of us that were worthy had been granted immortality. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that, but I smiled at my mate when I realized I wouldn’t be spending it alone. I had my mate by my side, and we were starting our lives together.

“What?” Markus asked.

I shook my head, reached for his hand, and laced our fingers together. I brought his to my mouth and gave it a quick kiss before we slowly started down the walkway. “Nothing, actually. Just thinking about the new chapter we’re about to start. I’m glad to have you by my side.”

Markus grinned.

“Me too.”

We left the single enforcer housing area, turning to our left and starting the short walk to the mated enforcer neighborhood.

“Do you know anything about our new place?” Markus asked.

I shook my head. “Only what I’ve told you so far. I know we enter the neighborhood, take the first right, and it’s at the end. The roads make large, long loops, and we’re at the end.”

“Any other feline shifters up there?” Markus asked. “Not that I only want to live near feline shifters. I honestly don’t care. I was just curious.”

I squeezed my mate’s hand. “Marc’s mate is a lion shifter from the pride down off of the mountain. They live there, but I think they’re on the other end.”

“Yeah? I’d like to meet them eventually. Everyone, actually.”

I chuckled. “We’ll have to see about having a block party or something. You know, like humans do in their cul-de-sacs.” I’d seen it in a TV show before but had never been to one.

“You mean a run but without the run?”

I shrugged. “Something like that.” We walked a bit farther, and I pushed out to Markus through our bond. His energy seemed to be doing okay, but I could tell that probably wouldn’t remain the case. I was worried. I would message Constantine once we got to our new place and I got Markus settled back on the couch.

“Who’s that?” Markus asked, pulling me from my thoughts. I looked in the direction he was pointing and smiled. Just barely out of sight was one of the gargoyle twins. If I had to guess, I’d say it was Ramsey since Raiden was recently mated, and Alexander had had a difficult pregnancy and delivery.

“That is probably Ramsey. Did you want to meet him?”

“I can?” Markus’s eyes widened. I chuckled. The twin in question stepped completely out of the trees and grinned, showing off lots of razor-sharp teeth.

“I didn’t mean to cause a fright,” he said.

“Ramsey?” I asked, hesitant. I didn’t want to mix them up, but I’d not spent enough time with either of them to be able to differentiate between their scents. The gargoyle nodded twice.

“You didn’t scare me. I just...I don’t want to be rude,” Markus said. “I’ve never met a gargoyle before though.”

Ramsey grinned again, this time keeping his teeth hidden. He walked closer, his height towering over both of us. Even in their human forms, the gargoyle twins were taller than a lot of the other shifters at the council. Well, except for the dragons. Those guys were huge.

“We are few, and those of us that there are, we don’t like others and often live in secluded clans in the middle of nowhere.”

Markus snorted. “You should try Nebraska. Kansas too. Both have nothing in the middle of nowhere perfected.”

Ramsey smiled again, then held out his hand. At the end of his dark green fingers were inch-long black claws, but I didn’t think he would hurt my mate.

“I’m Ramsey, by the way. You must be Parker’s new mate.”

I groaned. “Yeah, sorry about that,” I told the pair. “Markus, this is Ramsey. He’s an enforcer with the council,” I told my mate. “Ramsey, this is Markus, my mate.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Markus said.

“Likewise.”

“Are you mated? Do you live in the mated enforcer housing?”

Ramsey shook his head. “My brother does. He lives there with his mate, Alexander, and their little bundle of cuteness, Rowan.”

Markus looked at me with excited eyes. I chuckled. “There are all kinds of kids at the mated enforcer housing. That’s why they’re there. Mated. Having families. Mates can be together to help one another out when enforcers have to go on assignments.”

Markus sighed. “Yeah, I can see that being useful.”

“I was just out for a quick flight before I joined Raiden and Alexander for lunch. I should get home to shower and change,” Ramsey said. “It was nice to meet you, Markus. Congratulations to you both.”

“Thank you,” Markus said. “It was nice to meet you too.”

Ramsey jumped, then opened his large wings. I felt much like Markus vocalized.

“Whoa.”

My mate looked at me with wide eyes. “Right? I’ve never seen either of them fly either.”

“Either? Are there only two?”

“Well, they’re twins. Identical twins. They look exactly the same in both forms. Once you get to know them a little, you pick up on the differences in their personalities though.”

“That’s so cool though. But what I meant was were there only two gargoyles in the enforcers?”

I nodded. “Like Ramsey mentioned, they’re a very secretive species. I’m not sure how many there are worldwide, but I’m almost certain they have the fewest in numbers. We have them and the created gargoyle, Chief Daegal. And, of course, now Rowen. But he’s a newborn, and it’ll be years before he starts shifting.”

“That’s still cool. I’ve met more paranormal species since moving here. And now I’ve found my mate.”

I grinned at Markus. I took his hand again, and we continued on to our destination. We weren’t far, and when we entered the neighborhood, I turned right on the first road. We’d walked past a few houses on the left as we entered, but I knew where we needed to go.

“Are there couples in these houses?” Markus asked about the houses on our right as we walked past them.

“I’m not sure. I can find out for you though. And we can wait to see who comes and goes from them. I’ll be sure to introduce you to everyone.” I wanted him to feel comfortable and welcome. When we passed the house right before ours, it was obvious that it had someone in it. There was a decoration on the front door, as well as several pots with flowers in the front entryway.

“That one?”

“Yeah. I don’t know who lives there though. I know Benjamin lives at the opposite end, but beyond that, I’ll have to either knock on the doors or see if there’s a map or something.” I stopped at the large house at the end and looked at Markus. “What do you think?”

Markus looked at me, then at the house, before looking back at me. “About?”

“Our house,” I said, pointing to it. Markus’s eyes widened.

“That one?”

I nodded. And that’s why I was hesitant. It was large. Way larger than the two of us needed.

“That’s ours?”

“It is. Want to go inside?”

“Seriously?” Markus asked before he let go of my hand and took off up the pathway toward it. I chuckled and followed my mate. He got to the door and stopped, but I was only a step behind him at that point.

“It should be open. I’m certain Atticus left it unlocked for us, but I do have a key for you.”

Markus turned the knob and entered.

“No way,” he said quietly. I had to agree. It had an open floor plan, and there were a whole lot of windows against the back wall. Immediately, Markus hurried into the house and stopped just behind my couch. Well, now our couch until my mate decided he wanted something different.

“I can’t believe this is ours,” Markus said, then went around the couch and plopped down. He sighed before he toed off his shoes and put his feet up on the coffee table. I joined him, expecting to see him smiling, but he just looked tired. He’d hidden it well just how tiring the short walk over here was for him.

I sat beside Markus and pulled him into my side. “What do you think?” I asked again.

Markus looked at me, his eyes already showing sleepiness. “I think I’ll take a nap, and you can fret over me, but I definitely want to check it all out after a power nap.”

“Then a power nap you’ll have.” I kissed Markus’s forehead before I stood and helped him get settled on the couch. While he was sleeping, I’d call Constantine because I was definitely concerned.

CHAPTER 12

MARKUS



I couldn't believe this was my life. At least I knew why it seemed like my body was taking forever to recover from my heat. According to Constantine, I was pregnant. And not a little. Well, actually, just a little. I wasn't far along. But no, I wasn't pregnant with just one. Not even two. Nope. Parker and I were expecting triplets. Three.

I was still trying to wrap my mind around that. We'd been in our house for four days now, and I'd done nothing. It wasn't because I hadn't tried. I had. But Parker was going a bit overboard with his attention toward me. After we'd moved in, the short walk wiped me out, and Parker called the warlock doctor while I'd been napping. Well, that quick exam had provided a lot of surprising news.

I'd been given two separate teas. They were clearly marked in different tins. One was for helping with energy; the other was for morning sickness. I was warned that the morning sickness one would make me sleepy, but thankfully, I'd not experienced any sickness yet and hadn't needed to drink it. I was sleepy enough as it was. I didn't need anything that would help me sleep.

I heard a noise upstairs somewhere and reached out to Parker through our bond. He was grumbling about something but wasn't actually saying anything. I chuckled. He wasn't upset, just frustrated. I would imagine it had something to do with assembling furniture. We'd picked out a spare bed for the bedroom farthest from ours, and Parker had insisted I take yet another nap while he got it set up.

I tossed the light blanket off, throwing it onto the back of the couch, and got up. I had spent enough time on the couch already. I gave it a glance as I walked away and toward the stairs. I knew I would eventually get put on bed rest. Constantine had said it couldn't be avoided. I was carrying triplets, none of them identical though. There were three separate sacs. It was still too early for him to give us a definite answer as to what we were having though. That was all right. I could wait.

I climbed the stairs, my mate's voice getting louder as I ascended. He was exactly where I thought he'd be—in the spare bedroom. He was struggling with the bed frame. Immediately, I could see why, and it was frustrating that he would struggle instead of asking for my help.

“I thought you were napping.”

I glared at my mate, who winced.

“Sorry. That was rude. Did you have a good nap?”

“I did. And I was napping. Now I'm not. I'm no longer tired. I heard you grumbling and thought I'd see what was up.”

I went to the other end of the frame and lifted it a little. That was all that Parker needed for the piece to square up, and the end by him slid into the foot of the bed. I dropped mine, the rail seating itself into the notch at the headboard.

“Ugh. That was...if I'd not been so frustrated, I would have seen that.”

I moved over to my mate and knelt in front of him. “It's all right, you know. Do you want to tell me what's going on in here?” I asked, pointing to Parker's head. I wanted to know what he was thinking. Granted, I hadn't known him long, but in the short period I had, I knew enough to realize he was keeping something.

“I'm worried. Normally, I'm levelheaded, and it takes a lot to frazzle me. But you're carrying triplets, and I'm terrified.”

I started laughing, and it grew until I fell back on my ass, which seemed to make me laugh even harder. It wasn't until Parker crawled over the bed frame and kept crawling until I

was on my back that I looked up at my mate and immediately sobered.

“Sorry. I truly am.” I was. It was all right and understandable that he was terrified. I wasn’t exactly relaxed about the whole situation. I wrapped my arms around Parker’s neck and pulled, and he finally lay down on top of me, only he quickly rolled us so I was on top. I rolled my eyes before I leaned down and kissed him. I rolled us again, this time putting us both on our sides. “I didn’t mean to laugh at you. It’s just the whole situation is overwhelming. I get that. And yep, I’m terrified as well. I mean, I’m carrying three babies.” I gave Parker a horrified look. “How are we going to keep up with all of the diapers and bottles?” I asked.

Parker’s eyes widened.

“Right? That’s a lot of babies. Sure, Constantine has triplets. But he’s a warlock, and he just uses magic to change diapers and make bottles. We don’t have that ability, and our babies are going to outnumber us.”

“Shit. You’re right.” Parker sat up, pulling me up with him.

“We’ll figure it out, but yeah, my mind has been running through everything that’s going on now and will be in the future.” I thought about our mating for a moment. Things had been so fast for us. “Did you know that we claimed each other just two weeks ago? And we’re going to be dads in less than two months?”

That probably wasn’t the best thing to say to my mate. His eyes widened again, and he stood up and started pacing the room. I watched, completely comfortable where I was on the floor still.

Parker continued pacing for several minutes before he stopped, held out a hand, then shook his head and left the room. I stayed put, figuring if it was important, he would be back and share whatever it was with me. Sure enough, Parker returned just moments later and sat. He had his phone in his hand and touched the calendar app.

“I see the two weeks. I agree with that. Two weeks and a day. But feline gestations are three months.” Parker started counting the weeks and shook his head. “That would be September twenty-third-ish.”

I shrugged. “Sure, if I was carrying one, maybe two.” I took the phone and set it on the floor beside me. “Parker, I’m carrying three. Constantine said it would be a lucky thing if I carry them to September at all.”

Wide eyes again. I smiled before I reached out and touched my mate’s face. “It’s all right, you know. You can freak out about it. I do at times. Usually when I’m getting dressed and I realize I’m going to be huge and I wonder where they’ll have room. I’m not exactly large.” I had a longer torso, but I was slender.

Constantine had given me his One’s number. I’d found out that Miles was actually from Parker’s pride in Seattle and was the alpha’s youngest son, and he’d given Constantine triplets. Twin lionesses and one little warlock. Miles was just a bit shorter than I was, but Constantine had shared with me how Miles had to be put on bed rest. There was a lot of grumbling from Miles, but in the end, they had three beautiful children. They had decided they were finished with those three. Constantine was older and had all but given up on finding his fated mate. Then along came a young omega lion who happened to be the coven master’s grandson. It was all very confusing if you didn’t have a family tree, and I was a bit surprised that I remembered as much as I did.

“What are you thinking?” Parker asked.

I leaned into his side a little before sitting back up.

“Actually about Miles. Do you know him?”

That got Parker to smile. “I do, actually. He’s Alpha Vincent’s youngest. I hadn’t really put that all together until recently.”

“He has triplets. So it happens. We’ll be fine. That’s what I keep telling myself.”

Parker nodded. "I'm not saying let's move them in or anything, but I will put it out there that it is a very real possibility that my parents would be willing to come visit and help out if we need it. At least for a little while in the beginning."

I could tell that Parker was worried about even suggesting such a thing. "I'd be happy to have them." I looked at the bed my mate had been assembling. "Is this for them, then?" That would make sense. If he knew they would be out to visit, they would need somewhere to stay.

"It can be. I know Alpha War or Alpha Forest often have cabins that guests can stay at. It gives them their own space as well as would give us space. We could see if they could stay there."

I shook my head. "That defeats the entire purpose of having family visit." I sighed. "We're on our own when it comes to mine. It's yours or none at all."

Parker wrapped his arm around my shoulders and gave me a side hug. "We can search for your family if you wish."

I shook my head. "I have no desire to see them. They disowned me, and as far as I'm concerned, they aren't my parents anymore. I never want to talk to them again."

"Your sisters?" Parker asked.

I thought about it for a moment. "No. We decided in the beginning that we wouldn't have any contact. That way, our parents couldn't find ways to locate us if they ever decided they wanted to make our lives miserable." I couldn't even tell you what my sisters looked like anymore. They would scent familiar, but it had been so long since I'd seen them. We'd all aged a bit since, and I knew that even I didn't look like the little boy I was when they left. I'd gotten a few messages from them in the beginning, but they ended when we'd decided it was too much of a risk of our parents finding them. They didn't want to be part of the pride any more than I had.

"All right. We'll ask my parents if they would like to visit."

I side-eyed Parker. “You should probably tell them you’re mated first. They don’t know about me yet, do they?”

Parker rubbed the back of his neck. “They don’t, no,” Parker said. “I could call them. It’s still really early there for them.”

I wasn’t sure if that made a difference for his parents or not. I’d seen many memories of Parker with his family, and it looked like such an amazing thing. I wanted a family like that but never had it. Our pride wasn’t a great one either.

“Feel free to call them whenever you want. I know we’re supposed to have a month together to strengthen our bond, but I’d say that it’s pretty well cemented in place.”

Parker grinned. It was. Our bond seemed to come easily for us. We could both communicate both ways; we could see memories and feel each other’s emotions through it. Some couples struggled with some aspects of their bond in the beginning, but we’d been very fortunate.

“I’ll go make some tea, give you some privacy to call them if you want,” I said as I stood. It took a bit of effort to get up off the floor after having sat on it for as long as I had, but a push on my ass from my mate helped a great deal.

“You don’t have to leave. I don’t need privacy to talk to my parents,” Parker said as he stood. He grabbed his phone on the way up and started touching the screen. “I have no secrets from you, and if I tell them I’m mated, they’ll want to talk to you.”

That had me leaving the spare bedroom in a hurry. I was halfway down the stairs when I heard Parker talking to his mother, if his greeting was any indication. I went to the amazing kitchen we had, and after filling the electric kettle, I turned it on and waited. I pulled down a mug and opened the orange tin of tea. I smiled at the tea bags that were inside and dropped one in the bottom of the mug before closing the tin and placing it back next to the green tin. Inside that one was the tea I would need to drink if I got morning sickness. I figured it was only a matter of time before that lovely side effect of pregnancy made an appearance.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I’ve been busy moving and everything.”

I smiled at Parker. I’d left him to fend for himself, but apparently, he had followed.

“Why would you move? Did the council send you somewhere else? I thought you said you liked it in Montana.”

I looked over my shoulder at my mate. He was standing there, holding the phone out.

“I do. I didn’t leave Montana, just changed houses.”

“I just don’t understand the reason you need to move. What was wrong with the—”

Parker had moved up behind me and held his hand out farther. I was now in the picture, and apparently, he’d been video chatting with his mother.

“Because I’m mated now, Mom. Say hello to Markus, my mate,” Parker said.

“Hello,” I said quietly and waved with my empty hand. The tea kettle started to whistle, so I turned it off and poured the boiling water into the mug, the fragrance of the tea immediately wafting upward toward me. It was a good thing I liked tea because I had a feeling I was going to be drinking quite a bit of it for the next several weeks.

“Parker Allen Sullivan. You did not get mated and not tell us.”

I looked at my mate, shocked. “Allen?”

Parker shrugged. “It’s my father’s middle name. All of us boys have his middle name.”

I wrinkled my nose. I wasn’t really a fan of the name, and I wasn’t sure about giving all of our male children the same middle name.

“Parker, are you even listening to me?”

We both refocused on the phone.

“Sorry, Mom. I am listening, and yes, I did get mated. I wasn’t aware that I needed to inform you of my mated status

the moment it changed?”

Parker’s mom made a grumbling noise. I dunked the tea bag a few times before bringing the mug to my mouth and taking a sip. It was too hot to drink and not quite strong enough yet, so I left it where it was and moved over to the overly large refrigerator. It would certainly come in handy once our children were older. That was, if we still lived here.

“Seriously? He’s your mate?” Parker’s mom asked again. I looked in time to see Parker pull aside the neck of his shirt and knew exactly when she saw the mating bite. She screamed, and Parker set the phone down and started pushing the side button to lower the volume.

I chuckled and shook my head before pulling out the stuff to make sandwiches for lunch. I’d woken up a little hungry, and true, it was still more brunch time than it was lunch, but I was hungry now, and that was a good thing.

“Sorry. I didn’t know how else to tell her,” Parker told me.

“Well, it seems to have worked. After you showed her your bite, that is.”

Parker shrugged. “I think they thought I wasn’t looking.”

“Were you?” I asked as I placed the egg salad on the counter, then pulled out the lettuce. “Do we have any more tomatoes?”

Parker turned, went to the other end of the counter, and came back with one. I smiled.

“What are you making?”

“Sandwiches. I’m hungry.”

“Here, let me do that for you,” Parker said. I handed him the lettuce and nodded. I wasn’t going to argue. I knew it was no use and would only keep me from getting my sandwich as soon as possible.

I picked up my tea and left the kitchen. It was such a beautiful morning that I went out to the back deck, leaving the door open so I could hear my mate inside.

His mom had finally stopped screaming and was now talking to him again. There was another voice, and I had to assume it was his dad. The way in which he talked to them and sounded so happy while doing so made my chest ache a bit. I had never had that. The closest I'd ever gotten was my grandmother, but she was gone now. Her and my grandfather both.

The tea looked like it had steeped enough, and after another sip, I had to agree. I lifted the string and removed the tea bag, placing it on the table where I'd sat. I wasn't certain where the patio furniture had all come from, but it was definitely a nice addition to the place, and I'd found myself drawn outside already.

My tiger was content out here, and I knew that it was no use in trying to shift and go for a run or even lie in my shifted form for an afternoon nap. I wouldn't be able to shift until after the babies were born.

I heard talking and glanced over at the door. Parker came through with a plate piled high with sandwiches. I couldn't help but grin.

"Thank you," I mouthed to him. He winked at me, then went back inside. I sat there for a moment, staring out at the forest that was behind the house, and wondered if any of our neighbors were out there running around. Had we come this way when Parker and I had gone for our run together? It was a sad thought that I wouldn't get to shift and run with my mate for several more weeks at least.

"We would love to visit when you and Markus are ready for visitors," a masculine voice said as Parker returned. He set a mug down, and immediately, I smelled his coffee.

"Dad, meet Markus," Parker said as he turned the phone toward me. Again, I waved and grinned before I picked up a sandwich. My stomach was growling, and I knew Parker had heard it. He looked down at my stomach before he turned the phone back toward him. "He's hungry, so we're having a brunch of sorts."

“That’s nice,” Parker’s dad said. “And it is nice to meet you, Markus. I look forward to meeting you in person when you’re ready.”

I had a mouth full of food but quickly chewed and swallowed. “That sounds nice. Perhaps in September if you’re free then?” I said, not really thinking about it. I should have, though, because there was silence on the other end of the call and then another scream. Parker’s mom had done the math and figured it out.

“He’s pregnant already?” she asked suddenly. I looked over at my mate and tried to look apologetic. Oops.

CHAPTER 13

PARKER



My lion was grumbling at me. I had to agree with him. Our lives had been completely turned upside down. I wasn't sure what it was that Markus was doing differently than I was, but he seemed to be taking everything in stride so much better than I was. New house? It's gorgeous. Quitting his job? I'm going to settle in and work on decorating our new house. Pregnant? I want a family. Triplets, you say? It's scary, but we'll figure it out.

Why wasn't he freaking out like I was? Then again, why was I freaking out as much as I was? I needed to be more stable for my mate. He was going to need me, and I had to figure out how to be the alpha he and our children deserved.

"Yeah, Mom. I've been looking at all of the boards you sent me," Markus said as he walked by me. I could only stare after my mate. That was another thing—he and my parents. I had said they would love him, and they absolutely did already. The feeling was mutual, and Markus had started calling them Mom and Dad when they insisted. They talked daily, and they were already making plans for my parents' visit. I wasn't upset at all, just a bit surprised at how easily Markus seemed to be accepting all of the changes.

I could only watch as Markus continued on to the back door, then slipped outside. He walked to the lounge and sat, still talking to my mom on the phone. How was this my life now? Why was I struggling so much?

I followed Markus and poked my head out of the open door. "Hey," I said quietly. Markus looked my way and

smiled.

“Hey back. Everything all right?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I’m going to run to Benjamin’s for a bit. Is that all right?”

Immediately, Markus was concerned.

“Mom, let me call you back,” he said. I shook my head, but it was no use. He’d already ended the call and placed the phone on the lounge between his legs. “What’s wrong?”

I came outside and knelt next to my mate. “Nothing. I wanted to ask him about a few things. I can just call if you don’t want me to leave. But you were on the phone, so I didn’t think it would be an issue.”

Markus reached for my face and ran his hand down the side. “Are you sure you’re all right? You seem to be struggling a bit.”

I shrugged. “There’s a lot that has happened in a very short amount of time. My lion and I are working on everything, and we’ll be fine. I honestly had a couple of questions for Benjamin. Some about work since I go back tomorrow and was hoping to get a heads-up about a case we had been working on.”

“Yeah, okay. I mean, if that’s what you want. Will you be gone long?”

Now I’d worried my mate, and that was the last thing I wanted to do. “I won’t.” I sighed and shook my head. “Never mind. Let’s just go for a walk around the neighborhood? Are you up for that? You’ve been drinking that tea, and it seems to be helping you.”

Markus smiled. “It is. I’m feeling a lot better. I would love to go for a walk with you. I can’t shift.” Markus looked down at his stomach and winced. “And I’m already showing, so none of my pants fit, but I found some elastic-waisted shorts, so I hope that’s all right.”

I grinned. He was right. He was showing. He was around a month pregnant out of three. But he was carrying three babies,

and there was no hiding the fact that his stomach was certainly that of someone carrying a child. In his case, three.

“Sweats, shorts, it makes no difference for me. I like you in all of them. Or none,” I said and winked. Thankfully, it had the right effect on my mate, and his eyes darkened, and his cheeks turned a bit pink.

I stood and held out a hand to help Markus up. He didn’t need my help, but I wasn’t going to not offer. Markus took my hand, letting me help him to his feet. He bent down to grab his phone and started typing while we went back inside. When he held out his phone for me to look, I smiled.

“You didn’t have to show me you were messaging Mom. I don’t have to know everything you two talk about.”

“I know. I just wanted you to know I wasn’t going to call her back anytime soon. She’s really great, Parker. You had said they would love me, and I’ll admit that I was really nervous about your parents at first. I didn’t have a good family life growing up.”

I knew that, and it hurt to realize the loneliness and hurt that my mate had gone through because of something he had no control over. It wasn’t his fault he was an omega. Nor was it that he was a tiger shifter rather than a lion like his own father. Mine didn’t care. And out of all of my siblings, only one of us had ended up with a lion shifter for a mate. My parents had no preference, as it should be.

“Did you want help changing?”

“No. I’m going to be back in just a couple of minutes.” Markus kissed me quickly before he hurried up the stairs. I wanted to call out and tell him to be careful but didn’t because I didn’t want to be that mate. I didn’t want to hover or drive my mate bonkers because I trusted him. He was his own person, and if he and my parents had an amazing relationship, that was a win in my book.

I fired off a text to Benjamin quickly while Markus was upstairs changing out of his PJ pants. I didn’t blame him one bit. They were soft T-shirt material, and they were comfortable

for him. It wouldn't have bothered me if he wore them for our walk, but he had insisted on changing.

Me: Hey! I had a question. How did you adjust? How were you okay with Eli carrying twins? He's tiny compared to Markus. Okay, that was two. But I'm trying to calm myself about everything and it's not working.

I wasn't expecting a response since it was Sunday, and I figured Benjamin and Eli would be busy with their family. Benjamin's dads had moved to the area when his sire had been offered a position on Master Edison's committee. They got along great, and everyone knew they often spent at least one day on the weekend together.

I heard Markus on the stairs and looked up in time to see him smiling at me as he got closer.

"That was fast."

"Well, it's not as if I had to do much to change. I just tossed the PJ pants on the bed and pulled on shorts. Do they look all right?" Markus turned in a circle, and I was rolling my eyes at him when he stopped. I got a playful push against my shoulder when he noticed, which caused me to laugh.

"Of course you look all right, silly. Why wouldn't you?"

"Because I'm already showing, and they don't exactly make flattering clothing for tall and slender men with a large stomach."

I shrugged. I was sure he wasn't wrong, but I didn't think his stomach was large yet. He was showing, yes, but he wasn't huge like he seemed to think he was. I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket, and Markus looked at me as we walked out the front door.

"Do you need to get that?"

I pulled out my phone, showed him that it was a message from Benjamin, and after reading it, slid it back into my pocket.

"Everything all right with work?"

“Should be crazy when I get back tomorrow, but that’s expected after a month off. Are we still on for meeting there for lunch?” I didn’t know how it was going to go with being away from Markus for that many hours after having been with him for the past month.

“Lunch sounds good, yes. I was talking to Brice earlier. We were messaging,” Markus said. “And he said he’d come up here tomorrow around eleven thirty, and we could walk over together. He was going to have lunch with Atticus.”

“What about Ansel?”

“I guess it’s his time with Dr. Bennett, and he’s asked if he can go alone for a few sessions. They couldn’t tell him no because he’s really making progress, I guess.”

I didn’t know the teenage hellhound well, but I felt terrible for him. I’d heard what he’d gone through, and no person, shifter or paranormal, should ever be subjected to the terrors that Ansel had.

We were walking past the house next door when a familiar face came out the door, followed by another. I grinned at Raiden and Alexander, waving to the couple.

“Parker! Hold up!”

We stopped, and I wrapped my arm around Markus’s shoulders and pulled him closer to my side.

“I didn’t know you lived here, Raiden,” I said.

“Yeah, well, you two haven’t exactly come out of the house much in the past month. We heard you on the back deck though.”

I quickly went through my mind, wondering if we’d done anything outside that we shouldn’t have. Nope. We’d kept all of those activities to everywhere in the house.

“Markus, this is Raiden,” I told my mate. “And his mate, Alexander, who I think you know.”

Markus’s smile lit up his face.

“You live next to us?” Markus asked, pulling away from me a bit. “It’s nice to meet you, Raiden,” he said as he looked up at the tall gargoyle on his way to Alexander.

“We do. This is Rowan,” Alexander said, moving the baby a little away from his chest so Markus could get a look at their baby.

“He’s so adorable,” Markus said. His hand rose a little before he quickly dropped it.

“Would you like to hold him?” Alexander asked, holding the baby out to my mate.

“I can?” Markus asked. He looked at me with wide eyes as Alexander carefully placed the baby in my mate’s arms. The look on his face once he had the baby in his arms said it all. Markus was going to be the best daddy he could, and I had no worries that he wouldn’t give it his absolute all.

“Where are you off to?” Raiden asked, pulling my attention away from my mate holding Rowan. He looked so damn good holding a baby while he was carrying our triplets. Soon, I’d see him holding ours.

“For a walk around the neighborhood, actually,” I told Raiden.

“You’re welcome to walk with us. We’re on our way to Everett and Jennings’s house for a few hours.”

“Yeah? How’s that going?” I asked. Markus and Alexander started walking, Markus still carrying Rowan in his arms and Alexander placing his arm around Markus’s waist while they walked just in front of me and Raiden.

“Good. We’re spending some time with each other every weekend. And of course, with Ramsey as often as he’s willing. He’s a bit of a struggle because he doesn’t want to feel like he’s overstepping or intruding. But he loves Rowan, and he can only stay away for a few days before he comes to get his baby fix.”

We heard a snort ahead of us. Markus looked over his shoulder at us, and Alexander’s shoulders were shaking with

laughter. Alexander dropped his arm from Markus's back and turned around, starting to walk backward.

“That’s an understatement. He messages me several times a week asking for updates on what Rowan is doing.”

“Wait, are you back at work already?” He shouldn’t be yet. Alexander had just had Rowan literally days before I met Markus.

“No. Tomorrow. It’s been a month, and it’s time. There are several assignments coming up, and I need to get back to things.”

I glanced to Alexander, who was once more facing forward and talking to Markus. I felt bad for Raiden because he would have to leave his mate and child behind. I wasn’t a field enforcer, and very rarely did I go out on assignments. I had twice, but only for a day or two. My job was ninety-nine percent of the time here at the council building.

“Are you going out soon?”

Raiden shook his head. “Not that I’m aware of. I’ll know more tomorrow. I haven’t really talked to anyone other than Chief Daegal since I’ve been on leave. I was offered more time off from work, but with Marc being reassigned and our new guy not here yet, that only leaves Benjamin and Briggs. I wanted to get back to it to help my team.”

I cringed a bit. “Yeah, Marc is now in my department. I haven’t seen him at work yet though. He came back a month ago, right?” Marc’s mate was a feline shifter. Their gestation was three months, whereas Alexander, as a wolf, had carried their little guy for four months. Well, as long as he could. It seemed as if a lot of the mates weren’t carrying to their due dates anymore.

“You have Marc?” Raiden asked.

I nodded. “I was asked by Master Edison if I would consider it.”

“Really?”

I nodded again. “I have nothing against Marc, Raiden. He found his mate the same time you and Alexander scented each other. Alpha Bernard was a bit unfair with how he handled things with him. He wanted to make sure his mate was well taken care of.”

“He let our team down,” Raiden said.

“He was put in an unfair position,” I argued.

We’d drawn the attention of our mates, and Alexander came to Raiden and placed his hands on his chest. I could tell that I’d upset Raiden, and although that wasn’t my intention, that was what I’d done.

“I get where Marc was coming from, my friend. Markus is carrying triplets, and I’m not even leaving the area, but my lion is uneasy about leaving him at home tomorrow. A twenty-minute run and my lion is pushing at me to stay with my mate. Marc was torn between doing what Alpha Bernard deemed was required and what his bear was telling him.”

“He didn’t want to do his job,” Raiden said.

I shrugged. “That might be. But not every shifter is the same. Not all are ready to go back to work with only a month together. Do you know all about Marc’s bear and what his upbringing was like?” I asked. It was possible that Marc simply had an overly strong attachment to his mate because he had abandonment in his past. Or maybe he just needed a little more time because his mate wasn’t ready for the alpha father of the babies he’d been carrying to leave on a potentially dangerous assignment. No matter how it was, Marc deserved a place in the council if he still wanted it. He’d been a good enforcer from what I’d read.

“He knew what being an enforcer was when he joined. It’s all voluntary.”

“I’m not arguing,” I said as Markus came to me. He’d handed Rowan back to Alexander and wrapped his now free arms around my waist. I had one around his shoulders. “Life has a way of changing things though, and just because something that worked for someone two years ago no longer

does, that doesn't mean that person should be penalized because of it. It's my understanding that Alpha Bernard has been talked to by the other created ones."

"You wouldn't understand. You're not a field enforcer."

"I'm not. You're right about that. But I was a detective in the Seattle PD for more years than I probably should have been, and I'd seen firsthand how much life can change and impact someone in the field. That doesn't mean that their need something different than what they've been doing makes them wrong." I shrugged. "It simply means they need to adjust how they do their job for a bit. Sometimes it's temporary, others it's more permanent. It happens. Neither makes them wrong. Forcing someone to do something that goes against what their animal side tells them to do is though."

"It is," Alexander said. Raiden looked down at his mate. "Look at Chase. Or Eli, even. Think about what they went through. That went against what their shifter side said, yet they were subjected to it, and they've both struggled because of it."

Raiden's brow furrowed. "Yeah, but Marc wasn't sexually abused."

"True. But he was told to go against what his bear was saying. And we're all told, from a very young age, to always trust our shifter half. His was telling him he needed to be home with his mate still. When he couldn't be, he and his bear both suffered. I saw him during his restriction time. It wasn't a pretty sight to see. That's why Alpha Bernard was talked to. That's not how we treat those in our care." I looked over at Markus. He seemed sad. "Are you all right? Are you getting tired?"

Instantly, Alexander was in front of Markus. He turned, handed Rowan to Raiden, then was back to checking over Markus.

"I'm all right," Markus told Alexander. "The suppressors I was on worked really well. Then my heat was more intense than I've ever had. And now I'm pregnant with triplets. My body is going through a lot."

“Does Arik know about the tiredness?”

Markus nodded. “My doctor is Constantine though. I have a tea and other supplements that he wanted me to take. I do tire easily though. I’ll rest when we get home, and Parker will fuss over me, and it’ll all be good. This is really the first time I’ve felt up for going for a walk, really.”

Alexander moved Markus’s head from side to side with a hand on his chin. He looked over at me, concern on his face. “How long has he been pale like this?”

I sighed. “Since he woke from his heat. Constantine knows. That’s what the supplements are for,” I told him.

Alexander nodded, then moved back to his mate’s side.

“Let Constantine know if you have any dizziness, light-headedness, the room is spinning, or you see spots or anything.”

“The room spins sometimes when I lie down. Spots too. But only when I close my eyes.”

My gaze flew to Alexander’s. Was that bad?

“Let him know. It’s probably just the change in position, and with you already lying, it won’t be an issue of you falling. He should know though.”

“Is that bad?” I asked.

“It could be. His blood pressure might be low because he’s carrying multiples. It could also be high. His heartbeat sounds strong though. But he does look like he’s fading fast.”

I looked to Markus. He was. And we’d only made it about a quarter of the way around the neighborhood. It would be quicker and shorter to turn around and head back the way we came.

“I’m going to take him home, then. I’ll call Constantine and have him check him out.”

“I’m fine,” Markus said.

“I know you are. But humor me and let him check you over?”

Markus sighed before he nodded.

“Thank you.” I leaned in and kissed my mate’s cheek. I looked back to the other couple and offered a smile. “I didn’t mean to upset you or to cut the walk short for us.”

“It’s understandable you want to get him home,” Alexander said.

“You’ve given me a lot to think about. I hadn’t really thought about it from that perspective. But I agree with Alexander. Your first concern...should be your mate.” Raiden closed his eyes. “Like Marc’s was.”

“Something to think about for sure,” I said. “Have fun with Everett and Jennings. I’m going to get Markus home to rest,” I told them.

“It was nice to see you again, Alexander,” Markus said.

“Same. I’m going to drop in sometime soon if you don’t mind,” Alexander said.

“Anytime,” Markus said.

We waved to each other, and they went on toward Everett’s, and I took Markus home.

“Are you that tired? Should I carry you?”

Markus snorted. “No, I’m good. I just need to sit down and rest for a bit. Maybe some water and a snack.”

I knew just what to get for my mate when we got home. It was literally only a few minutes to the house, but it felt like longer. I was certain I knew exactly what Marc had felt like when he had to leave his mate. Sadly, I’d not known anything about his mate’s pregnancy or delivery. He was from the pride in Lucky Lake though, and I knew he did have family to help. I thought about my own family and wondered if perhaps it might be best if I asked mine to come and stay for an extended stay. Markus’s lack of energy was quite concerning.

We entered the house, Markus immediately sighing. I helped him to the couch in the back room and went to the kitchen to get his water and a small snack. By the time I got back to him, he was already asleep. I set the cup and bowl of

fruit on the coffee table and went to the back deck to first call Constantine and then my mom. I needed advice and help, and I knew it.

CHAPTER 14

MARKUS



The last thing I wanted to do was upset and worry my mate. That's what I seemed to be good at doing anymore. He was worried about me. I felt it through our bond, and it showed in his face. It took a lot of reassuring from both me and Constantine, who had come to check on me yesterday, that I was fine. My body was just using a lot of energy to create our children. Luckily for me, Constantine had personal experience from his own mate to help reassure Parker. That didn't stop him from hesitating about going to work this morning though.

I'd reassured him many times that I would spend the morning resting, and when it came time for me to join him at the council for lunch, it would be with a little bit of magical help, and I wouldn't have to walk all the way there. I would love to be able to spend time outside and explore the neighborhood, as well as get to know the mountaintop and all of the areas of it more, but that would have to wait.

I had plenty to keep myself busy, and the first thing I was going to do this morning was look through multiple baby name sites and come up with my list of names. Parker and I had decided we would pick three of each gender and start voting from there. Well, I had no idea what I wanted to name any of the babies, let alone all three.

I was settled on the recliner; it was an amazing thing, and I thought we should get another so Parker and I could both have one, but for now, we spent most of our time together on the couch. The sun was shining through the windows, and the

room was a comfortable temperature. I was feeling refreshed, and I really hoped that my energy held up for the next several hours. The thought of a nap was nice, but I wasn't tired and didn't think I would be able to doze off until it was too late, and then I'd be tired during my lunch with Parker.

Having my energy drained from me so easily was frustrating, but I was trying to do my best and remain upbeat about it. I was creating three new lives, and that would suck the energy from anyone. I'd been so active my entire life though, this was something completely new, and it was taking time to get used to.

I pulled up a site on my tablet and started scrolling through all of the names. I didn't have any family names I felt I needed to honor by naming one of my children after them. Nope, wasn't going to happen. I was relieved that Parker had agreed that we wouldn't be giving our sons his middle name if we were to have boys. It wasn't that I didn't like tradition. I didn't mind it at all. But to name every male child with the same middle name was...well, a bit lazy to me. Sure, it could be tedious to pick names, but that was part of the fun.

I scrolled for longer than intended and had a long list of names when my phone chimed on the coffee table. I put the recliner down, then placed the tablet on the table and picked up my phone. It was a message from Parker's mom. She was on her way to an appointment but hoped I had a good day today, and she would call us this evening.

I replied, letting her know that Parker was back at work starting today, but we would look forward to her call this evening.

I checked the time and saw it was after ten already. How? Where had the morning gone? I looked at my list of names and realized that was how. The page was filled. I was supposed to pick six total. I had many more than that.

I placed the paper on the table and stood, stretching my back. Sitting in one position for so long probably wasn't the wisest thing for me.

I went to the bathroom and took care of my bladder, then headed to the kitchen and grabbed a cup of water. I took it upstairs with me and decided to figure out what I wanted to wear to lunch. I didn't have a whole lot of options any longer.

When I entered our bedroom, I was immediately drawn to the bed. I knew it would smell heavily of Parker, and I would admit that I missed him. I was trying to be good and not bother him while he was at work, but it had turned out to be more difficult than expected. Come to find out that when you spent an entire month with your mate after you claimed each other, that first day of back to life was hard.

I went to the closet and looked through my shirts. I had a lot of slender-fitting clothing because I had always been on the slimmer side.

I found a pair of summer pants that had a drawstring in the waist and chose to wear them over the sweats I was currently wearing. Now to pick a shirt. I looked down at the one I was wearing and shook my head. I hadn't cared what it looked like. I was in the house, and it didn't matter to me that it was tight across my stomach.

Parker was a bit wider than I was, as well as a size larger, so I went to his side of the closet and looked through the shirts. I found a white button-down that looked like it might fit. I wasn't sure though. I definitely needed to get some new clothes though.

My tight T-shirt was pulled off and tossed toward the hamper and the button-down pulled on. It fit, but just barely. It buttoned over my stomach, but it was a snug fit, and I knew that next week, it definitely wouldn't fit. Yep, needed to go shopping.

I left the closet, my pants thrown over my shoulder, while buttoning the sleeves at the wrists. Once both were buttoned, I placed the pants on the end of the bed and pushed the sweats down. They joined the pants, and I went in search of a pair of underwear. I had some, and they would still fit, which was a bonus. But if I was going to wear those pants, I needed something underneath them.

I found a pair in with my socks and pulled them and then the pants on before I went to the bathroom and messed with my hair. It didn't look too bad and only took a little bit of product before I deemed it presentable. Once my hands were washed and dried, I turned to the side to look at myself in the mirror. Definitely pregnant. I faced forward, and when looking directly at me, I didn't necessarily look pregnant. I appeared to be a man wearing an unbuttoned shirt and loose pants. Comfortable. That was a good thing.

Grabbing the water I'd brought with me, I left the bedroom and went back downstairs. I took my empty glass to the sink once there, then decided to spend a little time on the back deck. It quickly became a favorite place of mine, but I'd been warned that there were mountain lions in the area—the natural kind, not the shifter kind. I knew they were no match for my tiger, but I couldn't call him at the moment. He was busy resting and having a long nap while I was pregnant. That meant I needed to be careful when outside, and I'd promised Parker I wouldn't wander far without at least one other person with me.

I moved the lounge until it was lying flat, and then I got comfortable on it. The sun felt amazing, and Constantine had told me that getting out into the sun was a good thing for helping me feel better. I had no reason to argue with him, and I'd always been one to like spending time outside.

I lay there for quite some time and had gotten warm and comfortable and was dozing off when my phone pinged. I groaned at the thought of answering it, but I knew what it meant. Brice was either here or would be shortly.

I slid my hand into my pocket, pulled out the phone, and read the message. He was here. I replied, letting Brice know I was out back but would be there in just a moment.

Reluctantly, I sat up, then stood. This was why I hadn't climbed into our bed. I knew if I did that, I'd doze off. Then I'd gone and made the mistake of lying in the sun on the back deck, and now I felt groggy.

After closing and locking the door behind me, I went through the house and opened the front door. Brice was standing there with a familiar face. I smiled at Elliot. It took only a few seconds for it to hit me. Elliot had triplets. My eyes widened, and I pointed at the younger warlock.

“You have triplets!”

Elliot chuckled. “Yes. What about it?”

I sighed. I closed the door behind me and groaned. It was locked, and I’d left my key inside.

“What’s wrong?” Brice asked, grabbing for my arms.

“My key is locked inside.”

“I can help with that,” Elliot said. I suddenly found myself back inside the house, and after opening the door so the other two wouldn’t be stuck outside, I went to the kitchen and grabbed my keys from the little basket we kept them in.

“What about the triplets? They’re not a secret. You’ve even gone running and swimming with them.”

I grinned at those memories. My tiger loved the water, and I swam whenever I could.

“Nothing bad. Do you remember your pregnancy?” I knew it had been some time since he’d carried their triplets, but hopefully, he remembered some of it.

“I remember it. Why do you ask?”

“I have no energy. None. Constantine said it’s because I’m carrying three. But yesterday, we went for a walk. I made it like two houses down—more like three, actually—but then I was tired, and we needed to come back. Is this going to stick around the entire pregnancy? I’m tired of being tired.”

I was whining, but I didn’t care.

“It’s different for everyone, but I think a lot of omegas are lacking energy in what’s their first trimester. But you’re carrying three, so you might not get it back anytime soon.”

My shoulders dropped. That was what I was afraid of. Even Constantine had warned me that my energy would be

fleeting when I had it. Determined to make the most of things as they were, I took what I hoped was a fortifying breath and nodded.

“Very well. I’ll just have to learn to accept the fact that not only do none of my clothes fit, but I’m not going to have much energy for the next two months.”

Elliot gave me a sympathetic look and rubbed up and down my arm.

“Well, Parker’s shirt looks great on you, then.” Elliot looked me up and down before smiling. “His pants do too.”

“The pants are actually mine. I bought them for a trip last summer and then never went. But they have a drawstring waist, so I can tie them to where they stay up.” I looked down at my stomach. “At least for now. I’ll have to find something else because it’s basically been sweats and PJ pants.”

“You know, I always thought I’d have an omega someday. Then I met Atticus and honestly thought that the fates had messed up somehow and had given me a human male for a mate. But then to find out Atticus is actually a hellhound and they’re all alphas, so I have an alpha for a mate.” Brice shook his head. “I’m thankful. I don’t know how you do it. You have to put up with so much to bring babies into the world.”

Elliot grinned, and I shrugged. I’d not done a whole lot yet, but Elliot had four kids with Troy, and he knew exactly what all went into having children.

“It’s a pain we’re willing to endure to have our children.”

“Are you ready? If we don’t go soon, I’m afraid that Parker might get a little worried. As it is, I’ve felt him push out to me several times this morning.”

Elliot smiled. “That’s sweet. He’s just checking in on you.”

“I know. I don’t mind at all. But I’m trying to not bother him at work. It was hard enough for him to go to work this morning.”

“As another lion alpha, I can relate. I might not have an omega, and not one that’s pregnant, but I get the worry from

being apart from your mate. I'm lucky that Atticus has magic and can come back to me in a moment. But he deals with a lot of evil, and it's concerning."

"I'm glad Troy works in the park. They're armed, mind you, but they deal mostly with lost hikers or drunk ones. I'll take that over rogue demons and dishonest alphas that are pure evil any day."

That was understandable. It was a relief when I found out that Parker was an interrogator for the council. Sure, he had to question those rogue demons and other pure evilness, but he was home every evening, and we wouldn't have to spend weeks apart. I would deal if that were the case, but I knew I was one of the luckier ones.

"Let's not keep Parker waiting," Elliot said. "If you're ready?"

I nodded. Elliot reached out, touched my arm, and next thing I knew, my stomach rolled a bit, and I found myself standing in front of the council building. You couldn't mistake it for anything else. But it had been a while since I'd been here, and things looked different.

"I'll be just a text away," Elliot told us.

"Thanks, Elliot," Brice and I said at the same time.

Elliot nodded, then disappeared.

"Do you know how we get inside?"

"Sure do," Brice said. He held up a badge, and I followed him over to the door. He swiped the badge, then typed a code into the keypad, and the door clicked. Brice pulled it open, and we stepped inside. The room was as I'd remembered—huge.

Brice immediately went to the security desk on the left and handed the guy there his badge.

"This is Markus. He's Parker's mate and doesn't have a badge yet."

The guy behind the desk nodded. "I have a badge for him, but Parker has to be here for me to give it up."

“Understood,” Brice said.

I looked around, confused. “How do I get in, then?”

“You can either use your bond and call for your mate to come to the security desk, or Brice here can sign you in. Either works. Brice has clearance enough to sign guests in.”

“Just sign your name, Markus. Parker can get you your badge before you leave.”

I nodded. That worked for me. I signed my name where the guy behind the desk indicated and then was given a lanyard with a card on it. It said “visitor” on it, but I didn’t care, really. If it got me inside the building and to where I could see my mate, that worked for me.

“Thanks, Spencer,” Brice said. I smiled at the shifter, then followed Brice into the large foyer, trusting him to know where we were going.

“Do you know where Parker’s office is?” I asked as I walked beside Brice.

“I do, but we’re going to the cafeteria. Atticus said they’d meet us there.”

“Oh. Parker hasn’t said a thing to me about that. But I had just assumed we would go to his office.”

Brice glanced at me before he placed a hand on the middle of my back to direct me down a hallway that was just to our slight right. I went with it, and as soon as we entered the hallway, the scents coming from the cafeteria hit me, and my stomach growled. Brice must have heard it because he chuckled.

“The food here is always really good. The council knows how important food is to shifters. True, there are several warlocks, and they don’t eat nearly as much as we do, but the vampires can definitely give us a run for our money when it comes to eating red meat.”

I could only nod. It was all a bit overwhelming now that I was here. I’d not expected to ever be back at the council, and

I'd not asked Parker any questions about anything. Now here I was with Brice.

"How are things going down at the department?" I asked. I missed working with the guys and wondered if I'd ever go back. I knew that Alpha War wouldn't be able to hold my job open for me for as long as I was going to need. That didn't mean I couldn't possibly do something else later. Our kids would eventually go off to the shifter school, and then I'd suddenly find myself with nothing to fill my time.

"They're good." Brice looked at me and grinned. "Max is getting a transfer finally."

"What? Where?"

"Colorado. It's where his wife is from, and she really wanted to be closer to her parents." Brice shrugged. "I guess she was a very late-in-life baby, and they're getting up there in age and have had a few moments where she's drawn the line and said she was going with or without Max. He put in his notice and leaves at the end of the week."

"Already?"

Brice nodded. "It was several weeks ago that he put in his notice. Alpha War put in a good recommendation for him, and he was able to get hired in at the sheriff's department there, I guess."

This was huge news. If the only human was gone from the sheriff's department, that meant the deputies could be a little laxer about things at times. We always had to be careful when around humans, but when we knew we had privacy, we could speak more freely.

Brice entered the cafeteria, and those scents were even more amplified. I saw movement off to my right and turned just in time to see Parker wrap me up in his arms. After a moment of shock, I melted into his arms and held him as tightly as I could.

I stayed there for several long minutes, just letting my mate hold me. He'd only been gone a few hours, but now that I was here with him, it seemed to hit me harder than expected.

I was going to blame it on pregnancy hormones. I was sure that was at least part of it but knew it wasn't quite that simple.

"Hey, are you all right?" Parker whispered near my ear.

"I am now. I missed you, and not talking to you through our bond has been so much harder than I expected." My voice was muffled because my face was buried in his neck, but I knew he'd heard.

I pulled away enough to look at Parker. He surprised me by leaning in and kissing me there in front of everyone. I wasn't going to complain. Parker was definitely free with his affection when we were home, and he often touched my back or held my hand when we were outside. But I'd not expected him to kiss me in front of everyone in the cafeteria. When I looked to my left, I saw Atticus and Brice already in line, Atticus's hand on his mate's back, and they were leaning in close together.

"I'm sorry, Markus."

I looked back at my mate, curious. "For what?"

"For agreeing to not reach out. Talk to me as much as you want. I'll let you know if I'm questioning anyone. But for the most part, this morning has been playing catch-up and trying to make heads or tails of the mess that is my files. Marc, bless him though. He did try. And once I showed him the system, he caught on quickly and had most of it fixed as of ten minutes ago."

"So he's working out well?" I asked just before my stomach growled again.

"Seems to be. We can talk more over lunch though. Let me feed you so your stomach stops complaining." I couldn't disagree with that. I would love to spend a meal with my mate. I knew I'd seen him just a few hours ago, but I'd missed him more than I'd anticipated. I followed Parker to the line and took the tray and plate he handed to me. Everything looked and smelled so good, and I didn't know how I'd be able to choose, but I'd give it a try.

CHAPTER 15

PARKER



“Mornin’,” Marc said as I entered the office I now shared with him.

“Good morning. How are you this morning?” I asked. I placed my coffee on the desk and dropped my bag onto the floor beside it.

When Marc didn’t answer, I glanced his way. He shrugged.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Sorry you got stuck with me.”

I scoffed. “Not stuck. You’ve been a great help. How are things going with you?” I asked as I sat at my desk. I had a meeting this morning with several of the created ones regarding the wolf pack in Mississippi that we had just started investigating right before I’d met Markus.

“Not bad. I’m really thankful that Master Edison didn’t make me move out of my house here on the mountain.”

I froze. I’d been gone for so long I didn’t know what was happening here at the council anymore, it seemed.

“What do you mean? Why would you move?”

“Alpha Bernard isn’t exactly happy with me.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Is he still giving you problems?” I’d met the created bear a few times. He as well as Alpha Vitomir were both the epitome of cranky bears, and I felt bad for any of the enforcers that ended up under their teams.

“No. But he wasn’t too happy that I wasn’t ready to go back into the field right away.”

My lion wanted to growl. “I live in mated enforcer housing. My title has never been enforcer. Why would I be there and you had to move?” That made absolutely no sense.

Marc shrugged.

There was a knock on the door. We both looked toward it and saw a smiling Aleric poking his head inside.

“Hey, Marc.”

Marc sat up a bit.

“Yes, sir?”

I felt terrible. Marc had certainly gotten a bad end of everything simply because he wanted to help the council in a different way rather than being an enforcer.

“Konrad reminded me to ask if you and Scott wanted to bring the babies over for supper this weekend.” Aleric looked directly at me. “He can’t get enough of all of the babies, and the more, the merrier for him.”

I grinned. That was a good thing.

“Umm, I can ask. We’re going to Scott’s parents’ house tomorrow. They’re going to be leaving on Sunday to visit his sister and her mate. They’re expecting their second, but they wanted to spend some time with our twins before they left.”

Aleric nodded. I could only sit there and try to absorb as much information as I could. I’d missed so much. “Sunday works. But if you will be too tired from tomorrow, I’m sure next weekend will work for him. We’ve not had you over yet, so we wanted to ask.”

“Umm...I’ll let you know by lunchtime.”

“Sounds good.” Aleric patted the doorframe with his hand. “See you in the meeting in a bit,” he told me. I nodded and watched him disappear from view.

“That was odd,” Marc said.

“What? Why?”

“Do they invite all of the mated couples over?”

I shrugged. I actually had no clue. “Not sure. But Aleric was with his parents when they claimed Treasure Ridge. Maybe it has something to do with that? They’re a bit like the founding family here or something. I do know they love babies though, and they’re always fighting over their grandkids. Enjoy it if you can.”

I picked up a file folder and opened it. It had information about one Alpha Woodrow. He was the dirty alpha of the pack in Mississippi.

“Do you know if there’s any more information about Alpha Woodrow?” I asked Marc.

“Yeah. I was able to get some information last week.” Marc went searching in the pile of files on his desk before he found what he was looking for close to the bottom. “Dr. Bennett had some new notes from his sessions with Hailey.”

I felt my jaw tighten at the thought of Hailey and what she’d been put through. She was only fourteen and entirely too young to be subjected to the ugliness of their pack’s alpha and beta.

“Thanks,” I said, taking the file folder from Marc.

“Do you find it odd that your mate and I have the same name now?”

I snorted, pulling my eyes from the paper I’d been scanning. “Well, I know that until me, Markus was only called Markus by his mother. He had always preferred to be called Mark. But he’s never once asked me to call him Mark, and I’ve always called him Markus.” I shrugged. “You shall continue to be Marc and my mate Markus. No confusion.” I smirked before I went back to the file in front of me. “Is this correct?” I asked. I held out the page when Marc leaned closer.

“As far as I know. You’d have to talk to Dr. Bennett about it. I’ve actually not gotten to that file yet, which is why the new notes are in the file on your desk.”

I nodded. I got it. There were only two of us here full-time. I had another that helped when needed, but sadly my department was still understaffed. I needed more help if we were going to be continuing on at our current pace.

“You know...I don’t know what you used to do before you joined the council. You’re good at research.”

Marc chuckled. “You’ll laugh.”

Marc had my attention. “How so?”

“I worked in forensics.”

I chuckled. He was right. “No way.”

“Yep. All the way down in Denver. I’d had enough with dealing with the politics in the human departments, and when I heard about the council forming and how they needed enforcers, I applied.”

That was frustrating as hell. How had Marc not been put in my department from the beginning? “Did Alpha Bernard know about your background?”

Marc nodded. “They all did. I applied for an enforcer position, though, because it was all that was open. Thankfully, Master Edison was willing to put me with you.”

I looked around the room. There were only two of us in the office. Two. There were dozens of enforcers.

“I wonder how many more are in fieldwork when they would be better suited for other positions.”

“Not sure. There are probably some. I think the council was focusing on field agents at first though.”

I could understand that and knew that even after two years, the council was still working things out. But it had been two years. Why weren’t they more balanced by now?

“Interesting. Well, if you worked in forensics, it makes perfect sense that you’re good at research. I could have really used you when we were all focused on the trafficking ring down in New Orleans.”

Marc nodded. “There’s a lot to be found there still.”

That caught my attention. We were still watching the area but had stopped focusing there. “What do you mean?”

Marc spun in his chair and, after typing in a code, opened the file cabinet. He pulled out a file and wheeled himself over to me.

“I get that we’re looking elsewhere now. But if you look back at everything that was found in New Orleans, if you know what to look for, it’ll give you clues as to where we should be looking.”

I nodded. “Yeah, we already knew that.”

“Yes, but what about where to look for the missing paranormals?”

“We’re still looking for those. The hellhounds are going out in pairs to search places that are possibilities.”

“But why not ask the ones that were overlooked?”

“What do you mean?”

“The vampire coven. They have some fairly high-ranking members still breathing.”

“The coven master was killed.”

“Yes. But there were some that had information that were never accounted for. The one vampire on Master Ambrosius’s committee. The older one. Have you asked him?”

It took me a moment. “Laurent?”

Marc nodded.

“He was basically just an enforcer.”

“Yes, but he knew names and could give you a yes or no on who has been accounted for or not.”

“We’ve asked him,” I told the bear shifter.

“But have you asked him about non-paranormal businesses the coven had dealings with?”

I started to nod but stopped. “What do you mean?”

“All of the packs, dens, covens, prides, clans, thunders, all of them. They all have dealings with human businesses of some sort. We don’t have a choice.”

“All right. What about them though? I’m really not seeing what you are.” But I was definitely interested.

“Because it’s what I’ve always done. I went looking, researching. They all have business dealings with human companies, usually some sort of financial institution that in turn invests in something. And it’s usually raw textiles.”

“Like cotton?”

“Cotton being one. Can be anything though. Cotton, sugar cane, coffee beans, something along those lines that ship goods to and from other countries.”

“I’m listening.” I nudged my head for Marc to continue.

“Those goods have to be shipped. They are usually sent on massive cargo ships. Those ships have containers on them that hold those goods. If shifters are drugged, caged, and loaded in the middle of those containers, then surrounded by textiles, when the doors are opened for inspection, the shifters won’t be seen or heard, even if they happen to be awake. Humans can’t hear as well as we can.”

That made sense. We’d been looking for smaller boats. Ones that were carrying people, not goods. “Do you have a name for any of these companies?”

“I’m working on that. There are a few, but so far, I’m not finding any specific common one.”

I shrugged. “There might not be. But if we start scanning all of the business files and cross-referencing the information, we might find something in common.”

“I’ve been working on that in between everything else.”

I shook my head as I stood. “You focus on that. I’m going to go drop in on Master Edison for a few and see if he can get us more help. I have some interviews to revisit.”

Marc nodded, then started pulling out files and opening documents on his computer. I took the few folders I might

need and went in search of the created warlock. Perhaps giving me Marc earlier in our investigation would have been more beneficial. It was frustrating, but there wasn't much I could do about it now. I could only make the best of things going forward. But if there were more enforcers that had a research background, I wanted to see if they would be willing to join my department. If not, I needed to put in a request for more people in my department.

I nodded at others as I walked through the hallways, exiting to the main foyer and walking straight across to head to Master Edison's hallway. Technically, it wasn't his hallway, but it did have him and Master Ambrosius and all of their various committee people in it.

I was actually a bit surprised to find his door open and him sitting behind his desk. He was rubbing his forehead, and I wondered what could possibly be bothering him. We weren't supposed to get ill, and as far as I knew, that included headaches.

I knocked on the doorway.

"Come in, Parker. I've been expecting you all week."

That should be unnerving, but it was Master Edison.

"Master Edison?"

He finally looked up from his desk. "Have a seat," he said, pointing to one of the chairs on the other side of his desk. I sat, glancing around and wondering where Wallace was. I didn't scent him in the office, which told me he was either not here or was elsewhere in the building. "What can I do for you? You've brought files?"

"Yes." I handed the files over. "Marc told me he used to work in forensics," I said. Master Edison nodded. "It would have been incredibly helpful when the council was forming if, instead of being put in a field agent position, he was given to my department."

"He applied for a field agent position though," Master Edison said.

I sighed. I wasn't going to argue with one of the created ones. They deserved our respect, but the issue was that the council was still very much lopsided.

“Master Edison, I'm not trying to be disrespectful, but it's been two years now, and there are just now two full-time people in my department. Marc has young twins, I have triplets on the way with my mate, and we don't have enough people in our department.”

“What are you saying?”

“That we need more people. Specifically, ones that are good at research.” I indicated the files. “Marc pointed out that if we'd thought to look in the beginning, we might have had more information about where to search for the missing paranormals and how they were getting them out of here.”

Master Edison glanced at the files, then quickly back at me. “What did we miss?”

“Cargo ships.”

“We looked at those.”

“The large ones? The ones with all of the large cargo containers on them?”

“Those are inspected. They would have known if people were being smuggled out in them.”

“Unless the people were sedated.” I held out a finger. “Caged.” Another finger. “Buried in among the cargo.” A third finger. “Or there was someone that could be bought for a price, and they overlooked the containers. Any way you look at it, it's a very real possibility that is how they were getting the paranormals out of here. Marc was cross-referencing common businesses with the currently known places that paranormals are going missing from.”

It seemed as if I'd at least caught Master Edison's attention. Now if I could just get a few more people on our team, and maybe we could bring some more of the trafficked paranormals home. I'd love to bring them all home, but even I knew that not all of them were still alive.

“Those are good points. What do you need from us? And why not go to Alpha Amari with this?”

I shrugged. “He’s not quite as approachable as you seem to be, to be honest.”

Master Edison groaned. “Alpha Amari is a bit distracted at the moment with family issues. That’s all I feel comfortable with mentioning.”

I didn’t need to know. But Alpha Amari had been “distracted” for some time, then, because he’d been quite cranky and growly for a while.

“I’ll talk to Amari about his crankiness. What can I do to help you?”

“More people. I need more. More researchers, more interrogators. We’re two now. I’ve been one and a half since the beginning. I can’t do it all, and every day we aren’t getting things accomplished, that’s another day someone is suffering or another one goes missing.”

Master Edison sat back and nodded slowly. “I’ll get you some people. Might not be next week, but we’ll get you abled people to help. Anything else?”

I winced. “Marc had mentioned asking Laurent if he had ever heard about who his coven had dealings with in the financial world.”

“Their bank?” Master Edison reached for his keyboard and started typing. He hit Enter, scrolled a bit, then typed again and scrolled some more. “It’s not here. I’ll have Laurent come to your office so he can ask his questions. Does he think it’s the financial companies?”

“It’s possible they’re linked somehow. There’s always one larger parent company that has smaller companies under it. It helps not only with taxes but keeps the big guy protected. He couldn’t find that information for the coven in New Orleans. I’m not sure about the pack in Mississippi. But I remember the financial information for the Evergreen pack in St. Louis was in the notes. That’s a place to start.”

“Good. Start there. I’m going to go run this new information by Ambrose, and we’ll talk to the others in our afternoon meeting. It’s Friday, after all, and we need to know what’s new over the week.” Master Edison glanced at the wall. “You got this to me just in time.” Master Edison stood.

“Sir?” I said, wondering about his comment when I first arrived. Master Edison continued around his desk, then sat on the front of it.

“Yes?”

“When I first arrived, you said you’d been expecting me all week. Is something wrong? Are my mate and children all right?”

Master Edison smiled. “As far as I’ve been able to see, they’re perfectly fine. Markus will be tired, and you should agree when he suggests your family coming to stay.”

I nodded. “I had already planned on asking this weekend when we talked to them. My parents are already quite taken with Markus but don’t yet know about the triplets. We were going to wait a little longer before making that announcement.”

“That is understandable. But to further explain my comment, a lot has changed for you in the past several weeks. I had assumed you would have issue with the house I insisted you take.”

“It did cross my mind.”

“There is a reason. It will be clear later. But in part, it was because of the triplets. Room is needed for so many, especially when you will go on to have more than just those three.”

My world tilted just then. “I’m sorry?”

Master Edison chuckled. “You and Markus will have a few more before it’s all said and done. The placement of that house will allow for the house to be expanded, as it were. And we will be adding another two streets to the mated enforcer housing, so there will be more in your little neighborhood soon.”

I could only nod. My brain was still focused on more children. Not one more. A few more. Few was three or more. How many children were we going to end up having?

I nodded slowly and stood. “Thanks, Master Edison. Help in the department is needed, if you would.” I walked out of the office to the sound of chuckling behind me. I leaned back, peeking back into the office, but that only made Master Edison laugh harder. I made it several steps before I had to lean against the wall.

“Markus?”

“Hey, you! How’s work?”

“Good. Busy. Crazy.” Did I tell him? No. I decided not to. He was already somewhat stressed about having the three he was carrying now. I didn’t want to add to that.

“Is everything all right?”

“Busy. But I’ve just come from a meeting with Master Edison. I will hopefully be getting more people in my department. Marc is a great fit for my department, but I think with his help, we’re about to add more work to our plates, and that means we need more people.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Not at all. But there’s a lot going on and more to come. I just wanted to pop in and say hello. You make me smile among the chaos that is my job lately.”

That was actually the truth. Just thinking about Markus brought a smile to my face.

“I’m glad I could make you smile. If you need another smile later, let me know. I could join you for lunch if you wanted?”

I did want that. I pushed off the wall and continued down. I wasn’t going to get back to work by standing against the wall outside of Master Edison’s office.

“Only if you’re up for it. If you’re not feeling well enough, I’ll see you midafternoon when I get home.”

“I should. It’s been since Monday that I was there. What’s on the menu today?”

I chuckled. *“Not sure. I’ll email it to you when I get back to my office.”*

“Sounds good. Plan on me being there though. I want to try out my new badge.”

“All right. I’ll see you in a couple of hours.”

“Perfect. See you soon. I have to go throw the laundry into the dryer. You know, keep busy and all.”

I felt bad. He’d given up so much when he mated with me. *“Just don’t overdo.”*

“I won’t. Promise.”

Markus went quiet, and I figured he’d busied himself at the house. I did everything I could in the evenings to keep him from doing them during the day while I was at work. At the moment, I needed to get back to my office so I could make sure I was at a point that I could go home early. It was Friday, after all.

CHAPTER 16

MARKUS



It was incredibly difficult to sit still. I didn't have a whole lot of energy, but we were waiting on Constantine to arrive to do our ultrasound. He'd agreed to come to us for the care as it caused less stress on me and the babies since I didn't care to travel via warlock. It just wasn't my thing.

"I would say you would wear a hole in the rug, but we don't have one," Parker said. I stopped my pacing and looked at my mate.

"Should we get one?" I looked down at the gorgeous wood floors. Maybe we should get a rug. It would help keep the furniture from sliding, and when the babies started crawling, it would make that easier.

Parker came to me, a smile on his face, and wrapped his arms around me. The kiss was completely expected, and I returned it. It was a bit disappointing when Parker pulled away quickly though.

"We can get a rug if you wish. But I like the room without it. A rug has benefits though."

Parker pulled away, and I tried not to let it show how much that hurt. I understood he was stressed about everything. The babies, work, trying to balance everything, but I felt he was pulling away a little. Maybe it was just me; I wasn't sure. I'd spent every day this week with Alexander for at least a little while. He was a doctor, and he'd just given birth a month ago. He was full of helpful information and had tips and tricks for me. Like, how to hide my pregnancy growing pains from my

mate so he wouldn't freak out every time I had one and my alpha felt it through our bond. I wasn't sure that was the best thing to do, but I'd been reassured that it was something I might want to consider later on once Parker started obsessing over every little stretch, bump, and kick.

"What's wrong?" Parker asked. I turned toward his voice and smiled. I had to blink a few times to be able to focus on him.

"Nothing that I know of." I walked back over to the back wall and stared out at the forest beyond our little yard. The trees were thick off to the left and back behind the row of houses where Raiden and Alexander lived, but to our right, they had been cleared for the neighborhood.

I heard Parker coming up behind me, and when his hand gently touched my back, I looked to my right to stare at my mate.

"Something is bothering you."

I shook my head. "No. I'm anxious. We're going to get to see our babies. How fun will that be?"

"It will be nice."

I glared. "Nice? Just nice?"

"Well, you said fun. I'm, of course, excited to see the babies. I'm worried about you though." Parker reached out for me and ran his fingers down my cheek. "You're tired all of the time, and now you have morning sickness that's all day and night."

I started pouting. I would rather be tired all of the time than have to deal with being nauseous. I'd discovered it was something I could certainly live without.

"True, but there are three babies. Constantine said it was to be expected. Lots going on in this area," I said as I held my hand out in front of my stomach. I looked ready to give birth at any moment, which wasn't a good thing. I still had six weeks to go before I was actually due.

Parker started to say something, but we both heard a knock on the door. Parker left, hurrying across the room and disappearing in the hallway as he went to the front door to answer it. We both knew it was most likely Constantine, but it was possible it was someone else.

I heard voices, smiling when I saw the warlock doctor with Parker. He had a young blond with him, and I'd say that with how familiar they seemed to be with each other, that was Miles. He was walking beside Constantine but seemed to be staring at Parker intently. It was Constantine who first noticed me.

"Hello, Markus. How are you feeling?" Constantine asked.

I placed a hand on my stomach and sighed. "Pregnant, actually."

"I don't miss those days," Miles said. He left the trio and came to stand in front of me. "I'm Miles, Costas's One. I was in your shoes a few years ago, and although I love my kids, I did not enjoy being pregnant."

I smiled. "I'm not disliking it yet. Just tired all of the time," I told Miles.

"Yep. And uncomfortable in any position?"

I shook my head. "Not yet. Is that to come?" I asked, worried. I looked to the doctor for an answer.

"Miles, stop. You're upsetting him, and that's not what we want."

"I don't mean to, Costas. Even you agreed my pregnancy was difficult, and Markus is carrying triplets."

Constantine sighed. "He's usually much more tactful." Constantine and Parker were now standing close, and I suddenly felt boxed in against the windows behind me. I moved toward Parker and slipped out from behind him. Parker gave me a look, but I chose to ignore him.

"What do you need from me for the ultrasound? You had said it would be a magical one?"

Constantine nodded. “Yes. With multiples, it’s the best choice. Well, with all of them, actually. I can use magic and look at the babies from all sides, even if you have one that’s hiding behind a sibling. All I’ll ask is for you to lie somewhere that you will be comfortable. It will take some time.”

I pointed to the couch. It was very comfortable, and I’d spent a lot of time on it already.

“The couch is fine. Ours was Miles’s preferred sleeping spot when he was close to delivering our three.”

I looked to Parker, who shook his head at me. I narrowed my eyes. “Are you saying I can’t spend the night on the couch if it’s the only place I’m comfortable?”

“Markus, you have this giant body pillow as well as four others that you place around you in various places when we’re in bed. If you’re not comfortable with all of that, tell me how the couch would be? It’s narrow in comparison.”

He had a point. I crossed the room and got comfortable on the couch. Parker ended up helping with a second pillow, this one under my shoulders. That was certainly better.

“Is it all right to sit on the table?” Constantine asked.

“Sure. We put our feet on it though, so if that bothers you, then maybe don’t,” Parker told him.

Constantine shook his head. “I’m the father of seven-year-olds. Trust me when I say that you putting your feet on the coffee table is absolutely nothing compared to what those three get into.”

“Oh yeah. Last week, they somehow managed to get their hands on snails. I’m still not sure where they found them. We don’t have snails anywhere they should be able to get to. But somehow, they had them and thought it was absolutely fascinating that they were slimy in their hands,” Miles told me.

I wasn’t sure if I should laugh or be horrified. I looked at Parker, then glanced down at my stomach before looking back to my mate.

“Ours won’t be like that,” Parker said, trying to reassure me. He cleared his throat. “At least, not at first, I don’t think. Constantine said they were seven. We have years yet.”

I did laugh at that because what else could I do?

“There we go,” Constantine said. I focused on the doctor, curious about that comment.

“There we go what?” I asked.

“You were getting a bit anxious. Although the fun times with the slugs is actually true. I’ve even asked Arthur, and even he said he had no clue where they could have gotten them.”

I chuckled. “Well, it is a coven full of warlocks, is it not?”

“Yes. But whoever it was that provided them to the triplets isn’t admitting it,” Constantine said. “Are you ready to get started?”

“Yes,” I said. I was more than ready to see my babies.

“Good. Let’s just...” Constantine tilted his head to the side just a little, and the blinds on the back wall lowered. “Feel free to ask any and all questions at any time. Before we get started, I’ll ask once more if you want to know what you’re having.”

I looked to Parker. We’d been back and forth on that. We’d agreed we wanted to know, then decided we wanted it to be a surprise.

“We’re actually struggling a little on that,” Parker told him.

“Understandable.”

“You could have Costas write it down and seal it in an envelope for you if you want,” Miles suggested.

“Oh, that could be fun. We might decide we want to know, and if we do, we can just open it,” I said. “Could you do that?”

“I can and will. The sealed envelope is on the counter for you if you decide you wish to know,” Constantine told us.

“That fast?” Parker asked.

“Yes. I’ve known since our second meeting what you were having. I will make sure the sex of the babies isn’t able to be seen in any of the images.”

I looked over at Parker, who had sat on the floor beside me. *“He’s known since then? And didn’t say anything?”*

“Well, you’ve not asked to know what we’re having. I am sure he’ll gladly tell us if you only ask.”

I shook my head. I wanted to know, but I wanted the surprise more. Any thought about what we were having left my mind when suddenly, in front of us, were the images of our three babies.

“There they are,” Constantine said. “Baby A is sucking their thumb, Baby B is flipped opposite from A, and Baby C is being a bit shy behind the other two, which is why it’s easier this way when there are multiples especially.”

“Is that really what they look like?” I asked. I was completely in awe about what we were seeing.

“Isn’t it neat?” Miles asked. He was behind the couch, leaning over the back near us. “Costas did these all the time when I was pregnant. There’s only so much you can do when you’re on bed rest for more than half of your pregnancy.”

My eyes widened. I’d not been told I needed to be on bed rest. “Should I be resting more?” I asked, suddenly worried.

“Not unless your body tells you to. Miles had blood pressure issues and kept fainting. He had to be put on bed rest because of it.”

That was terrible. Alexander had something similar, and I’d found out this week that he and the baby both almost died during delivery.

“Constantine?” I said quietly.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Is everything all right? Alexander told me he and Rowan almost died during delivery.”

Constantine moved the images a bit closer, then enlarged them.

“Your babies all appear to be exactly where they should be in development. Their heartbeats are strong, and even the shy one, as you can see there, is active. Your babies are obviously all feline shifters. Alexander was a special case. Pregnancies carrying gargoyle babies have always been known to be difficult.”

“And triplets?” Parker asked.

“There is always risk with any pregnancy. Multiples increases those risks. The case with Alexander, though, is that he went into labor early but didn’t recognize the signs because whatever is here on the mountain that seems to be drawn to pregnant omegas especially seemed to take away his pain, and he felt none after that. He had thought it was another pain related to the pregnancy.”

I looked to my mate, suddenly very worried.

“How do I make sure whatever it is that’s here doesn’t do that to me?”

“Grandpa doesn’t think that whatever it is has any malicious intent,” Miles said. “It was trying to help Alexander and the baby. Once the labor progressed to the point that he had to deliver, there was serious infection, and Costas had to take Alexander’s womb.”

“Aspen,” I said quietly, but everyone heard me.

“Aspen?” Parker questioned.

“He’s alpha mate in Timber Valley. He had triplets and had to have his womb taken.”

Parker shook his head. “You won’t,” he told me.

“How do you know for certain? You can’t know.”

Parker narrowed his eyes. “Even if you did, it wouldn’t change the fact that you are my mate, and I would still love you. But it doesn’t matter because Master Edison said we would have several more. You are going to be fine.”

My ears stopped listening when Parker said he loved me.

“You love me?” I asked just above a whisper.

There was a throat clearing, but I couldn't take my eyes off my mate. I heard Parker grumble something but couldn't quite make it out because my ears sounded as if I was hiding under a pillow.

“That is...this isn't how I wanted to tell you,” Parker said. “I wanted to give you romance and tell and show you just how much I love you. But yes, I love you. How could I not?” Parker said, taking my hands and holding them tight. “You make me smile in the middle of a crazy day at work, you are happy to see me when I get home, and you light up any room you're in. Even exhausted and nauseous from morning sickness, you are still a positive ray of sunshine, and I love being around you. My life would be dark and pointless without you.”

“I love you too,” I managed to say back. I was crying though, and my voice broke, but Parker didn't seem to mind. He leaned in and gave me a sweet kiss, his lips pressed to mine for several beats but not asking for more. When Parker ended the kiss, he sat back down, then brought our joined hands to his mouth and kissed both of my hands.

“I'm forever thankful you love me too. I had a feeling, but the timing never seemed right. I apologize for not telling you. I should have when I first realized I'd fallen completely for you. You deserve everything, and I'm sorry I withheld it from you.”

I shook my head. “Don't be. You did nothing wrong.” I chuckled. I pulled a hand free and used it to grab the collar of my shirt and tried to wipe my eyes with it. “The timing has been bad. If I'm not sleeping, I've been sick lately. And before, we were so busy doing everything else. We claimed each other, moved, tried to figure out how to live together, had to decide what to do about our jobs and my college, and of course, we've spent evenings getting to know each other. We've been busy.”

I chuckled, and Parker kissed my hand again.

“I’ll still give you romance. You deserve it. And I know it’ll be even more difficult to get time alone together after the babies are born. We need to make the best of things now while we can.”

I nodded in agreement. I swiped at my eyes with my fingers, and Parker stood. “Be right back.”

He headed for the bathroom and returned moments later with some toilet paper. I needed to add tissues to the shopping list, apparently.

“Thank you,” I told him as I took the tissue from him and wiped my eyes. My nose was dripping only a little, but a quick wipe of that, and I was good. “Where did Constantine and Miles go?”

“They walked over toward the front door. I think they felt we might need a bit of privacy.”

I nodded. That was sweet of them. “Did Master Edison really say we were going to have more kids?”

Parker cringed. “He did. I know we said only a couple, then got triplets first time out. But according to Master Edison, you will have more children. I would say we should believe him and just take it as it comes.”

“Okay.” What else could I say? He was the created warlock, and he could at times see the future. If he saw me having more children, we’d have more children.

“Is it all right to return? If you’d like, we can do the ultrasound another day,” Constantine said.

I couldn’t see him because of the back of the couch, but Parker apparently could. My mate looked down at me, and I nodded. I was ready to finish the ultrasound.

“He’d like to finish. I would as well,” Parker said.

“Then finish we shall,” Constantine said as he and Miles reentered the room. Parker sat beside me on the floor again, but this time, Miles stood beside his mate, who once again sat on the coffee table. “Now then. Where were we?” Constantine said.

Images of our babies suddenly reappeared in the air in front of us, and I was just as mesmerized as I had been before.

“Look at their tiny little fingers,” Parker said. He leaned down close to me, and when he kissed my shoulder, I turned my head and looked at my mate. He kissed my nose, which caused me to laugh. When I looked back up at the images, they were shaking a bit.

“Is that from my laughing?”

“It is. I’m using magic to project their images up into the air for you. Their sizes are quite good with there being three. Their spines are developed and closed, they have all of their fingers and toes. Organs look good. Lungs will need a few more weeks for development, but otherwise, they look amazing.”

One of the babies was still sucking its thumb, and I wondered if it was the same one or a different one this time. It didn’t matter. Our babies were developing as they should be, and my mate loved me. The only thing that could make my life more perfect was if our babies were already here. In time, I told myself.

CHAPTER 17

PARKER



“How was your ultrasound yesterday?” Marc asked about five minutes after I entered the office. I was a bit surprised to see him here already because I wasn’t exactly late.

“It went well. Constantine is a very good doctor, and the ultrasound showed that the babies are healthy and where they need to be developmentally.”

“Babies? Markus is having twins, then?”

I grinned. “Actually, it’s triplets.”

“Triplets? No wonder you have the warlock doctor. Congrats on three though.”

“Did Arik deliver your twins? I’m sorry, I don’t even know.”

Marc shook his head. “No. Scott had his care and delivery at the pride. They have a pair of doctors there that have been around for quite some time. Nothing against Arik or anything like that.”

I shook my head.

“Do you have names picked? Nursery theme? Anything like that?”

I winced. “Not yet. We’ve each picked six names—three boy and three girl. But beyond that, we’ve not really done a whole lot. The room next to ours is fairly large, so we’re going to use that as the nursery, and I know that Markus and my

mom have been talking about nursery themes and everything, but I couldn't tell you what he's leaning toward."

Marc chuckled. "Scott couldn't decide. We ended up going with just a soft green-and-tan color scheme, and then most things ended up having teddy bears on them."

I laughed at that. "Your little girl is a bear though, so that's fitting."

"Yeah, but her brother is a lion. We do have a few things with lions on them though. But speaking of bears."

"Yes? Mine won't be bears, and we didn't ask what species they were or what sex. Markus wanted it to be a surprise."

"No, but that's brave. Scott couldn't wait to find out so he could get the nursery decorated, and then he struggled. But that's not what I meant."

I smiled. "I figured as much. What's up?"

"Bears. I talked to Asher. I used to work with him in forensics in Colorado. He's looking for a change of scenery and asked about coming here."

"Yes. A hundred percent yes. Have him fill out the application and send it directly to Master Edison. He said he'd push applications through for us."

There was a knock on the door. Marc and I turned and grinned. "Hey, Deacon. What's up?" I asked.

He held up his lanyard and grinned. "I've officially been transferred from the field to here. I'm not going to complain about not having to go out in the field all of the time."

"What?" Marc asked.

"No way," I said at the same time.

"Yeah, I don't have Marc there's background exactly, but I was on the police force before I joined the enforcers. I've done fieldwork before, but I've also spent time in a research lab."

I wanted to shout with happiness. "Great," I said instead. Possibly with a bit too much enthusiasm.

“Where’s the rest of the team?” Deacon asked.

“What team?” Marc asked.

“We’re it,” I said. “And until recently, Marc wasn’t even here. I’ve been going it alone since the beginning. Every so often, Atticus would help. Reinhold too. But mostly, it was Trevor from Salvatore’s team that helped. But Salvatore started complaining about me always taking his guy, so I stopped asking.”

I stood and went to the empty desk that wasn’t really empty. I grabbed the stacks of files, dumped them into a box, and took it over to the file cabinet.

“It’s just you?” Deacon asked. “With that many enforcers now, they haven’t gotten you anyone else?”

I shook my head. “You’ll find that our workload ebbs and flows. At times, we’ll be so bored you’ll be wishing you were back in the field. The next week, we’ll be so busy we won’t have time to sleep, it seems. It really depends on the enforcers and the assignments they’re doing.” I pointed to the desk. “That’s yours. I think it’s empty. If not, it’s something Trevor left in it. Make yourself at home there though. I only ask that you keep it somewhat tidy. I don’t mind clutter, obviously. Just don’t trash the place.” I pointed at my own desk, which was certainly not neat and organized, but that was because I had three different files open at the moment, and I’d been cross-referencing them against other files on the computer.

“Naw, I’m not messy. What do you need me to help with?” Deacon asked. There was a knock on the door before I could answer him though.

“Hey, Aleric,” I said.

“Good, Deacon made it to you,” he said. I nodded. “Can I get maybe ten minutes of your time?”

“Sure,” I told the head enforcer. “Marc, could you get him set up to help with what we’re working on?”

“You know it,” Marc said. He stood as I left the office with Aleric, trying to figure out what was going on. It was rare that

the head enforcer needed to speak to me. I wasn't a field enforcer, and I didn't have a whole lot to do with Aleric.

"Is something wrong?" I asked halfway down the hall.

"No. I wanted to go over some other enforcers with you and see if they were a fit for your team."

I glanced back down the hall, thinking about Deacon and how he'd just shown up.

"Umm, all right. What about Deacon? He said he had been transferred to my department."

"Yes, but he had a background in research. There are a couple others that I think would be good for questioning, things like that, but not necessarily a great fit for doing the research like Marc and Deacon."

"Oh. Makes sense." I still didn't know quite why he couldn't have just sent me the info and I could have looked it over, but here we were.

I walked beside Aleric, turning into his office at the end on the right. "Have a seat. I'll give you the options, and we can see what we can do."

I sat, scratching the side of my head a bit in confusion. I didn't understand why I needed to make the decisions about who would be sent to my department or not, but I didn't mind looking over the files.

"We have Bruno," Aleric said.

It took a moment to place him.

"Bear shifter? Mate is a human?"

Aleric nodded. "Yes. They've been mated...it's here somewhere." Aleric scrolled on the screen. "Here it is. They've been mated for nineteen years." Aleric looked at me and grinned. "They have four teenagers. Three will be in school starting next week. The oldest graduated and wants to take college courses."

"All right. Is this something he or any of the enforcers want to do? Deacon seemed excited to be in the department,

but I don't want to take enforcers from the field simply because I asked Master Edison for help because I have been greatly understaffed."

"It is my understanding that it wasn't intentional. Your department, as well as Salvatore's, has been overlooked. It was a miscommunication because it was understood that one person was filling positions when that person believed it was someone else. It was brought up at their meeting yesterday afternoon, and they've all agreed that it will be a group effort, just as enforcers are."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. Such a complete mess. A lot of it could probably have been avoided if they'd taken that thought process from the beginning.

"I have nothing against Bruno. If he's willing, so am I." I looked at Aleric, hoping he'd help make sense of this for me. "Why now? Do you know?"

"You're about to be a father. Marc already is. Deacon isn't mated, but nobody knows what will happen tomorrow. It was realized that while the focus has been the enforcer force, other areas of the council have been overlooked. Again, it's not just your department. Salvatore's is another as well." Aleric sighed. "The council has also agreed they need to secure their own medical, and there needs to be more than just Roman and his brothers running the store. The need for more personnel all around is great, and they've realized that. It's all been a learning experience."

"Do I need to agree or disagree with who the council hires for my department? I'm just the interrogator. I also do research, but Marc has all but taken over that."

"If you have no preference, I'll pass on who I think might be a good fit and send it on to the others. Like the enforcer selections, they will now all read over, see if they meet the criteria, and go from there."

I sighed. "Good. Then I can go?" I was ready to get out of there in the worst way. I did not want to be included in the selection process of people in my department.

“Yes, but first.”

I had started to stand but sat back down.

“Yes?”

“How do you feel about warlocks?”

I raised an eyebrow at the question. Most of the warlocks were in the field because that was how the teams traveled from place to place.

“I have no issues with warlocks. Why would anyone think that?”

“The particular warlock in question is Luca. He’s petitioned to Master Edison to return to the council.”

“I’m going to do my best to be as diplomatic as possible and say that it isn’t my call. I wasn’t the couple that Luca tried to come in between. Perhaps Benjamin and Eli are who you should be asking about that.”

I stood, nodded at Aleric, and left the office. I absolutely did not want Luca on my team. The final decision wasn’t mine. But if Master Edison chose to allow Luca a second chance, then I would deal with that when and if it happened.

Instead of going back to my own office, I left the hallway and went to the one that had Benjamin’s office. Raiden had said they would be going out on assignment soonish, but so far, they were still here. I needed to know if he was aware of the situation.

I made it to his office in minutes, knocked on the open doorway, and met black eyes I’d never seen before. I looked around the office and found it empty, aside from the one guy who smelled like Reinhold.

“Umm...where’s Benjamin?”

“With his father.”

That accent did not match the...well, look.

“Raiden?”

“With the mate and baby. They were to have brunch.”

I was getting frustrated. “All right. Briggs?”

“Bathroom break.”

I moved into the office. “All right, I’m Parker. I work in research and interrogations. Who are you?”

“Dimitri. I have been here since Wednesday.”

All right, the name matched the accent, but the face, nope.

“Dimitri?”

“Da?”

I thought about it for a moment but instead decided that nope, I wasn’t going to touch that one.

“Could you please tell Benjamin that I stopped by?”

“Da.”

“Thanks.”

“Da.”

Apparently, I was going to get one word from him now, so I called it good and left. I found Briggs halfway down the hallway and pushed him to the side.

“What’s up? Marc not working?”

I shook my head. “No, actually, he’s great. That’s not my question.”

“I didn’t know you had one. How can I help you?”

“I need to talk to Benjamin about Luca,” I told him. Immediately, Briggs scowled.

“He knows. That’s why he’s in a meeting with Rainier.”

Well, at least I didn’t need to be the messenger of bad news, then.

“All right. So...Dimitri?”

“What about him?”

I blinked at Briggs a few times.

“Really, Briggs?”

It only took a moment for Briggs to start laughing. I shoved him and started to walk away, but Briggs grabbed my arm and held me back.

“Come on, I had to give you a hard time, but only because the rest of us had the exact same reaction. He’s Alpha Sergei’s grandson, but he takes after alpha mate Chin obviously.”

“That’s just...all right. I mean, you hear the name Dimitri and you expect someone who looks like Alpha Sergei.”

“Yep.”

I ran my hand down my face. It had been a day already, and it wasn’t even lunchtime. I was ready to go home and curl up with my mate.

“All right, I definitely shouldn’t have thought what I did.”

“Well, we mentioned it to him because, yeah, he wasn’t who we were expecting either. But he’s a really big-ass deep red dragon, and we’re really happy to have him on our team. Guy is seriously trained in martial arts, but he’s just a powerhouse somehow.”

I rolled my eyes. “Maybe because he shifts into a big-ass red dragon?”

Briggs snorted. “Probably. Anyway, yeah, that’s Dimitri, and Ben knows about Luca whining about coming back. He’s not happy about the prospect. Especially since he tried to seduce Ben, even though he knew he was already mated.”

I shook my head. “That’s really not someone I want in my department.” I banged my head against the wall and groaned.

“I think Rainier might be able to have some say in if he comes back or not. I’ll keep you updated if I hear anything.”

I lifted my head and nodded. “Thanks. I’m going to go now. I think I much prefer my office and dealing with digging up dirt on scum and then questioning said scum.”

Briggs chuckled. “Then we’ll see if we can find more scum for you to question. We’re on assignment next week.”

I stared at Briggs for a moment, then nodded. “I’ll make sure we watch out for Alexander and Rowan. Is Ramsey on assignment?”

“They’re out now, but they should be back this weekend sometime,” Briggs told me.

“I’ll make sure I drop in and see how he’s doing. Markus spends a lot of time with Alexander already.”

“Then I think Alexander will be well covered. Raiden mentioned how they had started spending some time with Everett and Jennings again.”

I nodded. I only knew that because they’d been going to visit when Markus and I were going for a walk in the neighborhood. “All right. Hope you have a good day.”

“Same. We’re getting ready for our assignment, but other than that, not a whole lot going on with us. Try not to work too late. You have a mate to get home to now.”

“Very true,” I said. I waved over my shoulder and left the hallway. I did have a mate to get home to. And I very much wanted to be there with him now.

“Hey, handsome,” I said, reaching out through our bond.

I heard laughter through our bond.

“I think you’re the handsome one. But I’m not going to argue.”

I chuckled.

“Sexy, then? You’re definitely sexy.”

“Ugh. I wish I felt sexy. I’m feeling bloated. It’s official—I cannot see my dick, although that’s been the case for some time already. But I had trouble reaching it earlier to go pee, and that means I’ve now hit the ‘I must sit to do my business.’” Markus sighed. *“Still love me?”*

“More every day.”

“Good. Is everything all right at work?”

I'd struggled with how much to share with my mate. I knew he was already going through a lot, and I didn't want to add any sort of worry or stress.

"Parker?"

"I'm here. I'm headed back to my office. I was looking for Benjamin but found Briggs instead. Work is...odd. It just seems as if things are off-balance today, and I don't know what to make of most of it."

"How so? Did you want me to come to the council and join you for lunch?"

I did, but if he came here, then I wouldn't have an excuse to go home early. But it wasn't fair to the others if I cut out early.

"If you're up for it. But only if you are. I was actually considering coming home early. It's Friday and everything, and I know Marc would love to get home to his mate and twins."

I turned down the hallway that led to my office. It was much quieter here for some reason.

"Home early sounds good. We could sit outside on the back deck and soak up the afternoon sun. And you could even shift. I've not seen your lion for a while."

At the mention of my lion, he perked up. Was that it? Did I need to shift and spend time with my mate and our babies? It took too long to realize that I'd not shifted since the day we'd gone running and then claimed each other. I stopped a few feet from my office, trying to think back to if or when I'd shifted since. Had it been that long?

"Parker? Did you get busy?"

"Sorry, handsome. I'm still here. I've made it back to my office though. And yes, I'd love that. I'll leave here around one instead. Does that work for you?"

"Yes. Are you all right?"

"I am." I glanced at the clock on the wall. *"I'll see you in a little over three hours."*

“I’ll be here. But you know that.”

“Love you, Markus. Take care of our babies for me.”

“I love you too. You know I will.” Markus projected an image of him rubbing his very pregnant stomach. I couldn’t help but smile.

I entered the office to Marc and Deacon discussing what Marc had been searching for regarding the companies that we were investigating. He was talking about keywords, and I just sat at my desk and let them do their thing.

“What did Aleric want?” Marc asked about two seconds after I sat.

“To ask my opinion on which enforcers I wanted to bring over to our team.”

Marc and Deacon both stared at me.

“Who else are we getting?” Deacon asked.

I shrugged. “Marc, call your guy Asher and have him put in an application right away. Tell him to email it directly to Master Edison,” I said. Marc nodded, then reached for his phone. “I was asked if we wanted Luca, and I’m not exactly happy about that prospect, but if they bring him back, there’s not a whole lot we can do.”

“I know he’s a bit of an asshole, but honestly, I always thought most warlocks were until I joined the enforcers,” Marc said. “Then Luca came around and...bam. Asshole.” Marc shrugged. “Having a warlock on our team could be super beneficial.”

I sighed. He wasn’t wrong. I grumbled as I picked up my desk phone, and after looking up Aleric’s extension number, I dialed and waited.

“Aleric.”

“It’s Parker.” I sighed and glanced at my two office mates. “We’ll take Luca if he’s brought back. He could be beneficial to our department as long as he behaves.”

Aleric snorted. “If he’s brought back, it will be on a probationary period, and Master Edison will be incredibly strict about certain things.” There was a short pause, and I could hear Aleric typing on his keyboard. “I’ll let Master Edison know that you’ve agreed to it if it comes down to it.”

“Thanks, Aleric,” I said. I hung up the phone and raised an eyebrow at my office mates. “Well? Good?”

Marc shrugged. “I know how much of an asshole he is, and I was there to see firsthand what he was trying with Benjamin. But you gave me a chance, and I think he should get one too.”

I sighed. Marc wasn’t wrong. I nodded in agreement. “All right. Let’s get something accomplished because I have to interview Laurent again at eleven, and I’ve decided that it’s Friday and I want to leave at one and spend the afternoon with my pregnant mate.”

“One? Seriously? Is that just you or us too?” Marc asked. I chuckled at the hopefulness in his voice.

“All of us. There’s not a whole lot going on right now. Nothing that we can’t do Monday morning. But Markus is getting to that uncomfortable stage, and I want to go spend time with him. My lion is getting antsy, so I figured it was time to take the afternoon off.”

“I’m down for that. I don’t have a mate to go home to, but I wouldn’t mind going for a run. It’s supposed to rain most of the weekend, and I’m not the biggest fan of running in the rain. I’ll do it, but not if I can run when it’s sunny.”

Marc wrinkled his nose. “My bear doesn’t mind either way. But afternoon is when my mate naps with our twins. I wouldn’t mind joining him.”

I chuckled. Exactly. I nodded at Marc. Exactly.

CHAPTER 18

MARKUS



I groaned at the sound of Parker’s alarm. I was already on my side, a pillow behind me, a pillow under my stomach, and another between my legs, all of them offering support. I had officially gotten to the uncomfortable stage of things. If I had the energy to roll over, I’d bonk Parker in the head with one of my pillows. But that was so much of an effort I wasn’t moving until he helped me up and out of bed.

I felt the bed move behind me, and I expected Parker to be getting out of bed. Instead, the pillow behind me was moved, and then his warm hands started rubbing my lower back. I couldn’t help but groan at the pleasure that gave me. Parker chuckled, then moved a bit closer. I felt his lips on my bare shoulder moments before they moved to my neck. I sighed because it felt so amazing.

“Good morning, sexy.”

I tried so hard not to snort but failed.

“You might think you’re not sexy, but there is absolutely nothing not sexy about you. You’re carrying my babies. That in itself is amazing. And sexy.”

I sighed again. Parker was perfect. He kissed my neck again, then rubbed my lower back, and I groaned.

“That feels so good.”

“Which part?”

“All of it.”

Parker moved closer, and when I felt his hard cock press against my ass, I groaned for a different reason, this one frustration.

“Shh...I know. I can't help but be excited, but I absolutely do not expect anything. I know it's uncomfortable for you now. I understand, and I'm okay with just holding you.”

See? Perfect. He truly was.

“I could suck you. You like that.”

Parker's hand froze on my back before he moaned.

“I won't say no. But you don't have to. I just wanted to say good morning.”

Parker had been so amazing. A few days ago, something seemed to switch, and when we'd tried to make love, it was incredibly uncomfortable for me in any position. We'd tried them all. By the time we'd given up, I'd ended up crying, and Parker had held me while whispering reassurances to me.

Parker suddenly was gone, the pillow once more behind me. I wanted to roll and see why he was leaving, but I felt him roll off the bed. He came around to my side, and I couldn't help but stare at his gorgeous body. He truly was a gorgeous alpha.

“You first though,” Parker said seconds before he pulled the blanket off me and moved the two pillows that I'd had stuffed under my stomach and between my legs. I was going to protest, but all ability to talk and think left my brain when Parker dropped to his knees beside the bed, and then his nose ran up the underside of my own hard dick.

I'd discovered right away that Parker was a generous lover and had no issues with giving everything that he liked to receive. When he slid the foreskin back, I felt his tongue lick out at the underside of my head and moaned. I knew what was coming next and wasn't disappointed when sudden hot suction surrounded my cockhead.

I reached out, hoping for something to grab on to, but the only thing I could reach was the sheets under me. That would

do though, and I held on tightly as Parker's incredibly talented and hot mouth moved up and down my cock.

"Fuck, Parker. You're too good at that," I whispered when I felt familiar tingles in my balls, letting me know I was about to come.

I was sure my mate knew it, too, because his hand suddenly wrapped around my dick, and he stroked up and down while his mouth moved.

"Parker..." I warned one last time before it was too late and there was no way I could stop it. I gasped seconds before pleasure slammed through my body, and I felt my cock expand in my mate's mouth. Then it throbbed, and there was suddenly even more warmth surrounding my cock. Parker moaned loudly, then grunted and moaned long and loud around my cock. The vibrations from his mouth enhanced my orgasm, and I moaned as I pulled on the sheet in front of me.

There was something about being pleased by your mate because only he could drag out an orgasm like he did. It seemed to go on and on, but Parker knew when it became too much for me to handle, and he pulled off my cock slowly. I felt his tongue swipe out once, and then I sighed. My body felt like complete mush. I was so incredibly relaxed, and I didn't want to move.

I managed to open my eyes, and when Parker moved his head around my stomach, I saw the grin on his face.

"That is the best way to wake up," Parker told me.

"Give me a moment, and I'll return the favor."

Parker stood up. "No need," he said. I got a gorgeous view of his cock, which was only half-hard and his knot somewhat present.

I tried to raise my head, but Parker gently pressed me back into the pillow.

"Between your noises and taste, I couldn't hold back. I came on the floor. Let me get your pillows back, and after I clean up my mess, I'm going to grab a shower before work. Try to get some more sleep. I'll wake you in a few hours."

My brain was a bit fuzzy because I was so relaxed I was fighting to stay awake. But I could have sworn that Parker had said he was going to work, but he would wake me in a few hours. How was that even possible?

I couldn't fight it and gave in. Especially since Parker had put my pillows back under my stomach and between my legs before he pulled the blanket back up over me. I gave in and let sleep reclaim me. I was simply too warm, relaxed, and comfortable.

I woke, most likely hours later, to Parker's smiling face. He was dressed, and he was once more on his knees beside me.

"Good morning, handsome. Are you ready to be up yet?"

I blinked a few times and tried to focus. "What time is it?"

"Just after ten. I felt you were waking up through our bond. Do you want me to help you to the bathroom?"

I nodded because I knew that although I didn't have the urgency to go to the bathroom just yet, it would only be a moment or two before it hit.

Parker tossed the covers back again, then helped remove my various pillows before he simply lifted me from the bed and carried me to the bathroom. I wrapped an arm around his shoulder, holding on as much as I could. I didn't need to, though, because Parker carried me with ease. He set me on my feet, holding me until I was stable, right in front of the toilet. I grinned at him as I turned and carefully sat.

"Do you need me to wait?"

I shook my head. I was no longer uncomfortable with using the bathroom in front of my mate, but I was pretty sure I could stand back up without help. Maybe. Time would tell.

Parker leaned down, kissed the top of my head, then left. I could hear him in the bedroom while I took care of my morning needs. He was making the bed, possibly? I wasn't quite awake yet, and my brain wasn't registering the sounds coming from the other room.

I finished on the toilet, somehow managed to get to my feet, and went to the sink to wash my hands and brush my teeth.

I couldn't help but stare at myself in the mirror as I waddled over to the mirror. I groaned and let my head fall back on my shoulders. I did not need to start waddling. Maybe it was just because I'd just gotten up and my muscles needed to get used to being used instead of being completely relaxed in our amazing bed.

Determined to not let the day get the best of me, I washed my hands and then brushed my teeth. I had just spat the toothpaste out when Parker returned to the bathroom to check on me. He was carrying a bundle of clothing in his hands, and I smiled at him. So thoughtful. I rinsed my mouth before I grabbed the hand towel, wiped my mouth, and turned off the water.

“You think of everything, don't you?”

“I try. I'm learning as things progress though. Want me to help you get dressed?”

“I would really appreciate it. I noticed I was waddling toward the sinks, and that realization isn't exactly a good thing.”

Parker snorted. “You do not waddle. Maybe you need to stretch out or something, but you don't waddle.”

I sighed. “That's good to know.” I watched as Parker came to me and set the clothing on the counter. “Wait, what day is it? I thought you said you were going to work this morning?”

Parker nodded. “It's Wednesday, and I did work this morning. I'm working from home from here on out.”

I froze. “What? Why?”

Parker moved up behind me, and with gentle hands on my shoulders, he turned me toward the mirror. He wrapped his arms around my waist and placed them under my stomach. “Look closely,” he said quietly. He gently lifted my stomach, and I tried to see what he wanted me to look at but couldn't see anything.

“There’s nothing there.”

Parker moved me back a few steps, then did it again. “Look again. Look low.”

I did and realized Parker must have been watching my face because when my eyes widened, he carefully let go of my distended stomach. “When did that happen?”

Parker shook his head. “I’m not sure when it first turned pink, but I noticed it on Monday evening. It’s just light pink, though, and not dark at all. Once it turns dark, we’ll have to watch it closely.”

I nodded. My omega line had gone from a thin slivery line to a pink line. Like Parker had said, the next was a darker pink, then an inflamed red that just looked mad and infected. That’s when the burning pain would hit, and that signified that my omega line was opening.

“I’ve not had any contractions yet though,” I said. Parker walked back to me and knelt down in front of me, holding out the pair of briefs. I stepped into them, reaching down to balance myself on Parker’s shoulders.

“It’s probably a good thing you’re not contracting. But when you start, be sure to let me know so we can let Constantine know of any changes. He’s the one who recommended I start working from home when I called him about your omega line turning pink.”

Parker reached for the gray sleep pants that had quickly become a favorite of mine. He held them out, helping me into them before pulling them up my legs. He tied the drawstring to where the pants sat below my stomach, then stood.

“I didn’t bring socks, but you rarely wear socks or shoes anymore.”

I wrinkled my nose. I didn’t like them even before becoming pregnant, and now I really didn’t. I’d always run a bit hot, but now I’d started running even more so and often wore as little clothing as I could. When I did, it was always something that was lightweight and loose-fitting.

“No socks,” I told him. When I glanced down at Parker, he was barefoot, and I smiled. He was wearing jeans and a T-shirt but no socks or shoes. A perk of working from home, I guess.

“What are your plans for the rest of the day?” I asked. “I assume you have more work to do?”

Parker nodded. “Sorry, yes. We were able to find a common name when it came to several packs and prides and even a den, so we’re looking into that. Laurent was a great help, actually, because he knew a little bit of information about certain companies that his coven had dealt with.”

I pulled the maternity T-shirt on over my head and settled it across my stomach. Arik had been great with some information on places where I could get clothing that fit but wasn’t overly frilly. I had ordered quite a bit, thinking that it wouldn’t be a bad thing since apparently I was going to have a few more pregnancies, so I would just store everything in the closet until I needed it next time.

“That’s a good thing, then?” I asked.

“It is. But I have plenty of time to take a break and make you breakfast. What would you like?”

My stomach growled at the thought of food. “French toast and bacon?” I asked, hopeful. “Or sausage patties?” My stomach really growled then. “Definitely sausage patties. And orange juice if we have any.”

Parker chuckled as he laced our fingers together. He brought mine to his lips and kissed the back of my hand before he led me out of the bathroom.

“You know we have all of that. I wouldn’t let you go without your craving foods in the house.”

See? Perfect. I followed Parker out of the bedroom and then down the stairs. I was more than ready to eat. I didn’t normally sleep so late, and I wondered if it was something I should be concerned about or not.

“Did I not sleep well last night?” I asked Parker at the bottom of the stairs.

“You moaned a lot in your sleep. I checked in with you through our bond, but you weren’t projecting any sort of pain or anything like that. I think you’re just getting to the uncomfortable stage. You’re carrying three babies, after all.”

Parker held my hand as we went to the dining area and helped me sit. I could sit on my own, but we’d found out that, at times, going down, I could get wobbly. Carrying one could be a bit of a challenge at times. Like Parker just mentioned, I was carrying three. My balance had been greatly thrown off.

“Here’s your juice. I’ll be back with coffee in just a moment. Or do you want tea? The kettle is hot if you do.”

That was such a tough decision. “If tea isn’t too much trouble, I’ll take that.” I looked up at Parker. I didn’t want to be a burden. He was busy working, and now he was home taking care of me. That really wasn’t fair to him.

“It’s no problem to get you tea. I’ll be right back with it. Did you want sugar or honey?”

“A bit of honey? Is that all right?”

Parker sighed. “It is. Be right back.” Parker lifted my face with a hand under my chin. He leaned down, gave me a deep kiss, then stood back up just as quickly. “You are never a burden, never will be. You can have anything your heart desires, as long as I’m able. Honey is not an issue. Neither is the tea. Be right back.”

Parker left, and I could only watch him go. It was such a hot view. That man shouldn’t look that good in jeans and a T-shirt. He disappeared into the kitchen, and I turned to look out the window. It was sunny out and looked warm and inviting. I would have to go out and sit for a bit after I ate. I knew that Parker would complain if I even thought about going now. He was making me my tea and then was going to fix breakfast for me. I wouldn’t do that to him. But after I ate, he wouldn’t have any issue with me sitting out there while he worked.

I picked up the juice and took a drink, but it didn’t sit well in my stomach, so I put the cup back on the table. Most likely,

I simply needed food. It had been some time since we ate last evening, and I slept longer than I usually did.

Parker came back with tea, and I grinned up at my mate.

“Thank you. Can I help with breakfast?”

Parker gave me a look.

“Yeah, thought so. I had to ask though.”

My mate sighed. “If you really want to come help fix something to eat, you’re welcome to. I won’t keep you from doing things. But I’m here to take care of you. I like doing things for you.”

My heart skipped a beat. We’d only been mated for two months, and I was still getting used to having a mate. It was a drastic difference to have someone that wanted to do nice things for me. Sure, my found family in Honey Creek had been nice, but things were different with Parker.

I picked up my tea that Parker had placed directly in front of me. “I’ll sit here and enjoy my tea. I know you like to do things for me, and it’s not because you feel I can’t do them for myself. That you are doing them because you love me and your lion likes to take care of his mate. I get it.”

“Good. I’ll have food to you in just a few. Hold tight.”

Parker left again, and I absently brought the tea to my mouth while staring out at the back deck. I took a sip and sighed. I never would have thought I would still feel nauseous this far along into my pregnancy, but here I was. I saw what looked like a shimmer outside, but when I blinked, it was gone. When I saw it again, I looked down at the mug, wondering if Constantine had changed my tea on me or something, so I set it down and sat back in my seat.

“Parker?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m going to go outside for a minute. It looks so beautiful out there,” I said as I stood.

“All right. It does look nice. The sun is quite bright today.” Parker poked his head out of the kitchen and grinned at me. “Leave the door open, though, so I can hear you if you need me.”

“I will.” I pushed up from my chair and went around the table. The door was unlocked, telling me that my mate had already been out back. We would often have our coffee and tea on the deck in the mornings, and I couldn’t see him not doing so simply because I wasn’t awake.

As soon as I stepped out onto the deck, I knew I wasn’t alone. I looked to my left and saw that shimmer. It was moving as if it was gliding across the deck. I stood there, frozen in place, unable to move. When it suddenly wrapped around me, I gasped and closed my eyes tightly as I placed my hands and arms over my stomach as best as I could. I was ready for something; I just didn’t know what. Instead of the pain I expected, I felt a warmth wash through me, and when I opened my eyes, I saw the world through a shimmery view. When I stood, I felt as if I were being hugged, and then I heard a quiet giggle. I smiled at that and turned to see if I could find the source.

It left as quickly as it had wrapped around me, and when I looked to my right to see if I could find wherever it had gone, I saw nothing but the forest beyond the small yard.

“Everything all right? You’re projecting uncertainty through our bond,” Parker said behind me. I turned and stared at my mate for a moment before I nodded.

“Everything’s fine. It’s just beautiful out here. I heard something in the trees, I think,” I told him. Maybe the giggle had come from there. I couldn’t be certain.

“Yeah? What?” Parker asked, coming out onto the deck.

I shrugged. “Not sure. Is breakfast ready?” I asked, crossing the short distance between me and my mate. I felt a spike of uncertainty until I was close enough to touch my mate. When his arms wrapped around me, I relaxed immediately.

“Hey? I’m here. Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yeah. Just not awake, I don’t think.”

“Well, maybe breakfast will help. Your french toast is ready. The sausage is almost ready. Want to go ahead and start?”

I grinned at my mate before nodding. He kissed me quickly, then led me into the house, his hand tightly holding mine. I glanced back at the trees once more before I entered ahead of Parker. Perhaps I would spend the day on the couch instead.

CHAPTER 19

PARKER



The last two weeks had been nerve-racking at the minimum. I was thankful that Markus's omega line hadn't turned the angry red that we'd been told to watch for, nor had he felt anything like contractions or something that wasn't normal pregnancy discomfort. But being home with my mate every day had shown me just how miserable he truly was, and that broke my heart.

Markus was a trooper, but at this point, he was simply over it. He was ready to not be pregnant. He did his best to hide his discomfort from me and to always have a smile for me, but I knew better. He was huge, but I'd never tell him that. I simply had no other way to describe how large his stomach was. Even looking at it looked uncomfortable.

We'd discovered that the water helped relieve the weight of his stomach and the aches in his body, so he'd started to have a daily bath. Constantine had offered to bring him to Amherst, where Markus could spend as much time as he wanted in one of the coven's indoor pools, but he'd declined. Markus wasn't a fan of traveling by warlock, and I wasn't going to push the issue. The bath seemed to help alleviate some of his pain, and I had no problems with running him a bath or two a day.

"Markus?" I called out, trying to locate my mate. I could feel him through our bond, but he wasn't actively responding to me, which told me he was either deep in thought or asleep.

I left the room that we'd agreed was meant to be a home office and went to the back room. I almost didn't see Markus

until I went to check if he was out on the deck. He used to love sitting out there, but he'd only gone out twice in the past two weeks, both times when I was with him and insisted he get some fresh air and sunlight. He'd relented then but always came back inside whenever I did.

It broke my heart a bit to know he was so miserable that he no longer enjoyed the deck like he used to. I was hopeful though, but a quick glance showed the deck empty, except for the furniture we had for it. When I turned to search the house, I found Markus lying on his side on the couch. He was fast asleep, and that explained why he wasn't responding through our bond.

I pushed out to him through our bond and found him in a deep sleep. I was going to leave him to his nap because it had been some time since he had actually gotten good rest. If he needed to be on the couch with a full-body cuddle pillow wrapped around him, I was going to let him sleep there as often as he needed.

I glanced at the clock on the wall, though, and winced. We were supposed to be going to pick up my parents. They were arriving today, and I absolutely did not want to leave my mate home alone while I went to get them. But we needed to leave, and I didn't want to wake Markus.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and quietly left the room. I called Master Edison, hoping he would agree to pick my parents up for me. I hated to ask it of him, but with Markus sleeping and it being so late in his pregnancy, I didn't want to leave him alone.

"Parker? It's not time for the babies, from what I understand," Master Edison said in greeting.

I smiled. That was actually a bit of a relief. It sucked for my mate, but it wasn't time for the babies yet. "No, Master Edison. I have a favor to ask of you." I hated to do it, but my parents knew Master Edison and Wallace and had seen them many times at the pride when they'd been out to visit their grandson.

"What is it you need? Markus is doing well?"

“I believe so. He’s fallen asleep, and it’s the first time he’s been this deeply asleep in some time—several days, in fact. But we were supposed to be leaving to pick my parents up. They are coming in today to stay for a couple of months. I don’t want to leave Markus alone, but I also don’t wish to wake him.”

“Say nothing more. Where are they arriving? Are they flying?”

“Yes, sir. They are supposed to be arriving in a little over an hour. They’re flying into the airport north of here.”

“No issues. I will be glad to pick up Cecil and Viola. If you would let them know it is to be Wallace and myself bringing them here, I would appreciate that.”

“Of course. Thank you so much, Master Edison. I truly appreciate it.”

“It’s no problem at all. They will be a huge help to the two of you, I’m sure. I’ll locate Wallace, and we will be on our way to fetch them. Are they staying with the two of you?”

“Yes, Master Edison. At Markus’s insistence, they’ve agreed to stay here. At least in the beginning. He agreed to not throw a fit if they decide to leave and stay elsewhere close by though.” It had taken quite a bit of convincing on Markus’s part to get my parents to agree to stay in our house with us. He’d won the argument by pointing out they wouldn’t get nearly as much time with the grandbabies if they were elsewhere. Mom had argued back that we were supposed to be spending time with our children, forming our bond with them. I could understand and support both sides; I simply wanted everyone to be happy with the situation.

“Very good. With three, I can see and agree how two extra sets of hands would be beneficial. I’ll bring them to your place once they arrive. If you need anything else, don’t hesitate to reach out.”

“Thank you, Master Edison. I really appreciate it.”

I ended the call with a touch of the screen. Immediately, I opened the messaging app and sent both of my parents a

message, letting them know that there was a slight change in plans and Edison and Wallace would be picking them up at the airport. Moments later, my phone vibrated in my pocket, and I found a worried message from Mom.

Mom: Is he all right? Is everything as it should be with the children?

I smiled. She was quite taken with Markus, and in our many conversations since we'd claimed each other, she had told me how happy she was I'd been matched with someone as sweet as my mate.

Me: He's fine. Just sleeping and it's been a while since he's been able to sleep as peacefully and comfortably as he is. I don't have the heart to wake him. We'll be here waiting for your arrival though. The room is ready and Markus is actually excited to meet the both of you.

Mom: Dad says take care of your hubby and we'll see you when we get there. It will be nice to catch up with Edison and Wallace anyway.

I rolled my eyes at my parents. Only they would talk about catching up with the created warlock and his mate as if they were your average normal people and weren't the created one and his incredibly powerful alpha mate.

Me: Enjoy your time. See you soon. Thanks so much for understanding.

Mom: 😊

I smiled. That was so her. My parents were absolutely amazing, and I knew it. I went back to the back room and quietly sat in the recliner to watch my mate. He was still very much asleep, and I wanted him to stay that way as long as his body would allow.

I sat there for ten or fifteen minutes, looking over my mate's beauty while he was finally relaxed, and I sent out a silent thank-you to the fates for the gift of Markus and our triplets. I knew if I stayed in the room for longer though, I

would end up having to touch him, so I left, going back to the office and trying to occupy my time until my parents arrived.

If they were looking forward to catching up with Master Edison and Wallace, knowing my parents, it might be hours yet before they arrived. I couldn't nor would I be upset about that. They were doing us a huge favor by coming to help with the babies once they arrived. They were leaving behind my siblings, their mates, and their own children.

Nieces and nephews I'd not seen in a couple of years now. Sadly, I knew it would be several more before I'd be able to get back to Seattle to visit. It would be difficult to travel with three young ones, and if what Master Edison had said was true, it meant we would be having more. Markus wouldn't be able to travel unless he was willing to do so with the help of a warlock or hellhound. I'd traveled with both, and it was always smoother when a warlock did it, and I couldn't see Markus agreeing to let Atticus poof him from here to there.

I sat in my chair and leaned back, closing my eyes. I'd gotten so much accomplished since being home, something I was actually surprised about. It didn't take long to realize that was because there were actually way fewer distractions here at the house. It was me and Markus. That was it, and my mate, bless him, was happy to simply sit in the other room or come in and curl up in the lounge that we'd put in here for him. He was great at being quiet and leaving me to my work, and at times, he could sneak out of the room without me even hearing him.

But at the council? There were so many distractions. People always coming into the office, meetings I had to attend, or the others in the office becoming distracted, which in turn would throw all of us off our routine. Here, I had none of that, and I'd been able to dive deeply into not only one organization but another that was currently being looked into. Assignments were being planned, and I'd been told the feeling at the council was one of anticipation.

But today, my mind had been wandering to my mate more than normal. He was still three weeks away from his due date, and although his omega line had turned a darker pink, it was

still just the omega line, and the skin around it wasn't red even a little. I checked it often, and Markus had been great about letting me know if he felt any pains or anything abnormal, but nothing still. So why was my lion so on edge? Why did he want to be near our mate?

I gave up trying to focus on work, and after sending out a memo to everyone that needed to know, I logged off the laptop and closed it. I pulled my badge from the card reader and locked it in my desk drawer. Not that I expected anyone to break in and steal the badge, but it was simply a precaution that I still had from my years on the Seattle PD. My badge and sidearm had always been locked up when I was off duty, and this felt no different to me.

I left the office, turning off the overhead light and pulling the door shut behind me. My first stop was to check on Markus, finding him still very much asleep, so I went upstairs to check and see if any laundry or anything else needed to be taken care of.

I was drawn to the nursery and smiled at the sweetness of it. Markus had wanted baby animals and gray. So he got baby animals and gray. There was an oversized plush gray rug that felt like you were walking on a cloud. It was soft enough to curl up on, and Markus had said it would be perfect for the children when they started crawling. I didn't think that would happen for months yet, but we'd gotten the rug anyway.

The furniture was all white or gray, and it fit the room perfectly. We'd opted for three cribs, not expecting them to sleep in them anytime soon or for them to sleep in them separately. But we had them if they ever wanted space from their siblings. The other items were sweet and pastel focused, and I had to admit that the baby animals came together perfectly for our first nursery.

The two oversized chairs with reclining backs and thick ottomans were perfect for those middle-of-the-night feedings, and I had a feeling we would be spending a lot of time in those chairs. Markus had gotten us each a nursing pillow, even though we would obviously be bottle-feeding the babies. He'd said that Arik had told him they were a lifesaver when it came

to midnight feedings when you were half-asleep but you still needed to feed the baby. The pillow was a perfect spot to rest the baby while you were not quite awake enough. I had no experience with any of it; I just went with it and smiled as package after package arrived.

There was nothing that needed to be done in the nursery, so I went to check our bedroom for laundry. Since I'd been home, I'd been able to stay on top of it better, and it wasn't often that I went more than a couple of days without throwing what we had into the wash.

I'd listened to Constantine when he'd said it was going to be rough going the first few weeks with triplets. I believed him. He had the use of his magic. I didn't, and I had to do it the old-fashioned way, but I wouldn't trade that for anything.

I found our hamper with just a few things in it, and the basket was empty, so I'd done laundry recently and simply hadn't remembered. That wasn't the first time and certainly wouldn't be the last. My days ran together a bit, and I knew that in the coming weeks, that was only going to be more of an issue.

With nothing really to do, I left the bedroom and tried to think of something to occupy my time. When I'd been single, I used to work or go for a run. Neither was going to happen today, so I simply went to the back room and sat back down in the recliner.

I'd been in the chair, scrolling on my phone for probably close to half an hour, when Markus moaned. Immediately, I set my phone down and went to my mate. He was starting to wake, and I hoped the moan wasn't an indication of something bad.

Markus stretched and winced a bit. That was enough for me to drop to my knees and touch the side of his face. "Markus? Are you all right?"

Markus's eyes blinked open, then closed before opening again, and then he was looking at me with a sleepy smile on his face.

“Hey there. Are you all right?” I asked again.

“Yeah. I need to pee though. My bladder is screaming at me.”

I chuckled at that but stood and quickly picked my mate up and took him to the bathroom that was in a room under the stairs. It had a toilet and a sink, but it didn't need more. There were two full bathrooms upstairs, and that was more than enough for us, even with three children on the way.

I set my mate down in front of the toilet, then helped with the shorts he was wearing and held on to him while he slowly sat. He sighed in relief when he was able to let go, and I fought a laugh. He wasn't kidding—he had to go.

Once finished, I helped him up and out of the bathroom. “Where to?” I asked.

“Umm...the kitchen? Or you know what? The couch. I feel like I'm still half-asleep, and maybe I shouldn't be walking around and trying to fix a snack.”

I helped Markus back to the couch, where he lay back down. I was suddenly concerned about him. Was this normal tiredness, or was he having problems?

“Can I check your omega line?”

Markus nodded, then rolled to his back a little more. He couldn't lie flat on his back because he said his stomach was too big and his legs went numb when he did, but I wouldn't keep him in that position for long. It took only a moment for me to check the line. The skin around it had started to turn slightly pink, and the line itself had started to turn more bright red from the dark pink that it had been.

I righted his shorts, placing the elastic waistband as far off the line as I could before I stood.

“Everything all right?”

I looked at Markus. It was his body, and I was sure he knew something wasn't the same. I would never lie to my mate anyway.

“The skin is turning pink, and the line is changing from dark pink to bright red. It looks as if it’s just started though, but I think we should watch it more closely and let Constantine know.”

Markus nodded, then yawned. “I don’t feel any contractions or anything. I’ll let you know if I do, but so far, nothing.”

“I know you will. Did you still want a snack? What would you like?”

Markus sighed. “Do we still have any gelatin or fruit? Both sound good, and right now, my stomach doesn’t feel the best.”

Another sign to watch for.

“I’ll be right back. I know we have both. Do you want tea?”

“Yes, please.” Markus closed his eyes and seemed to settle into the couch again. I helped him with his body pillow, getting it situated under his stomach and between his legs. He sighed, and I knew he’d gotten comfortable.

“Be right back,” I told him as I ran my fingers through his hair. Markus nodded but didn’t open his eyes.

He was tired. Exhausted, even. The omega line was changing. His stomach was feeling questionable. I needed to let Constantine know that I felt it was going to happen soonish. I didn’t want to alarm Markus, so I texted as I gathered up the things for his snack.

I felt him doze off through our bond, and when he seemed to fall into a deeper sleep, I was torn between waking him to eat and have tea or letting him sleep. Figuring Constantine would be better at judging that, I sent him a text explaining everything.

Moments later, there was a short reply, and I was immediately relieved. It was all right to let Markus sleep and to let him know if anything else changed. Constantine knew that the delivery would be a whole lot sooner than even I thought, and I should expect to be a new parent this weekend.

This weekend was as quick as two days away. I decided that with that news, I needed a tea to calm my own stomach, so I thanked the doctor and went ahead and made that cup of tea anyway. It wasn't going to be for my mate though. No, I needed to have it to calm my own nerves. I was about to be a dad. Markus would be a daddy, and it was going to happen this weekend. How crazy was that?

CHAPTER 20

MARKUS



“How are you feeling this morning, Markus?” Viola asked me as I slowly made my way into the dining room.

I sighed. “As good as could be expected, I think,” I told her. Parker rushed over to help me sit in the chair, and I sent him a glare. I closed my eyes, took several deep breaths, and reached out for my mate. He took my hand and squeezed it tightly. When I opened my eyes and looked up at him, I saw nothing but love and concern. He didn’t deserve my irritation. “I’m sorry, Parker. I shouldn’t have glared at you.”

“I understand, Markus. You’re not feeling the best, and you’re just miserable at this point.”

That was true, but that still didn’t excuse being irritated with my mate. He was attentive, and he was doing everything he could to help me as well as make me as comfortable as I could possibly be.

“Still, I shouldn’t glare at you for simply helping me sit when you and I both know that I’ll most likely fall over if you don’t.”

I just felt incredibly off today. I ached everywhere, and I was just over being pregnant. Parker was correct about that. I wanted to hold our babies in my arms, to be able to walk and not waddle, to be able to get up out of the bed without help.

“Do you want some tea?” Parker asked. “Maybe some fruit? Gelatin?”

I reached for my mate. He moved closer, and I wrapped my arm around his leg and leaned my head on his hip. “Yes, please. You’re so good to me,” I said.

Parker ran his fingers through my hair and gave it a little tug. I looked up at him and found him smiling. “You’re my mate, and I love you. Of course I’m going to be good to you.” Parker leaned down, kissed my forehead, then stood. “Be right back.”

I let go of Parker’s leg, and he went off to the kitchen. I leaned forward as much as I could and tried to get comfortable. It just wasn’t happening. I looked at my mate’s parents instead and tried to smile. “You raised a good one there,” I told them. Viola smiled, and Cecil winked at me.

“We tried with all of them. We like to think we didn’t do bad with any of our children,” Cecil told me.

“We will have to figure out a way to get everyone together in one area soon,” Viola said.

“Vi,” Cecil said. There was something about it in his tone that had his mate looking his way.

“What?”

“Parker and Markus aren’t going to want to travel or have a bunch of visitors for some time. It’s one thing to have one at a time. Two is a bit hectic, but three is going to be quite overwhelming at times. They’re outnumbered all at once.”

“He’s right, Mom. We’re not planning on traveling anytime in the next year, to be honest. Not that I wouldn’t say we might be able to get down to Honey Creek or Timber Valley for a family reunion of sorts, but getting everyone up here on the mountain is difficult. There has to be background checks on everyone before they’re allowed on the mountain. And there are no visitor cabins here. Parents or siblings that visit either stay off of the mountain or with the couple.”

I looked up at Parker, hoping he would understand my fear of having everyone here all at once.

“Our house isn’t exactly small, but it’s not nearly large enough for everyone, their mates, and all of their kids,” Parker

told her. He set my tea on the table in front of me, and I could smell the extra honey he'd added to it. The fruit joined it, and my mate ran a hand across my neck, getting my attention. "Be right back with your gelatin."

I nodded but didn't say anything. I picked up the tea and took a sip, closing my eyes at the sweetness of it. Parker had switched back to the tea from the beginning of my pregnancy, the one that helped with energy. I wasn't sure if that was because he felt I needed it or if Constantine had told him to, but it definitely tasted different than the one that helped with morning sickness.

Parker returned, placing the jiggly red stuff in front of me, and I smiled—until I felt a sharp pain in my side, and I reached over to push against whichever child was kicking my ribs.

"I didn't say we were going to do it in the next few months or anything," Viola said. "Just that I'd love to get everyone together at some point. Soonish doesn't mean within the next year. Just soonish." Viola reached for my hand. I moved mine off my ribs and took hers, meeting her gaze. "I wouldn't do that to you, Markus. We would never all expect to stay here. That's a whole lot of Sullivans all at once, and I wouldn't do that to you the first time you met us all."

"Thanks," I told her. I winced and pulled my hand away, pushing against my side again.

"Are you all right?" Parker asked, suddenly kneeling down beside me.

"Yeah. One of your kids has decided they need to stretch and get more room or something. They're either kicking my ribs with their feet or their head." I sighed when they finally seemed to move enough to where the pressure wasn't there. I picked up my fork and started eating my fruit, but I simply wasn't hungry. I'd stopped eating most things about a week ago, but Constantine told Parker it was all right as long as I was drinking water and eating a little something once a day. Fruit and gelatin it was.

I chewed the strawberry and had just stabbed another piece of fruit, this one cantaloupe, when the pressure was back. I ignored it outwardly, but I knew Parker had felt it through our bond. My mate knelt down beside me, reaching out for the spot I'd been rubbing not long ago.

“Are you all right?”

I tried to breathe, but the foot or head in my diaphragm was causing issues with that. “As good as can be expected, I think,” I told him. I truly was over being pregnant.

Parker started rubbing my side, and I sighed in relief when his touch seemed to reach out to our child and they once more stopped stretching.

“You'd think they were doing stretches or yoga or something,” I said. I set the fork down and picked up the spoon, digging into the gelatin. It didn't require chewing, which at the moment seemed to be so much effort. I could just squish the red stuff and swallow. That was better at the moment. I had managed to get half of it down before Parker stopped rubbing my side and moved to my lower back. He knew exactly where it had been aching, and I was incredibly thankful for his attention and moaned.

“There?”

“That feels so good,” I told him. “I would love to be able to stand up straight again.” I had just taken another bite of fruit when the kicking was back in my side. I winced as I reached for it. I gave up trying to eat and sat back. “Seriously now. You could stop pushing. I get it; you're out of room,” I said to my stomach.

“Parker?” Viola said quietly.

I looked at my mate in time to see him nodding at his parents. Cecil stood, pulling out his phone.

“What's going on?” I asked.

“Markus, sweetie, I don't think the babies are stretching,” Viola said.

I looked to my mate. “Handsome, I think you’re in labor,” Parker said. “Your back tightens up, then the tightness rolls around to your sides, then stops there,” Parker said, placing his hand over mine. “Let me check your omega line?”

Was it possible? Was I in labor and didn’t realize it?

“Yeah, sure,” I said. I turned in the chair and reached for my mate, who grabbed my arms and pulled me to my feet. We’d made it not even two full steps before there was a sudden intense pain centered in the middle of my stomach, and then there was a large gush of fluid that ran down my legs and onto the floor.

I gasped, looked down at the mess on the floor, and looked back at my mate with wide eyes.

“Definitely labor, Costas. His water just broke and is all over the floor,” I heard Cecil say somewhere behind me.

“Umm...I think I might be in labor,” I told Parker.

“Think nothing,” Parker said as he swung me up into his arms. “You’re about to give birth, handsome. Let’s get you upstairs, and Constantine will be here in just a few moments to take care of everything.”

I could only nod. “I’m not too heavy, am I?” I asked.

Parker growled low in his throat, and I laughed. It ended quickly, though, because another pain hit, this one stronger than the others, and I actually felt it start in my lower back and wrap around my body.

“Oh, that’s not fun at all,” I said. Parker rushed down the hallway and into the bedroom. I was surprised to see Constantine already there waiting for us. “You’re fast,” I said absently.

“I might have had a bit of a heads-up and knew you were going to deliver today.”

I glared at the warlock. “And you didn’t think to let us know?” I asked.

“Umm...handsome...”

I turned my glare to my mate. “You knew?” I asked, just below a shout. “And didn’t tell me?”

“I didn’t want you to focus only on that. You would worry yourself, and then that’s all you’d be able to think about this weekend.”

“I would ask about his omega line, but since his water has broken, it’s most likely open,” Constantine said.

“It was still closed this morning when I checked. It was quite angry-looking, though, and very red.”

“Yes, that’s how it usually is just before it starts to open.”

“Why didn’t I have that burn that I’d been told about?” I asked. Parker laid me down on the bed, and I tried to get comfortable. A second pillow was suddenly behind my shoulders, and that seemed to help a great deal.

“It’s possible you didn’t feel it because your body ignored it,” Constantine said. There was a knock on the door, and I tried to look around the doctor and my mate to see who it was. “Miles, perfect timing,” Constantine said.

“I tried to hurry. Layla didn’t want to let go of my legs.” Miles came into the room, immediately opening a bag that was at the foot of the bed. I’d not noticed that before. Where had that come from?

“Are you ready?” Constantine asked.

I widened my eyes at that. “Already? I mean, I’m soaked and uncomfortable, and the pain in my stomach is almost constant at this point, so yeah, if I get to be dry and the pain goes away, I’m ready.”

“I can fix all of that,” Constantine said. He held out his hand, and once it started glowing bright green, he moved it slowly down my body, starting at my stomach and going to my feet. I sighed when a floating feeling washed over me.

“Oh, that’s so nice. Alexander mentioned that.”

Miles chuckled. “It’s great, isn’t it?” the other omega asked from beside me suddenly. He was standing near my head, holding a blanket. “Since you’re soaked, and although

you can't feel that anymore, Costas is going to use some more magic to remove your shorts. I'll cover you with the blanket, all right?"

I nodded. "That's fine. I get why you might not want him to see others. But I'm a shifter. I'm not shy."

"Naw, I know he only has eyes for me. He sees people naked all the time with all of the shifters at the coven and all of the babies he seems to be delivering anymore." Miles moved down my body, and he nodded, then spread the blanket out over my lower half. "Parker, you're going to be up here, helping him rise up when he needs to push," Miles said. He came back to stand next to my shoulders and slid an arm under my upper back. "Like this. When he needs to push, you need to help him sit up just a bit."

"I can do that," Parker said, taking Miles's place.

"Wait," I said. Everyone froze. "There are three babies. Is Miles going to take care of all three?"

"I can. I'm a pro at babies, and three is just like old times. Did you want someone else in here with you?"

I looked up at Parker in question.

"It's up to you, Markus. You're the one delivering our children. If you want someone else in here, you can have them."

I thought about it, and the thought of having anyone other than who was here already didn't feel quite right. I shook my head. "No, I'm good. I was just curious."

"Costas is great at multitasking, and he uses magic to get the babies cleaned up, and then I'll help move them to the bed over there beside you. Then come back for the next one."

I nodded again. "Then I'm ready if you are," I said.

Constantine was looking at me patiently. "All right, then. I'll back the magic off enough that you can feel the contractions, and when you have the next one, I want you to lean up and push."

I felt the floating feeling lessen some, and almost immediately, there was a wave of dull pain. That I recognized as being a contraction, so I tried to sit up a little to push. Parker picked up on it and helped, allowing me to bend over my stomach a bit and give it a good push. I felt a burning pain in my lower stomach and gasped. “There’s the burn,” I gritted out through clenched teeth.

Someone chuckled, but it was Constantine that had me relaxing.

“Good. Now, relax. The head is out, and this one has lots of dark hair like Parker.”

I looked up at my mate, who was staring down at my lower half.

“Is it bad?” I asked.

Parker shook his head, then looked down at me. “It’s beautiful. Messy but beautiful at the same time.”

I felt another contraction before I could answer, and I leaned upward, Parker helping again. I pushed as hard as I could, and Constantine gave me those wonderful words.

“He’s here,” he said. I relaxed, leaned back, and tried to catch my breath. Seconds later, I heard the beautiful sound of our son crying. Constantine held him up so I could see, and my first thought was he was amazing. But like Parker had said, definitely messy.

I could only stare while Constantine held our baby, and then he lowered him to the bed beside my legs. I heard talking, but I was completely focused on the sounds of our son. We had a boy. I’d given my alpha a son.

“Is he an alpha? Or an omega?” I asked, suddenly curious.

“There is no omega line. Your little liger is an alpha.”

I froze and looked up at Parker. “Liger?” That wasn’t... that didn’t happen. I tried to sit up to look at the baby, who had stopped crying. Constantine lifted him and held him out to Parker, who carefully yet expertly took our son and held him

close to his chest. Parker brought the baby to me and knelt down beside me so I could get a better look at him.

“His eyes were blue,” Parker said. The baby’s eyes were closed now, but moments later, he opened them and looked my way. I knew he couldn’t actually see all that well yet, but his eyes were indeed blue.

“Do you think they’ll stay blue, or will they turn green like yours?” I asked. Mine were brown, and there was no way his eyes would end up being brown.

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t matter. Look at him. He’s beautiful and perfect, Markus.”

I agreed. He was. “But a liger? How is that possible? That doesn’t happen. They’re either a lion or a tiger.”

Parker shrugged.

“Markus, the next baby has moved into position,” Constantine said.

“I’ll take the little boy for you,” Miles said. He carefully took our son from Parker, who helped me sit halfway up. Instinctively, I pushed, but my heart wasn’t quite in it, and I sat backward without waiting for Constantine.

“Wait for the contraction,” Constantine told me. I nodded and waited for the tightening in my stomach. When it hit, I nodded to Parker, and with his help, I was up and pushing as hard as I could. I had to push three more times before our first daughter was delivered.

“This one is a little lioness. She’s bald, so I couldn’t tell you exactly what color her hair is going to be,” Constantine said. He held her up for a moment, then set her on the bed. Seconds later, her loud cry filled the room, and I could finally sigh in relief.

We didn’t have time for Parker to hold her and show her to me before the last one moved into position. Miles took her directly from his mate, and I was sitting up when a strong contraction hit me. I was tired, and my body was over being pregnant, but my tiger surged forward, surprising me, and I

somehow found the strength to push the half a dozen times it took to deliver our third child.

“Another girl. This one is a little tiger like her daddy.”

I leaned back and couldn't hold back the tears. I started crying, the morning overwhelming and all of the emotions hitting me at once. I had a son that was a liger—something I didn't know was possible. And I had a little lioness, as well as a tigress. I had three beautiful feline shifters that their papa and I would one day be able to shift and run around the mountain with.

“Hey, hey, it's all right,” Parker said, running his fingers through my sweaty hair.

“I just...it's a lot, Parker.”

Parker leaned in and kissed the tears away from my left cheek before he used his hand to wipe the others. A tissue appeared suddenly, and Parker used that to wipe my eyes before he kissed my cheek again.

“You did amazing. You're the strongest person I've ever met, Markus. You're definitely a rock star, and we have three beautiful babies because of you.”

Parker wiped my eyes again, but it really was no use. The tears were coming and wouldn't stop. I turned my head to the right, getting a look at the three little heads that were lying on the bed over by Miles. When I looked up at the lion shifter, he was smiling down at the babies, every so often fussing with one of them. There was crying in the room, but I couldn't tell you if it was one, two, or all three of the babies. But they were finally here.

“Are they all right?” Parker asked. “They're earlier than they should have been.”

“They're just fine. A little small, but that is expected anytime there are multiples. You had three, so they're going to be even smaller. Their lungs are fully developed though,” Constantine said.

“Costas and I will be staying for a few days down in Honey Creek,” Miles said. “Grandpa is going to get our

triplets, and they'll get time here with their older cousins. Well, like third cousins? Second? Whatever it is. Anyway, they'll enjoy playing with Arik's kids, and we can spend time up here on and off. There are several babies to check in on, and yours just happen to be the newest."

I wiped at my eyes and nodded. Parker was back with a dry tissue, and I looked up at my mate. "I love you," I said through sobs.

"Oh, sweetheart. I love you too. So very much. You did good today. Just let it all out," Parker said. He slid an arm under me and wrapped the other around my chest, holding me tight. It was just too much, and I felt completely overwhelmed.

"Parker, could you help him sit? I need him to give me the smallest push."

I sat up partway, did as asked, then was lying back down. I felt a warmth wash over my lower half and sighed. That floating feeling was back.

Parker wiped my eyes again, then smiled at me.

"Good?"

I took a deep breath and nodded. "I am. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You have every right to cry. And I'm sure after a nap, you'll feel so much better," Parker told me.

"The omega line is closing," Constantine said, cutting into the conversation. I looked up at the doctor.

"Thank you, Constantine. The babies are okay?"

"They truly are, Markus. And as for your son, I wouldn't worry about it too much. He's healthy, and I'm sure that Edison will have an explanation as to why it's possible. But he is indeed a liger."

That was fascinating. I nodded, then looked toward the babies where they were lying in front of Miles still.

"Ready to hold them?" Miles asked.

I nodded and tried to sit up. "I'll help," Parker said. He added another pillow behind me, moving them all closer to my

back and giving me the support I needed. Miles came around the bed, holding a baby that was wrapped in a light pink blanket.

“Here’s your little girl,” Miles said.

I took the baby and found myself staring into the blue eyes of our little tigress. I met Parker’s green eyes and smiled. “She has blue eyes too,” I whispered.

Miles came back seconds later with another baby, this one our other little girl. He helped me hold her in my other arm, and I couldn’t help but stare at her in awe. She was already fast asleep, and I was already in love.

Parker suddenly knelt beside me, our son in his arms. “Look at them,” I said quietly.

“They’re beautiful,” Parker said. I had to agree, they were.

CHAPTER 21

PARKER



I'd been around babies before. I was the last of my parents' children to find my mate and have children. I had spent time with my siblings and their babies when they were little. But it was completely different when you were the one who was the parent to those babies. There were no triplets in my family until ours, and we were definitely outnumbered.

Our trio was now two days old, and I swore they never slept at the same time. We would get one changed and fed, and then the baby would need to be changed again. We would get that one put down for sleepy time, but then the next one would wake, and it was time to do it all over again. Then the next. Then we got maybe an hour of quiet time if we were lucky, and the cycle started all over again.

I was dragging, and Markus looked like he'd not slept in months. Probably because he hadn't. Not really.

"Someone's waking up," Markus said, his face smooshed into the pillow beside me. I nodded but then realized he couldn't see me.

"I have whoever it is."

"No," Markus mumbled. "You got the last one."

I was already up, trying to get my bearings. It was the middle of the night, and we'd been trying to get some sleep, but it simply wasn't happening. I shuffled my feet toward the bathroom and turned on the light that was over the shower. It gave a nice glow to the bedroom and allowed us to see enough

without turning on the overhead light or either of our bedside ones.

I came back to find Markus lifting one of the babies up out of the crib we had moved into our room. Instead of three separate bassinets, we'd opted to have one crib in here and placing all three babies in it. Was that the best thing? Who knew. It was what we were doing though.

"I'll get you a bottle," I told my mate. He nodded and held up a hand.

I left the bedroom, still shuffling my feet because I really wasn't awake yet. I found the stairs by stepping off the landing and stumbling down the first few before I caught myself on the rail.

"Shit," I said a bit too loudly.

"Parker? Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Missed the first step. We should put lights out here or something."

"We'll have to look into that. Later. Like, way later."

I had to agree. I held on to the rail as I went down the rest of the stairs, and when my feet hit the bottom floor, I smiled. I'd made it down without falling down. That wouldn't be good. Constantine was still here and would be for another day or two, but he was here to deliver our babies and make sure they were doing well after delivery, not fix me if I fell down the stairs in my sleep-deprived state.

I made it to the kitchen without further incident and grabbed a bottle out of the fridge. I placed it in the little warmer and pushed the switch, turning it on. This was the best thing ever. Alexander, I think, was the one who recommended it, and we'd thought we would need more than one because of course our triplets were going to be on a schedule and would all eat at the same time. No, of course ours couldn't possibly do that.

"Parker, bring a second bottle. Beau is waking up."

I nodded. Nope, he couldn't see me. *"Will do."*

I grabbed a second bottle from the fridge and dropped it into a second warmer. I pressed the button on that one just as the first bottle clicked off. It was ready. I turned it over a few times while waiting for the second bottle to heat up. It finished in no time, and I grabbed it and headed off toward the stairs.

I heard crying as I reached the stairs and hurried up them as fast as I could. I wasn't sure who was crying, but I knew that if one was crying, the other two would join, and then Markus would look at me like he was completely overwhelmed. My precious mate couldn't handle our trio crying. It broke his heart.

I entered the room, handing Markus the first bottle, and set the second on the bedside table beside my mate. I rushed to the crib and reached for Beau, who was crying. He'd woken his sister, who was starting to fuss as well. Beau was soaked through, and I groaned.

"I have to change him, and the crib will have to be changed before we put them back."

"Do you need help?" Mom whispered from the doorway.

I looked toward her like she was the savior she was. "I won't say no," I whispered. "Can you settle Brianna? We fed her last, but Beau woke her."

Mom came into the room, immediately picking up Bri and cuddling her to her chest. Our precious little tigress settled almost instantly, and I was able to get Beau changed, wiped up with several baby wipes, and into a dry diaper and onesie. He was sucking on his fist, but when it didn't give him anything that his stomach agreed with, he would throw a fit and start crying louder.

"I'm trying here, little man. Give me a moment," I told him. He was changed and dressed, and I was across the room and picking up the other bottle in under a couple of minutes. That was too long for our son though, and he continued to fuss, even once I had the nipple of the bottle in his mouth. After a few swallows, he finally quieted, and I sighed at the silence in the room.

I went back to the crib and pulled on the sheet.

“I’ll get that,” Mom whispered to me.

“Are you sure?”

“It only has to be pulled up, right? The sheet and the waterproof pad? There are more under?” I nodded. Another trick we’d been told to give a try. Put several layers of waterproof pads and sheets on the mattress and then just pull them up and off in the middle of the night. It helped with too-little-sleep changes. I went over to the chair that I’d moved into the bedroom and placed beside Markus’s side of the bed when he’d started spending more time in bed the last couple of weeks of his pregnancy. Markus looked over at me, and I felt for him.

“What if you go to the couch after this? I can listen for them, and you can get some uninterrupted sleep for the rest of the night?”

The tired look turned to a glare. “They’re my kids too. We’re in this together, remember?”

“Yes, I’m very aware of that. But you’re exhausted, Markus. You need to sleep.”

“I’ll sleep when they do,” Markus said. He was feeding Bailey, and our little lioness had quite the appetite. She gave her brother a run for who could drain their bottles the fastest. She’d had a head start on hers though, and Markus took the bottle away and set it on the table before he carefully put our daughter on his shoulder and started rubbing her back in circular motions.

All three of ours burped through different methods. With Bailey, it had to be circles on the back, Beau liked his back to be patted gently, and Brianna needed to be sitting up a bit while we patted her back. All of them were good eaters, but there were three, and they all had their own schedules, and that made for a great deal of no sleep for the two of us.

“Bri is asleep again. Come get me if you need anything,” Mom whispered.

“Thanks,” I said quietly.

“You’re the best, Mom,” Markus said. I smiled. I had to agree. My parents didn’t have to wake in the middle of the night to help us take care of our children, but they were always willing to help out when another pair of hands was needed.

I heard Markus sigh and turned in time to see him slouching down in the bed. He had a now passed-out Bailey on his chest and looked to be dozing off while cuddling our daughter. I didn’t blame him. The babies were as sweet as could be, and I loved holding them as much as I could as well.

I would move her to the crib once I was finished feeding Beau, but for now, I could stare at my beautiful mate holding one of our daughters. His body had bounced back incredibly quickly in the last two days, and already his stomach was almost as flat as it had been when I’d first met him. He had little energy, but I was in the same situation. Neither of us had much by way of energy.

I burped Beau, and after he had settled back down, I cuddled him for a few minutes before I forced myself to get up and take him back to the crib. I snatched a clean swaddle on the way, and after getting it spread out in the crib, I had him swaddled and tucked up next to his sister.

I then got another swaddle, placed it on the foot of our bed, and carefully took Bailey from Markus. He startled awake and tried to reach for her when I picked her up until he saw it was me that was moving her. I smiled at my mate, then took our little lion and had her wrapped up tightly and back in the crib with her brother and sister before I gathered up the bottles. I really should take them downstairs, and I knew I would regret not doing so, so I took the bottles and left the bedroom.

I was mindful of the stairs this time and made it down them without incident. I opened them before I dropped them into the sink that was full of soapy water for the nighttime bottles. Once those were where they could be dealt with in the morning, I trudged my way back up the stairs and to my mate. I found both swaddles, as well as Beau’s wet onesie, and dropped them on top of the sheet and waterproof pad. Those could wait until morning. I wasn’t going to start laundry in the middle of the night. And I knew I would most likely be adding

at least another onesie or two to the pile before we were up for the day.

After I turned off the bathroom light, I crawled into bed and reached for my mate. I was careful and grabbed him around the chest and pulled him tightly to my front. Markus moaned in his sleep, and I smiled as I started to doze off. We only had a couple of hours at most before Brianna would be up again. I had no clue what time it actually was, but it was stupid hour, and I just wanted sleep. Markus snuggled into my front, and I sighed. This was definitely worth it right here. That was my last thought.

I woke I wasn't sure how many hours later, but I knew it wasn't enough. "What is that horrible smell?" I said absently. I moved my arms and found them empty. I cracked one eye open and looked for my mate but already knew he wasn't in bed with me. I popped my head up and found Markus. He was across the room, dealing with a squirmy baby. I was immediately out of bed and hurrying to Markus to see if I could help.

"What do you need?" I gagged and had to turn my head. "That tiny being made that stench?"

"I think I'm going to be sick," Markus said. He looked at me, and he seriously looked a little green.

"Go to the bathroom," I told him. I pushed my way in front of the baby and realized it was Brianna. She'd made a huge mess in her diaper, and it was sticky, thick, and the smell was absolutely terrible.

My stomach rolled and I turned my head away in hopes of getting a breath of fresh air. It was no use though. The scent was everywhere, and there was going to be no getting away from it.

I carefully rolled Brianna in hopes of getting everything cleaned up, but it seemed like it wasn't wiping away. I grabbed her swaddle, wrapped it around her, and took off for the bathroom. We were going to need more than just wipes, it seemed.

“What’s wrong?” Markus asked when he saw me enter.

“I need a soapy cloth. This is too sticky to come off. It’s wiping away, but it’s leaving residue behind. She needs a bath maybe, but a warm, soapy cloth will probably work.”

Markus nodded, went to the shelf where we’d put some baby supplies, and came back with a bottle of baby wash and one of their gentle cloths. He set them beside me and turned on the water.

“That’ll warm up in a minute. Let me go get rid of that diaper. And maybe open the bedroom windows.”

“That would probably be good. If we need to, we can take the babies to the nursery and sleep in there.”

Markus chuckled, and that just seemed to spiral into laughter. I got it. We were completely sleep deprived, we’d had our first blowout when it came to diapers, and the stuff was a sticky mess. This was apparently our life now.

Markus cleared his throat before he left the bathroom. I checked the temperature of the water, and when I found it warm, I decided to plug the sink and squeeze some soap into it. She was going to be getting a bottom-half bath, but I had to be careful to not get her umbilical cord stub wet. It was completely sealed with Constantine’s magic, but there was a little nub left that would have to dry out and fall off, just like with human babies.

I let the sink fill about half-full, then tested the temperature once more before I carefully set Brianna in it. It wasn’t enough to cover her stomach, and she wouldn’t be in it long. I just needed to get her clean, and then we could dry and dress her.

She fussed a little when I first put her in the water but quickly seemed to calm. I rolled my eyes. “Of course my little tiger would love the water. What is it with you tigers and liking water? Hmm?” Markus loved to swim in either form. I could take or leave it but didn’t mind it in my human form. But my lion? I avoided the water if at all possible. I was more of a lie-in-the-sun-and-take-a-nap kind of cat.

I held her as best as I could with one hand and used the other to wash away the yuck that was smeared everywhere. I had just called it good when Markus finally came back into the bathroom. He stopped when he saw me trying to rinse our daughter's behind and legs in the sink with clean water that was running again.

“Did you bathe her?”

“I did. It just seemed to be the better choice.”

“If that works. Let me get a towel, then.” Markus went to the shelf again, this time coming back with a baby towel. This one had rubber duckies on it. Together, we managed to get her wrapped up in the towel, and Markus took her to the bedroom while I quickly cleaned up in the bathroom. I sprayed cleaner in the sink, gave it a quick rinse, and deemed it good for now. I could deep clean it in the morning once the sun was up. Until then, this would have to do.

I washed my hands, then went to the bedroom. I was hit with a wall of stench, but it was much less than before. It was still there though, and I wrinkled my nose. The windows were open, but there was little breeze moving through them. I turned on the ceiling fan, then went to the crib to move the other two but found them already gone. The pile of dirty and wet clothing and bedding was gone as well.

I looked toward the bed, finding the mess that we'd made of it while trying to sleep, and grabbed our pillows and the blanket. I closed the door behind me, leaving the mess and scent there to air out, and dove into the nursery and made a makeshift bed for Markus and myself on that crazy plush rug. Was it as comfortable as our bed? No. Would it be okay for an hour or two? Yes.

“Could you feed Beau? He's awake again. His bottle is here,” Markus said, pointing to the table beside him.

“Of course. What about Bailey?”

“She'll be next, I'm sure. As soon as I'm finished with Bri here, I'll get to Bailey.”

I went to the crib and smiled down at our son. He was moving his head around a little, but he wasn't fussing yet. There was a changing table in here, and I had him changed and a bottle in his mouth in under a minute. He was sucking deeply, gulping down his formula, and I sighed as I sat on the floor beside the ottoman where Markus had put his feet up.

"Are we sleeping in here?"

"I figured it was safest. Until another horrid diaper, that is. But the rug is soft enough for a nap." I tried to turn my head enough to look at my mate, but it was no use. The angle was completely wrong. "That's basically all we're getting. Naps."

Markus yawned. "I know. I love our trio, but this shit is no joke."

I chuckled a little. He wasn't wrong. It had been two days straight of nonstop diapers, bottles, and little to no sleep. I heard a tiny burp, and then Markus was moving. He stood, walking around me where I was leaning against the corner of the chair. He went over to the changing table, and after a moment, he had Bri swaddled and settled in the crib.

"Be right back," he whispered. I nodded but wasn't sure he could see me or not. We had a plug-in night-light under one of the windows, but it didn't give off very much light. It definitely wouldn't keep any of us awake.

A few minutes later, I was just putting Beau on my shoulder to burp him when Markus came back with another bottle in his hand.

"Perfect timing. She's just started to make noise."

Markus sighed. "They seem to be syncing up. Maybe this is a good thing. Possibly not." Markus put the bottle on the table, then went and grabbed the baby. I carefully stood, then checked Beau's diaper again before I swaddled him and placed him next to his sister.

"If they sync up, we might be able to get more sleep in longer stretches," I whispered.

"But how will one of us feed two at once?"

I thought about it for a minute, then remembered those pillows. “The pillows that Alexander had you get? Or was it someone else?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it was Alexander. I can’t remember last week at the moment.”

I chuckled at that. I had to agree. I still wasn’t sure what time it was, but it was still pitch black outside, and that meant it was the wrong time of night to be awake.

“Let me feed her. You go lie down and get some sleep,” I said when Markus was finished changing Bailey’s diaper.

“Are you sure? I don’t mind.”

I yawned. “Sleep. I have her,” I said again. I took the baby, and after I got situated in the chair, I sighed and reached for the bottle. It took only seconds for her to open and latch on to the nipple. She was just as strong of an eater as her siblings, and Constantine had told us that was a good thing. Strong eaters meant they would grow, which was what we wanted since they were all small. Beau was the largest at five pounds and twelve ounces. The girls were a little smaller but were still over five pounds, which was tiny compared to most babies that were single births. They were healthy though, and that was all that mattered to us. They would catch up in time.

I heard Markus groan as he got settled on the floor, and I couldn’t wait to join him. How was this our life now? We were so happy to sleep on the floor? Granted, our perfectly comfortable bed was in a room that desperately needed to be aired out, but still. The floor.

I spent a few minutes feeding Bailey, and when she was burped, cuddled, swaddled, and back next to her brother, I shuffled my feet as I moved over to where my mate was quietly snoring. I glanced toward the table where I’d left the bottle, but I didn’t have it in me to run it downstairs. I would pay the price of scrubbing it with a brush in the morning, whenever that happened to be. I had no clue.

I lay down on the rug and moaned. It wasn’t too bad. My back cracked twice, and once I was settled next to Markus on

the floor, sleep claimed me in seconds.

CHAPTER 22

MARKUS



I loved my children. Completely and totally. But they were a whole lot to deal with even now when they were a month old. Today was Parker's last day of time off before he had to go back to work, and I wasn't sure I was okay.

We'd discussed it many times over the last month, and we decided that although he'd been granted an additional month of time off, it was better if he went back now. Cecil and Viola only had three more weeks here with us, and everyone leaving me with our trio all at once would be too much, so we were going to slowly work my way into things. I wasn't sure how it was going to go, but I was going to give it a try.

I was currently downstairs on the couch, snuggling with Beau. He was a cuddle bug, and I loved it. He was also our biggest eater and had already graduated to more formula and was already taking a solid four ounces per feeding. They were all growing, but Beau was noticeably bigger than his sisters.

"There you are," Parker said as he came into the room.

"I'm not hiding," I told him. "I've been here for the past fifteen minutes or so. Your parents wandered off with the girls."

"I know. Give him here," Parker said, taking Beau from me. I wanted to protest but couldn't. He had every right to cuddle the babies. They were just as much his as they were mine, and while he was at work tomorrow, I'd be home with all three babies. That was both terrifying and definitely not exactly fair to Parker. "Be right back."

I watched Parker walk around the couch and then up the stairs. I wasn't sure why he would need to go upstairs to cuddle with the baby, but if that's what he wanted to do, I could just follow.

We'd gotten into somewhat of a routine now, and Parker and I could sleep in three-hour stretches now, which we both thought was absolutely amazing. It wasn't, but when you had spent close to three weeks sleeping in sixty-to-ninety-minute stretches, three hours was amazing.

Parker came into view about a minute after he'd disappeared up the stairs, only he didn't have Beau with him. In fact, he had none of the babies.

"Where's Beau?" I asked.

"With my parents." Parker held out his hands. "Come on."

I took his hands and let him pull me to my feet. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

Parker led me to the back deck, and I wrapped my arms around myself. It was the first of October, and the temperatures had cooled considerably. It had been warm and cozy inside, but if Parker wanted to stand out on the back deck for a few minutes, I was willing.

"Take your clothes off," Parker said. I turned to look at my mate like he was crazy, but my ability to speak was lost. Parker was completely naked, and I'd forgotten just how gorgeous he was. It had been entirely too long since we'd been intimate. At the end of the pregnancy, it was just too uncomfortable for me. Since the triplets had been born, we'd both been too tired and always fell into bed completely exhausted.

"Strip and shift, Markus. I want to go for a run with you before I have to go back to work tomorrow."

Shift? That sounded wonderful. I glanced toward the house where the babies were.

“They’re fine. My parents know how to take care of babies. They raised four of us, and they’ve helped with several of their grandkids.”

“Yeah, I know.” I glanced at the door again. “It’s just—” I stopped when I heard Parker shifting. It didn’t take long for his lion to come out, and when he shook out his magnificent mane, I sighed. “So gorgeous. In both forms, but this one is just amazing,” I told him. I couldn’t stop myself, and I walked over to run my fingers through his mane.

“If you shift, we can go for a run. I know your tiger would love that. He’s been peeking out recently, and now is the perfect time. Tomorrow, I’ll most likely be too tired after dealing with council stuff to want to do more than cuddle with you and the babies.”

He had me there. I nodded, and after I gave Parker a tight hug, I stood and pulled my own clothing off. I tossed it on top of Parker’s on the lounge before I knelt and called for my tiger. He was quick to come, and when I found myself looking at my large striped paws, I shook my body, then gave it a very good stretch.

“The last time we ran together, we weren’t yet mated. This time will be so much more, Markus. We can communicate, and that will make all the difference.”

I walked to my mate and rubbed my head against the side of his, showing affection as well as marking him as mine. “You’re right. You lead, and I’ll follow behind you. Go easy on me at first though. My tiger has been through a lot in the past few months.”

Parker rubbed his head against mine, then under my chin and into my neck. If I’d been in my human form, I would have sighed at the gesture.

“I will always go easy on you. We’re just going for a relaxed run through the forest.”

Parker stepped down and off the deck and looked back to see that I was following. I did, and it felt incredibly good to be back on four legs after so long being unable to shift. Parker

started out at a trot, and I kept up only a step behind him as we entered the tree line. I had to fall in behind him, but that wasn't an issue for me. I would follow my mate and alpha anywhere because I trusted him completely.

We slowly picked up speed as we came upon a well-traveled path. I was happily running behind Parker when he suddenly turned to his right, taking us to a trail that he must have known about but wasn't quite as well traveled. It was narrow, and we had to slow considerably, but I had no cause to worry.

We continued on for I wasn't sure how long before Parker slowed to a walk. I found myself breathing heavily, but I didn't care. I was loving the exercise, and my tiger was happy to not only be out but to be with our mate. I promised him he would get to come out and meet our triplets later on, but for now, it was time to spend with our mate.

Parker came to a little clearing that wasn't much larger than the size of our back deck, really. It had somewhat of a lean-to at one side of it, and Parker walked up to it without a care. I followed more hesitantly, wondering what it was doing in the middle of nowhere.

"What is this place?"

"It was built by the dragons a long time ago. They used it as a resting place when they were out checking their traps. There are several of them around the mountain."

"Traps?"

"Yes. When the dragons first settled in this area, they had to come up with a means to make an income. With the area being so secluded, they chose trapping and skinning. They would travel once a year back east a bit to trade their furs for coin and get supplies they couldn't grow themselves. That only lasted a few years though."

"Why?"

"Because they soon gained a warlock who could provide them with all the things."

I snorted. Even in my tiger form, I was able to pull that off.

Parker went inside, and I heard the familiar sounds of him once again shifting.

“What are you doing? It’s cold out here, even for us, for long periods.”

Parker’s head poked out. “Not in here. Come in and shift.”

Parker’s lion was wider than my tiger, but I was longer. But he fit through the door, so I would as well, wouldn’t I? I would have to try to find out. I moved to the open door and peeked inside. I was surprised to find my mate sitting on a pile of blankets. Not only that, but the interior of the place smelled fresh and was free from debris and critters. I stepped inside fully, moved over to my mate, and didn’t stop until I was hovering above him.

“Shift, Markus. I want to spend some time with you before we have to be back to the house. Right now is for us and us alone.”

He didn’t have to tell me more than once. I shifted, my tiger more than happy to take a break so I could spend time with my mate. When fur gave way to skin, I felt Parker’s hands on my body, and in seconds, I found myself pulled down onto the blankets, and my mate had moved over on top of me.

I placed my hands on his chest and ran them upward, the hair there feeling amazing. It had been so long since we’d had the energy or even the thought to touch each other except in passing when we were trading children.

“I want you. You can say no, and I won’t press. But it’s been a month since the babies were born, and it’s been longer since we’ve been able to be together.”

“Yes,” I said, pulling Parker’s head down to mine with a hand on the back of his head. My fingers threaded into his hair, tugging him a bit to the side so his mouth moved over mine at a better angle.

I moaned into Parker’s mouth when he moved completely over me, his warm body lying on mine. I pressed my right leg

out against his, and Parker moved in between my legs exactly where I wanted him.

His hips rolled to the same stroke of his tongue against mine, and it ignited something inside me, my body feeling awake and alive for the first time in too long.

“Parker, I need you. In me, on me, something. I need more.”

“I’ll take care of you. But we have time. Let me enjoy you a little before we get carried away.”

I wanted to groan in frustration but didn’t. He was right. It had been so long, and we both knew that once he was inside me, it would be fast and hard, ending entirely too soon because our need was too great.

Parker pulled his mouth from mine, and I did protest then until his mouth moved to my jaw, and then he nibbled on my neck. I leaned my head to the side and gave him more room. My mate spent a moment or two licking over my mating bite, and I couldn’t help but grab his hair and hold on tightly. It was a hot spot for me, and he knew it.

“Parker,” I growled out.

“I’ll take care of you,” he told me. He lifted his head as much as he could and winked at me before he dove back down, and then his tongue flicked out at my nipple. I moaned and arched my back, wanting more pressure there. Something. Anything. I just needed more.

Parker nipped at my nipple, pulling a hiss from me before he licked over it and then moved to the other one, giving it the same attention.

I was panting, and if I could get my hands to let go of his hair, I would flip us and climb on top of him so I could get him inside me where I really needed him. I felt empty, and I could feel the slick starting to leak out.

Parker’s tongue trailed down the center of my stomach, and then I cried in relief when it lapped at the head of my cock, which was peeking out from the foreskin.

“I’m going to last maybe two seconds,” I warned him.

“Perfect. Once you’ve had an orgasm, I can take my time and get reacquainted with your body.”

Parker grabbed my cock with his hand, lifted it, then opened his mouth wide and swallowed me down to the base without issue. I still had my fingers buried in his hair, and I held on tightly as I gently rolled my hips, needing to move even a little.

“Do it. Move in and out. Take what you need.”

I grunted and did just that. I held on to Parker’s hair as I rolled my hips, moving my cock in and out of my mate’s mouth over and over. I watched as my cock disappeared into my mate’s mouth, and when it reappeared, it was shiny, and I had to close my eyes and fight off my orgasm. It was too soon. It felt too good to have my cock sucked as I moved in and out of my mate’s mouth.

When Parker moved my legs a little outward, I knew what was coming. Me. When I felt a finger press against my opening and circle around, then press inward, I bit my lower lip and moaned loudly. My hips moved up and down faster of their own accord, and I felt as if I didn’t have much control over my own body. On the downward movement, that finger rubbed against that amazing spot inside me, and I couldn’t stop the orgasm that slammed through my body.

I shouted, uncaring of the noise I was spreading through the forest as my cock pulsed and spurt after spurt of cum flooded my mate’s mouth. He groaned, the vibrations intensifying my own release. I felt my channel clamp down on Parker’s finger, and that, too, added to my own pleasure.

I rolled my hips until I felt like my entire body was tingling, and then Parker pulled up and off my cock.

“Sorry, Markus. I’ll explore later,” Parker said. I didn’t get the chance to question what he was saying before I was flipped onto my stomach and my ass was pulled up into the air a bit. I felt something much larger pressing at my opening, and I had

enough thought to relax and press back against him as he slowly applied pressure.

It took a moment for my body to open, but when it did, we both groaned, and Parker's cock slid in easily, and his hips were against me in just one thrust.

"Don't move," Parker growled. I froze, not wanting to move. I did not want this to end too soon, although I knew it wouldn't last nearly long enough for either of us. But knowing we were here again opened up new doors in the nighttime once the babies were taken care of.

Parker held still inside me for several minutes, his hands running up and down my back and hips as he seemed to fight with himself.

"We can do this again later, Parker, but I really need you to fuck me. Hard."

"I wanted soft and gentle."

I growled and rotated my hips in a circle. Parker's cock moved around inside me, and I smiled at the louder growl behind me, followed by the tight grip on my hips.

"Fine. You win. But I want slow later."

I had no issues with that if it got his cock moving in and out of my body.

Parker pulled out, his hips immediately snapping forward, and I tried to raise my ass higher in the air to give him a better angle. He lifted my hips and did it again and again, Parker's rhythm gaining speed, and I whimpered with every grunt that came from him. He pulled out and thrust back in at a quick pace that he kept up for several minutes until his tempo faltered once, then twice. The feel of his knot starting to catch on my opening and then rub over my prostate had my cock throbbing. I grabbed the blankets below me, holding on as tightly as I could.

Parker's thrusts became more difficult, his grunts growing in volume, and when he thrust hard three more times before he had difficulty pushing his cock inside, Parker held tightly against me, his growl loud and proud. Fingers threaded in my

hair and I was lifted seconds before I felt teeth in my shoulder. I screamed as my second orgasm rolled through me. My entire body tingled in waves, and I felt a splat of warm liquid hit my arm as I was pushed down flat onto my stomach.

Parker grunted, pressed his hips tighter to me, and then his teeth were pulled from my neck, a too-rough tongue licking across the new wound. It was directly over my claiming bite and would heal in a matter of seconds, but Parker's tongue was definitely rough, and that caused me to groan loudly against the blankets below me.

Parker laid his head against my neck, panting loudly and trying to catch his breath. I felt his cock throb over and over inside me, his lion determined to practice for my next heat. I snorted at that thought, and my mate stiffened above me.

“What?”

“My thought of your lion practicing for my next heat.”

“Mmm...” I felt a strong throb inside my channel.

I closed my eyes and moaned at the sensation.

“Keep talking like that and we'll never get out of here. My lion loves that idea, but it'll be your choice,” Parker told me.

I would have to wait until the triplets were much older before I even considered having more children, but for now, I was very happy to practice anytime we could.

“Later. Much later,” I mumbled instead.

“So much later,” Parker said. His lips kissed the back of my neck before he slid his hands down my body and then grabbed my hip with his right hand and slid his left under my upper chest. I was suddenly rolled onto my left side, and Parker rolled his hips, pressing his cock into me just a bit more.

“Fuck, that feels amazing,” I said.

“It's supposed to. I'm your mate, and my knot is definitely on your prostate. If I do this...” Parker made his cock throb over and over, and I moaned at the sensation. “I could make you come again.”

I so wanted that. “Yes, please.”

Parker snorted. “If that’s what you truly want,” Parker said. He rotated his hips in a circular pattern before he added in the throbbing feeling. He was right—his knot was directly on my prostate, and it didn’t even take a minute for me to be spraying the blanket with my third orgasm.

“That’s my beautiful mate. Come for me.”

I moaned, my body feeling like one giant orgasm for several minutes. When it finally passed, I sighed, my body completely relaxed. It was then I felt Parker’s cock throbbing, and it wasn’t something he was doing. My mate had given himself another orgasm in the process of making me come.

I reached back, touching his hip and rubbing gently while I lay there and waited for us to not be knotted together. Parker kissed my shoulder seconds before a blanket was tossed over me.

“Where did that come from?”

“Behind me. Rest, Markus. A quick nap will be perfect, and when we wake, we’ll decide what to do next.”

I yawned. Parker had mentioned rest. I was the new daddy to triplets. Resting always induced yawning and the images of sleeping curled up tightly in Parker’s arms.

“I love you,” I said.

“I love you too. I’ll do gentle next time,” Parker said.

I smiled. “Okay. I liked this time too though. I don’t need you to do gentle because you feel you have to. I love it any way we do it. Always.”

Parker kissed my shoulder again.

“You’re perfect, Markus. Absolutely perfect. Rest and we’ll see if we have enough time for round two.”

I wanted that. I didn’t know how long we had before we needed to be back at the house, but right now, I loved being in my little area with just my mate as my focus. I needed this, and so did he. I sighed and held on to Parker’s arms tighter.

This was absolutely perfect. We would worry about everything else tomorrow. For now, we only had the two of us.

RAMSEY'S BOOK is next in the series! It's definitely time for our troublemaking gargoyle to find his own mate and perhaps settle down. Or maybe not...

WE LEARN MORE about the mysterious Dr. Bennett in his book, Castiel!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thank you so much for reading Parker and Markus's story. I can't believe this is the first book in this world with two large feline shifters! Hmm...definitely time to visit a pride somewhere! Don't worry, you are definitely going to see Parker again in future books. And of course Markus will find time to come visit his mate at work for lunch while Cecil and Viola watch the triplets for them! Thank you so much for all of your continued love and support. I truly couldn't do this without you.

xx

Taylor

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