



STEEFAN

DESTINED PARANORMALS BOOK FOUR

TAYLOR RYLAN

STEFAN

DESTINED PARANORMALS BOOK FOUR

TAYLOR RYLAN

MORTIMER PRESS, LLC

Copyright 2023 by Taylor Rylan

All rights reserved.

www.taylorrylan.com

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Cover by Jay Aheer of Simply Defined Art

www.simplydefinedart.com

Editing by Sandra Dee of One Love Editing

www.oneloveediting.com

Proofreading by Judy Zweifel of Judy's Proofreading

www.judysproofreading.com

Cover image from iStock

www.istock.com

SYNOPSIS

What happens when the confirmed bachelor literally falls head over heels for his beloved?

Stefan Santos was finally content with his life in the beloved gem coven. He loved being able to tend bar and meet all kinds of new and fascinating people. Despite the fact that all of his fellow coven members were happily mated and starting families, Stefan had no desire to follow suit. He was quite happy bringing home a stranger when certain needs arose.

Kyle Baker was excited to be chosen to leave the fae realm and find his very own mate. Although, when he realizes that he's been sent to a vampire coven, his worry about his safety isn't unfounded given what they're taught with regards to fae, vampires, and the intense draw for their blood. That is until he happens to meet a sweet fae named Montgomery, who is more than happy to welcome another of his kind into the coven with glee. Will Kyle's mate feel the same?

When Stefan first scents Kyle and literally falls over the little fae, he realizes his bachelor days have come to an end. Can he convince Kyle that he's not upset about that? Can Kyle accept Stefan and a new life among the vampires that sometimes spend months floating up and down a river?

Stefan is the fourth book in the Destined Paranormals series. It is a 40,000-word novella that focuses on fated mates and how they figure out those first few weeks together. This is in an mpreg world, and there will be a baby or possibly two, but this story does not focus on or cover the pregnancy.

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. Basically, all the fluffy mate stories.

CONTENTS

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Synopsis](#)

[Welcome to the Universe of Destined Paranormals](#)

1. [Stefan](#)
2. [Kyle](#)
3. [Stefan](#)
4. [Kyle](#)
5. [Stefan](#)
6. [Kyle](#)
7. [Stefan](#)
8. [Kyle](#)
9. [Stefan](#)
10. [Kyle](#)
11. [Stefan](#)
12. [Kyle](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Taylor Rylan](#)

CHAPTER I

STEFAN



It had been three years since I'd joined the Beloved Gem coven, and I was still grateful every single day that Master Nikolai was willing to take a chance on me. It wasn't until I'd been accepted that I learned that most everyone else in the coven had a similar background with regards to former covens. Mine wasn't nearly as dark as others', but I didn't agree with my former coven master and what he was willing to accept as tolerable when it came to how not only members were treated but donors as well.

So I became a lone vampire, seeking out somewhere else to call home. I'd wandered around the country for months, always searching for a coven that was willing to take a chance. It wasn't until I heard from an acquaintance that Master Nikolai was in search of an additional bartender for his riverboat casino. It didn't take long to fill out the background forms, and although I didn't expect a callback, I happily accepted the position of the job and member of the coven when I did.

"Stefan, did ye accept the supply order this mornin'?"

I smiled at the sound of Fergus's voice. I turned from where I'd been organizing the now clean glasses in preparation for later today once the bar was open.

"I did. Everything but the oranges arrived."

"The oranges?"

I nodded. I'd thought it was odd as well, but when I asked about it, I'd not gotten a straight answer, only that there were

no oranges.

I shrugged. “I’m not sure. The delivery driver said they weren’t in the order. I checked, and they were on the list, and he threw a fit when I wouldn’t sign off on everything being accounted for.” I’d talked it over with Diego when he arrived at the commotion. “Diego was going to send Adam out to get some so we had them for tonight. Master Nikolai was calling the delivery company about not only the missing oranges but the driver’s insistence on signing off that they were in the delivery.”

Fergus scowled. It wasn’t an uncommon sight but had been fairly infrequent since he’d met his beloved.

“Is everything else accounted for?”

I nodded. Movement to the right. I grinned as Montgomery came walking up toward us with little Tobias on his hip. He was quite pregnant, but I’d been told he still had another month to go. I felt bad for him because he already looked incredibly uncomfortable. Fergus noticed my distraction and turned to see what was causing it. Immediately, his entire body relaxed but then stiffened back up as he hurried over to his beloved.

“Ye shouldn’t be carrying him.”

Monty rolled his eyes, but he easily let Fergus take their son from him.

“I can’t chase him any longer either, so it was carry him or let him run off and away from me. I chose to carry him because I really didn’t want to try running through the hallways. He was in the elevator before I even had our door secured.” Monty came over to the bar and, with a little bit of effort, had himself up on the barstool. I took the glass I’d been wiping down, and after going to the small fridge below the bar, I pulled out the carton of apple juice. We’d all learned quickly that Monty’s craving this pregnancy was apple juice. I set it in front of him and grinned as I winked at him. “Thank you,” Montgomery said as he picked up the glass and took a big drink.

“Stop flirtin’ with me beloved,” Fergus said. He playfully pushed on my shoulder, and I laughed.

“Just doing my job, boss. You know the pregnant beloveds are just as important as the customers we’ll have in the house later today.” We were a hotel and casino that was open to the public, and it was true there were humans staying in the hotel at this very moment. But I knew Montgomery had come in through the employee entrance, which was only accessible from the elevator that went to our floors. The exterior doors were closed and locked, sealing the bar away from hotel guests. The casino was open 24/7, but the bar wouldn’t be open until noon, which not only gave us time to get ready for the long evening but also provided the coven members time to congregate here and hang out.

“Was Adam able to get oranges?” Fergus asked as he set Tobias on the bar.

“I’m not sure. He left some time ago but hasn’t returned. I can call him if you’d like.”

“No need. I’m going to help Monty get Tobias back to our suite and settled, and then I’ll be back to help with the stock.”

“Sounds good,” I told him.

“Thanks for the juice,” Monty said as Fergus helped him down off the stool. I nodded, and Fergus and his little family left the bar area. I wasn’t quite sure why Monty had come down, but I was always happy to see the little fae.

I was finishing up with the glasses when I heard a baby fussing. Julian was trying to calm a fussy baby Maynard. He was without their twins, and I had to wonder where they were. Perhaps Master Nikolai had them.

“Have you seen Nikolai? He said he was here in the bar.”

“I have not, no. Fergus was just here with Montgomery and Tobias. But I haven’t yet seen Master Nikolai.” I glanced from a somewhat frazzled-looking Julian to the fussy baby. “Is there something I can do to help?”

“No. But thank you. Nik said he was here. He has Maynard’s bottle.”

“I’m here,” Master Nikolai said as he came rushing across the bar, a bottle held out in front of him. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. I was looking into our list of suppliers.”

Julian took the bottle, and it seemed as if the baby immediately scented what it was because the fussing stopped. The little guy greedily started drinking, and the bar was once again quiet aside from the baby swallowing. Nikolai stared down at both his beloved and their young son.

“I do apologize, Julian. I was headed this way, but Diego came to the office, and I got a bit distracted.”

“It’s all right. I should have brought his bag down with me. I only intended to come and get the twins from you, but of course, this little guy decided he needed to be fed. Right. Now.”

Master Nikolai and Julian both chuckled. “He is a demanding little one,” Master Nikolai said.

I grinned at the pair. I didn’t have much to say with regards to whether their little one was demanding or not. I’d not had a whole lot of time around the new baby. He was half a year old at this point, but I’d seen him maybe three times. Not that it was a requirement for the coven master’s beloved to have their children around the rest of the coven. It certainly wasn’t.

“I’ll be back in just a bit, Stefan,” Master Nikolai said to me as he wrapped an arm around his beloved, and they walked off toward his office.

“Where are the twins?” I heard Julian ask as they walked away.

“Diego is watching them. They were playing with blocks on the floor,” Master Nikolai said before they’d moved too far away to be heard.

I wasn’t concerned about Master Nikolai or Fergus returning to help. They were both busy with their families, and in all honesty, they should spend all of their time with them while they could. Babies grew fast, and in a blink, they were talking back because they were in those difficult teenage years.

I grinned, thinking about that and wondering if I'd still be a member of this coven when that happened for any of the newer parents here. I would like to be because I finally felt as if I had found a place to belong.

Since the glasses had been stacked and were ready for this evening, I took the bin they were in and returned it to the kitchen before I went to the back stockroom and started organizing the delivery from earlier this morning. It wasn't the most glamorous part of my job, but it was a job that not only provided me with a generous wage, but Master Nikolai offered protection and a sense of belonging. Everyone respected him, myself included. He was fair and was willing to admit when he made a mistake.

I placed the crates of various liquors on their shelves where they belonged—Fergus had them organized according to popularity and then alphabetically. I personally had never seen a stockroom as organized as this one or the one on the actual *Beloved Gem* when we were still traveling up and down the river. But it worked, and things were always easy to access in a hurry when we were slammed with customers three deep on a Friday or Saturday night.

“There you are,” Fergus said as he entered the stockroom as I was moving the kegs into their orderly positions. Again, a Fergus thing. Not that I didn't appreciate it, because I truly did.

“Here I am,” I told him. I glanced over my shoulder at him before I picked up the next keg and moved it into its spot. When behind that door, we could use our advanced strength and easily move kegs and large crates of alcohol. But when we had to move them out in public when we could be seen by humans, we had to either ask for help that wasn't actually needed or appear to struggle a little. It made for some interesting moments in the evenings.

“Is something wrong?”

I shook my head and carried the keg the last few steps over to where it belonged.

“Not that I’m aware of. I’m just trying to get this morning’s supply order organized. I didn’t have time earlier, and we’re going to be opening soon. Although our numbers seem to be down for some reason this year.” I wasn’t too concerned. I knew I wasn’t going to lose my job or anything of that nature, not like the possibility if I were working for a human company. The coven had funds for members no matter what. But the fact that the number of guests at the hotel and casino had noticeably reduced recently was reason to question why.

“I’m not sure, to be exact. I know Master Nikolai mentioned the possibility of reducing the number of available rooms simply to give the coven some more downtime. There are several of us with wee bairns, and that puts more of the workload on those such as yourself.”

I chuckled and shook my head as I accepted the next keg that Fergus had decided to help me organize.

“’Tis amusing?”

I shook my head again. “Not at all. But unlike you, if I have nothing to do in the evenings, I become bored.” I set the keg down and looked back toward Fergus, who was still standing as he had been when he handed the last one to me. “I go home to an empty suite, Fergus. I’m one of the very few in the coven that doesn’t have a beloved.” I thought about how to best say what I’d been thinking about lately, and I’d discovered that it surprised even me.

“Are ye upset?”

“Not exactly. Just...” I thought about it for a moment. What was I exactly? “Perhaps thoughtful at this time. I’m not sure how to describe it exactly. I’ve never seen myself as settling down and having a beloved or family.” I glanced around the stockroom and chuckled. “But I’ve never had a coven as supportive as this one. That makes a big difference. Especially when I’m surrounded by happily mated couples.”

“Do ye want to leave?”

I scowled at that question. Why would I want to leave where I was finally feeling at home and ready to possibly look for more in my life.

“Why would I want to do that? How could you possibly get that from what I’d said?”

“To look fer yer beloved?”

“Oh.” That made sense. But I shook my head. “No. I don’t wish to leave.”

“Are ye expectin’ him or her to show up here?”

“No. I’m open to having a beloved at this point. But I’m not ready to go out and actively search for him or her. Hopefully him. I’m incredibly content here and don’t wish to leave. I’ll consider it in the future, but for now, I’m not ready for that just yet.”

Fergus seemed to think about that for a moment and then nodded once. “Just so long as ye realize that ye wouldn’t be leavin’ forever. Master Nikolai would welcome both of ye back. All of the younger ones went out searching at one point or another.”

“I do realize that. I’m just not there yet. The fact that I’m now open to having a beloved, someone else I’m responsible for and opening myself up to is a big step.”

“Understood.” Fergus turned and picked up another keg before handing it off to me. We finished organizing the stockroom quickly, and then I bid Fergus farewell until later this evening.

Since I still had a few hours before the bar opened, I double-checked the doors, ensuring they were locked, before I exited the bar through the employee door after swiping my badge to open it. Behind it was a hallway that was filled with the private offices of Master Nikolai, our coven master; Fergus, our floor manager; and Diego, head of security. Diego was still the coven’s second, but Fergus had become third. With the departure of Matteo and how things had gone down with him and his mate and everything that had happened,

Master Nikolai had been more insistent on having several in place in case a key member left.

Not needing to talk to any of them about anything, I turned right and headed toward the elevator that would take us to the upper floors of the hotel. I missed traveling up and down the river, but having a much larger suite was certainly worth the trade.

After entering the elevator, I pushed the button for my floor, swiped my card, then typed in my code. The elevator dinged, and up I went.

It only took seconds to arrive on my floor, and when I exited the elevator, I went down to the second door on the left and swiped my card again. The door to my suite unlocked, and I entered the place I'd called home for longer than anywhere else in recent years.

I placed my wallet and badge on the table against the wall in my little entryway before I toed off my shoes. I had a three-bedroom suite, and I often chuckled at the two other rooms since I was single. They were still just as empty as they were the day I moved my meager belongings in. I'd since purchased enough furniture to fill the living room and main bedroom, but that was the extent of it.

I had a few things in the kitchen and a small table that sat four, not that I ever used it beyond occasionally eating at it when I felt guilty for having it and never using it. I took my meals in the employee dining room. I didn't have to cook, nor do dishes or major grocery shopping, and I found all of those things more than reason enough to not cook for one, which was such a hassle. I did keep cereal and milk in the place, things that I absolutely loved. Fresh fruit, juice, water, and I was sure there was probably a can or two of beer, but beyond that, my place was pretty bare.

I walked over to the large floor-to-ceiling windows that gave me an amazing view of the Mississippi River. It was flowing, but the banks were frozen, and along it were larger chunks of ice. It was rare that the river actually froze, but it did happen on occasion. The reason Master Nikolai had always

kept the *Beloved Gem* docked was because of the paddle wheel. A large enough chunk of ice could cause serious damage. Not only that, but the constant water being lifted by it and encountering the below-freezing air temperature caused the wheel to freeze. Not a good thing.

I could see the *Beloved Gem* docked at the end of her permanent and private pier below. She was closed for the season but would open back up in the spring, and in late spring, the *Gem* would once again make a voyage down the river. I smiled at the thought. I would be with her when she made the journey. I was single, had no issues with being stuck in a small stateroom for a month, and found it enjoyable to meet so many new people along the trip.

I noticed it was starting to snow, and when I glanced out over the city, I could see that it was actually snowing heavier in that direction. It was most likely headed our way, which could mean we would either have a busy night or we would be incredibly slow, and the hours would drag. I always hoped for the former, but either way, I would be going in at five and closing the bar down at two.

Not really in the mood to watch the snow come across the sky and arrive at the casino, I went to the couch and picked up the remote. I had several more episodes of the latest binge-worthy series to watch, and I had time to do it. Why not? Work would be there for me later.

CHAPTER 2

KYLE



“K yle! Bring me some more sweet loaves. They’re all gone already.”

I looked around the kitchen for the sweet loaves that Dad was asking for. I wasn’t sure which ones they were though. Everything had been stacked together, and nothing was labeled this morning. That wasn’t something I was looking forward to telling him though. I wasn’t the one who had moved everything. No, that was my brother, Tyler.

I trudged my way toward the open doorway and saw immediately why they were already gone. The front of the bakery was completely packed. That wasn’t necessarily unusual, especially not for a Friday. We weren’t open on Saturday or Sunday, and everyone was rushing to grab their goodies for the entire weekend.

Dad turned, the smile he had on his face immediately dropping when he saw my arms were empty.

“Where’s the loaves?”

I shrugged. “What did they look like this morning?” I asked.

Dad’s eyes widened.

“What do you mean? They’re sprinkled with brown sugar on the top before they’re baked. They have a thin caramelized crust on them.”

“Oh!” Those I could find. I went back into the kitchen and headed directly to the loaves that he’d described. There were a

couple dozen left, and I grabbed two trays of them. When I turned, I came face-to-face with Dad, and he had a huge scowl on his face. Luckily, it didn't seem to be aimed at me, but his face was a thundercloud.

“What happened in here? Why would you do this?”

I turned and set the trays back down before placing my hands on my hips. “Me? I didn't do this. I've been here all of five minutes, remember? This mess was like this when I arrived.”

“Where's Tyler?” Dad asked. I shrugged because I had no idea where my brother was.

“He wasn't here when I arrived. I figured he was on break or maybe you'd sent him home.”

Dad shook his head and reached for the tray. I handed it to him, and after he'd disappeared through the doorway, I grabbed the second one and carried it out front.

I slid it into the empty slot and took the empty trays back to the kitchen. I had no idea what had happened back here. Tyler wasn't like this. Why would he suddenly make a huge mess of everything? Nothing was labeled, and sure, I could figure out what some of the things were, but I was going to question when it came to some of the more basic and plain-looking loaves. The pastries were fairly easy to recognize, but not all.

I had identified three other breads and had them in the properly marked trays when Dad returned to the kitchen. Tyler was with him, and he didn't look too happy.

I picked up a flatter, round loaf, thinking possibly sourdough, but I couldn't be certain. I gave it a deep sniff, and yep, sourdough.

I placed it on the correct tray, and after scenting the others that looked similar, I had them organized.

“Now, tell me why it is that you decided to take everything out of their proper trays and place everything all willy-nilly on the table?” Dad asked Tyler

“I...yeah, I did that. I wasn’t thinking. Sorry, Dad. I can help fix it,” Tyler told him.

“What do you mean you weren’t thinking. Of course you’re going to fix it. You know better than to do something like this.”

“Did you tell them?” Danny said as he came rushing into the back room of the bakery. He had his and Tyler’s one-year-old on his hip.

“No. I haven’t had a chance. They’re upset because I messed up the breads.”

“Messed up?” I said, irritated. I reached for a tray of muffins. At least they were still on a tray. They were some sort of berry, and I decided that they could simply go out as berry muffins. I set them off to the side, adding a few stray muffins to it.

“Tell us what?” Dad asked as he handed me another pair of muffins.

“I’m pregnant!” Danny said excitedly.

We all froze. It took a few seconds for what Danny said to sink in. He was pregnant. They were going to have another baby.

Immediately excited, I rushed over to my brother’s mate and wrapped him up in a tight hug.

“That’s so amazing,” I told him.

“Thank you. We’re so excited.”

I could understand that. I was thirty-one, and although I’d not yet found my own mate, I hoped to do so in the next five to ten years. First, I had to be able to get away long enough to do so. With Danny being pregnant again, I didn’t see that being possible in the very near future.

I was trying to remember when it was that he had a fertile period, but I couldn’t remember Tyler missing work anytime in the last month or two. So when had he had a fertile period? He hadn’t just left Danny home alone to deal with it and their

little one, had he? He adored Danny and wouldn't have done that.

“Kyle?”

I turned at the sound of Father's voice. He was standing in the doorway, a sad look on his face.

“What's the matter, Randall?” Dad asked.

“There's someone here for Kyle. He's needed out front.”

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No, son. Nothing wrong. But you're needed out front. I promise it is a good thing. But you will have to come out here.”

I nodded and gave my family another look before I started toward the front of the bakery I helped my parents run. Every little village in our realm had one, and we were the family who happened to run ours.

When I passed through the doorway, the first thing I noticed was that it was no longer busy. That couldn't possibly be a good thing. It had been packed just minutes ago, and I knew there was no way all of the customers could have possibly been served in that short amount of time.

“What's going on?” I asked, looking from Father to the two men standing on the other side of the counter.

“Hello, Kyle,” the tall, dark-haired one said. “I'm Thomas, and this is my Chosen, Canyon. If you are unaware, we're fates, and we've come to discuss your mate with you.”

I turned to Father, my eyes impossibly wide with shock. He had a smile on his face, but it looked sad and forced. “This is a good thing,” he told me. “Your mate, Kyle. Your mate is waiting for you. You will find the happiness that your dad and I have, that Tyler has with Danny and Eloise found with her mate when she found her mate three villages away.”

I knew what he was saying was true, but... I glanced back at my family behind me. Tyler had his arms wrapped around Danny, and Dad was holding Sia. I would never see any of them ever again. I'd never see Sia grow up, nor would I know

anything about the little one that Danny was carrying and would give birth to in the spring. I had to leave everything behind to have my mate, and I wanted that, but it just didn't seem quite fair.

"We understand it can be a difficult decision. But we can tell you that your mate is more than ready to find you, and he has a large found family. They're amazing and protective of their own. He himself is an only child, but there are many around to call family."

Dad nodded. "You should go, Kyle. Your mate. We always knew that it was possible that one of our children could be chosen to go to the shifter realm to find their mate. That's you. It's time for a new adventure, something that is beyond our little village and our bakery."

But what would I do there? I had been working in this bakery since I was tall enough to see over the counter and worktables.

I looked from Dad to Father. "Your mate, son. This is a good thing, which I've already told you. We'll miss you, but it will fill my heart with happiness knowing you are with your mate and having a grand life together."

I took a deep breath before I looked back to the fates and nodded. "I guess I'm ready." I had just been thinking about finding my own mate only minutes ago. Now that I'd been told it was time to go meet mine, I felt nothing but apprehension.

"We'll accompany you to your house, where you can pack a bag," Thomas told me.

"But first, go stand beside your family," Canyon said, speaking up for the first time. It didn't go unnoticed that their voices were drastically different. I did as instructed, and when we were all standing together, Canyon pulled out what I knew was a phone. It made a bright flash a few times, and when he pulled it down, he nodded and smiled. "Perfect."

I wasn't quite sure what that was about. We knew about phones, but we didn't have them here. There was really no

need, but perhaps they would make things easier when talking to family that was villages away.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Thomas told me. He and Canyon left the bakery, leaving me with my parents and my brother and his mate. I looked to Tyler for the first time since I’d been told my mate had been chosen.

“This is nothing but good things. You’re going to make him very happy,” Tyler told me as he pulled me into a tight hug.

“You think so?” I asked. We pulled apart, and I was met with a huge smile.

“Absolutely.”

“I agree,” Danny said, pulling me into an equally tight hug. “I’m going to miss you though. I know I’m not supposed to say that and make things more difficult for you, but I will. I love spending time with you, having the brother I never had at home.”

I chuckled. Danny was the only boy out of five children. And when he and Tyler had found each other, he and I, both being omegas, had an immediate connection that just seemed to click.

“I’ll miss you too.” I gave him another quick hug. “I’m sorry I won’t get to meet the new little one.”

“Me too,” Danny said. He squeezed me tighter for a second before he suddenly let go and then moved to Tyler’s waiting arms.

I looked to my dads and took a deep breath. “I’ll miss the both of you.”

“The same for us,” Father said. He pulled me into a tight hug, and I let him hold me for a long time. I knew this was the right thing to do. My mate would bring me so much happiness. He was my perfect other half, and together, we would have our own life, our own family. But it was sad to be leaving the family I had. I loved them immensely, and leaving our realm to start my life with my mate hadn’t even been on my radar.

I felt another pair of arms wrap around me and then smiled at the thought of being surrounded by my dads. They were amazing parents, and I was sad about them not being in my future children's lives.

"I'll miss you all," I whispered, my voice cracking through the tears that I'd not been able to keep from falling.

"Oh, my sweet boy," Dad said. He pulled me away from Father, turning me toward him, where he wiped my cheeks with his thumbs. "We'll miss you as well. Always. But we'll be thinking about you and your family you're going to have. There's a huge realm there for you to experience and explore, and I want you to go there and do that. Make sure your mate takes you on all of the adventures, and you two enjoy life to the fullest."

I nodded—I could do that. "I will," I told him.

"Good. Now, go get some things, and don't fret. We'll always love you, but it's time for you to make your own life—away from here."

I could do that. I would. I nodded and continued to do so as I stepped away from my family. It was the most difficult thing I'd ever had to do. When I reached the front door of the bakery, I turned back at my family once more, committing the image to memory before I opened the door and walked through. Outside, I found the fates waiting for me. I swiped at my eyes again before walking over to where they were.

"I'm ready," I told them.

"Very well," Thomas said. He gestured behind me, and when I turned, I found a glowing circle in front of me. I didn't even think twice; I simply walked through. I was a bit surprised to find myself walking into the kitchen of my parents' home. The fates came through behind me and offered encouraging smiles.

"There's a bag in your room if you need it. Pack things in there that you wish to take with you. Once you're finished, we'll take you to our realm and give you further instructions

before sending you on your way to your own mate,” Thomas told me.

I nodded again because I honestly didn't know what to say or do, really. I went down the hallway and entered my room, finding the bag he'd mentioned on my bed. I glanced around, taking one last look at the room that had been mine for the past thirty years. It was a long time to spend in any one room, I supposed, but it was the only one I'd ever known, and I would miss it.

Not knowing how much time I had, I went to my dresser and started pulling out clothing. A quick glance over my shoulder to gauge how much I could take with me. The bag seemed to be large enough for me to take most of my clothing. I didn't have much beyond that. I had very little life outside of the bakery. We got up in the middle of the night and worked until dinnertime before we came home, had a meal, and then went to bed so we could do it all over again the next day.

I wasn't complaining. I never would. But it left very little time for other things. Of course, we would spend time with Tyler, Danny, and Sia. But they, too, were often gone in order to get up early again the next day. It was true I had two days off, but those days were always spent doing chores around the house and preparing for the upcoming week.

I managed to get the majority of my clothing into the bag. I tossed in my journals at the top and then went down the hallway to the bathroom. I added my items from there and then went back out to the front room and found the waiting fates.

“Are you ready, then?” Canyon asked. He was placing a piece of paper on the table. I nodded at them.

“As ready as I'm going to be, I guess. I don't have much. We spend most of our time at the bakery.”

“It will be a difference when you arrive in St. Louis,” Thomas told me.

“Is that where I'm going? St. Louis?”

“It is. Your mate is Stefan, and he’s started having thoughts that he’s ready to settle down. Now that he has, he’s ready to meet you,” Thomas said.

“Stefan?”

“Yes. Stefan Santos. He’s a bartender for a casino and hotel. It’s winter there now, but in a few months, the casino will make a trip back down the river, and that’s when adventure happens,” Thomas added.

Adventure down the river? Winter? Will I finally get to see snow in person? Would it be as cold as I’d read about? It was always warm in our realm. It rained frequently, and the place was always beautifully green. But I was excited to see snow. And all of the beautiful colors in the autumn. Thomas mentioned a casino and hotel. I knew what a hotel was, but I was unfamiliar with the term casino. I’d find out soon enough though.

“If you’re ready,” Canyon said, pulling me from my thoughts. I glanced around the room once more before I started toward the door. I obviously didn’t see it happen, but as I stepped out of the door of my childhood home, I stepped into a completely different realm. The colors were off—the trees had purple leaves, and the grass below us was green, but not the green of my home. This green was different. Add in the pink sky, and I could only stare at the sight before me.

“Ah, yes,” Thomas said as he suddenly was standing beside me. “Marian and Gwendolyn have been at it again.”

“At what?” I asked, not sure what he was talking about.

“Yesterday, the grass was orange,” Thomas told me.

“Orange?” I asked, wondering how that was even possible.

“I rather like the lime green. It goes well with the purple leaves,” Canyon said, joining us.

“Hmm...yes, quite,” Thomas agreed. “We’ll need to let them know. Perhaps they’ll leave it for a time, and we’ll come home tomorrow to the same colors.”

“Do they change them often? Is that even possible?” I asked, intrigued.

“They do,” Thomas said. “Last week, the leaves were rainbow colored. Each one was a different color completely, and all of them were together on each tree.”

“We’ve had times where they made everything black and gray,” Canyon said. “I think that color scheme was the one they kept the shortest amount of time. I think they should bring back the neon colors though.”

“Neon?”

“Yes,” Thomas answered. “Incredibly bright. I personally don’t recommend that much neon in any one place, but that is just me. I’m more of a subdued man myself.” Thomas held out his arm, gesturing toward a cute little cottage. “Now, let’s give you some information about your mate and where you’re going. Shall we?”

I grinned at that and followed Canyon toward the cottage with Thomas right beside me. I was more than ready to learn more about Stefan and what my mate and our future would be like.

CHAPTER 3

STEFAN



It was not busy at all. This was unusual for a Friday evening, and I had to wonder if there was something going on outside of the casino that I'd not realized. Was it snowing heavier than it had been earlier? Were the roads bad? Was there a huge event elsewhere in the city that I was unaware of?

"You seem distracted," Adam said to me as I grabbed a glass and started pulling a pint.

"Thinking," I told him. I finished the pint, handed it to the customer, and moved on to cleaning up the bar area.

"Thinking about what?"

I looked out over the bar and noticed that only two of our tables were occupied. This was actually a bit unnerving.

"What is going on that on a Friday, we only have two tables with five total customers here?" I asked him.

"You know, I'd not thought about it. It is Friday, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"Huh." Adam moved and leaned back against the low counter behind the bar and crossed his legs and arms. "It wasn't busy earlier when we opened either. Not that we're always slammed when we first open, but I'd honestly thought it was Wednesday or Thursday since those are usually our slowest days. I'm actually quite surprised it's Friday. How did I mess that up?"

I shrugged and reached for a dry towel to go back to wiping up any little spills. “It’s not difficult to do when we don’t really have a set schedule and things are as slow today as they are.” I moved over to stand beside Adam, giving up any pretense of cleaning something that wasn’t there. We stood there side by side for a moment and looked out over the bar. This was so unusual. We were normally crazy busy, and neither of us had time to think, let alone stand around and try to find something to do.

When a familiar face came through the door to our left, immediately, I was concerned. Fergus shouldn’t be here this late. He came over to us and stood on the other side of Adam. We just stood there, waiting to see what was going on.

“Slow night,” Fergus finally said, breaking the silence.

“It is,” Adam responded.

“If it’s all right with Stefan, why don’t you go ahead and head on up to your suite,” Fergus said to Adam.

Immediately, my coworker and fellow coven member looked to me expectantly.

“I don’t mind at all. It’s only fair since you opened and were only going to be here for another hour at most anyway.”

Adam grinned, then gave my shoulder a pat before he took off for the employee entrance. I didn’t blame him. It had been incredibly slow, and he’d been here for six hours already. I’d only been here for four and had four more to go.

Once Adam was gone, Fergus looked my way. “Master Nikolai said to close it down no later than midnight, no earlier than eleven.”

That surprised me. “Is something wrong?”

“Nay, just slow. He said there is no reason for you to be here and not having anything to do. There’s always tomorrow, and perhaps it will be a more usual Saturday. The casino is equally slow, and he has been shutting down tables all evening.”

“All right. I’ll gauge what it’s like later and go from there.”

“Sounds like a plan. Donna worry too much about it and overthink things,” Fergus told me before he patted my shoulder much like Adam had and then left. After a moment, I refocused on the few customers I did have.

Moments later, I watched as the couple got up and left, leaving behind their glasses—not uncommon.

I grabbed a dry towel, threw it over my shoulder, and after I rinsed the rag in the hot, soapy water, I went to the table to clean and dry it. With that finished, I got back to busywork, trying to make it through the rest of the night. The trio left around fifteen minutes later, and after I cleaned their table, I got to stocking the bar. What normally would take a solid hour for things to be up to Fergus’s standards only took ten minutes. Then, I stood there and waited. And waited some more.

When eleven o’clock came around, I went to the door that opened out to the casino and peeked out. What I saw was surprising, yet not. There were only three people in the casino that I could see.

I went back to the bar, and after writing out a sign, I put it on the door, letting others know we were “closed for staff training.” I shrugged. It wasn’t necessarily true, but there was truly no use in remaining open. After the sign was secured to the door, I locked it and then closed down the bar for the night. It looked like I was going to get quite a bit more binge-watching done of that new show.

NIGHT AND DAY. That was the difference between yesterday and today. Sadly, when going by yesterday’s number of guests, it didn’t take much to be drastically different. It was true, we were a lot busier than we were yesterday, but still not to our normal numbers.

“Stefan, ye got a minute?” Fergus called out from the end of the bar. I glanced his way and saw him there with Montgomery. I held up a hand, indicating I’d be right there. I finished the drink order I’d been working on, and when I made

sure Adam was good with the others at the bar, I headed toward the end of the bar. When I reached the end, I lifted the cut across, immediately regretting my decision to not stay on the other side of the bar.

The most enticing scent hit me, and I stumbled and plowed right into a slender man who was standing behind Montgomery. I grabbed him on my way down, hoping I didn't hurt him and could somehow soften his landing because we were sadly both going down.

"Oof," a quiet voice said on impact. The floor was much harder than I'd expected, and when I looked up, I found myself gazing into gorgeous icy-blue eyes. His hair looked to be sandy blond, but I honestly couldn't tell nearly as easily as I could his eyes.

When his eyes suddenly widened and the amazing scent I'd been smelling turned sour, I realized that scent had been coming from him.

"Your eyes," he said as he tried to scramble to get off me.

I blinked once and then realized why he'd said what he did. My eyes had started to haze, and everything suddenly clicked into place. My eyes hazing, the amazing scent, and the suddenly insistent erection paired with aching fangs told me exactly what I needed to know. That gorgeous man was my beloved.

I wasn't sure what I'd ever done to deserve someone as stunning as he was, but I knew I would thank the fates every day.

It wasn't until the slight weight of my beloved disappeared that I was able to get myself under control enough to sit up. When I did, strong hands suddenly found their way under my arms, and I was lifted from the floor.

"Well, that answers the question of who," Fergus said. I wasn't sure exactly what was happening, but I was quickly escorted to the employee door and through without a second thought. I tried desperately to locate my beloved and tugged against the hold Fergus had on me. "Nay. He's behind us.

Monty has him, and he'll bring him into me office right behind us."

Just the mention of my beloved being somewhere close by and that he was being brought to the office as well had me calming even more. I let Fergus direct me to where I needed to go, and when I was pushed into a chair, immediately, my focus went to the door. I wanted desperately to see my beloved again.

When Montgomery came through the door with the same gorgeous man right behind him, I tried to stand but was quickly pushed back down into the seat.

"Stay there for a moment," Fergus told me.

I nodded, unable to take my eyes off the gorgeous man.

Montgomery and my beloved moved to the other side of the office, where they sat on the sofa, leaned close together, and started talking quietly. The arrival of Master Nikolai drew everyone's attention, and when I tried to stand again, Fergus allowed it this time.

"Master?" Did Master Nikolai know that someone's beloved had arrived?

"Fergus and Montgomery gave me a call not long ago, and as we have very few unmated members left in the coven, I'm not overly surprised to see that you are the one chosen this time," Master Nikolai said.

Ah, that was understandable, I guess. It was most likely only a matter of time before I was the one to scent my beloved. Was I ready though? It didn't rightly matter at this point. He was here, and now it would be time for me to figure out how to charm him. I glanced his way and noticed he appeared to be terrified. Why though?

"I'm quite pleased with my gift from the fates," I said out loud to the room. My eyes were on my beloved though, and I hoped he understood that I would do anything for him and that he had nothing to fear from me. I didn't even know his name yet, and I would literally die for him.

“As you should be,” Master Nikolai said. “Perhaps it’s time for introductions?”

I nodded because I wanted nothing more than to know my beloved’s name. Well, perhaps to be able to take him somewhere private so we could become better acquainted. I was willing to wait for him, just so long as I got to spend time with him and he lost that scared look from his face.

“Hi there,” I said, holding out my hand toward my beloved. “I’m Stefan Santos. I can’t wait to learn all I can about you.”

My beloved grinned up at me, and after a moment’s hesitation, he stood. I was finally getting a good look at who the fates had paired me with and realized that he was fae, just as Montgomery was.

“I’m Kyle. It’s nice to meet you too,” he said quietly. Montgomery stood, and when they were both standing next to each other right in front of me, I realized my beloved was quite a bit taller than Monty. I was curious about that because I was under the impression that all fae were short. Obviously not.

“Well, now that you’ve been introduced and you have my suite number, feel free to call on me anytime you want or need,” Montgomery said. He rubbed his stomach, and I couldn’t help but smile down at him. He had only a month to go, but he looked ready to have the baby.

“I will. Thank you,” Kyle said. He and Montgomery quickly hugged, and then Fergus wrapped a protective arm around his beloved.

“Congratulations, Stefan. Don’t worry about your shifts. We’ll cover them,” Fergus told me. My eyes widened now that I thought about that. That’s right. I had shifts to work. How would that work with having a new beloved?

“Don’t worry him, Fergus. I’ll take care of everything,” Master Nikolai said as he joined us by moving closer.

“Aye. Have a good evening, then.”

I waved to Fergus and Monty as they left the office. I looked around again and realized we were actually in Master Nikolai's office, not Fergus's like I'd originally thought.

"Kyle, it's nice to meet you. I'm Master Nikolai, the coven master here. I wish to welcome you to the Beloved Gem coven, as well as the Beloved Gem hotel and casino. I hope you feel welcome and at home here with Stefan."

Kyle offered a lopsided smile. His hair was a mess of half curls, but most likely just nervousness and fingers had been pulling at it for some time. I didn't mind either way. It was cute and worked for my beloved.

"Thank you, Master Nikolai. I wasn't told I'd be mated to a vampire. When I realized, I freaked out a little, but I remembered to ask for Montgomery." My mate smiled up at me with a genuine smile. "It was a nice surprise to find another fae here. I hope it won't be an issue if we are friends."

Confusion flashed on Master Nikolai's face before he quickly masked it. "Not at all. Montgomery is a valued member of our coven, and he makes Fergus incredibly happy. We love wondering what it is he'll do to make us laugh next. Having you here could only add to that, I'm sure."

Kyle smiled again.

"I would imagine the two of you would like to get to know one another better? Maybe take Kyle to the employee dining room, Stefan? It's early still, and the evening is young. Perhaps a long talk will help relax your new beloved?"

I nodded despite the fact that the last thing I wanted was to take my unclaimed beloved into the employee dining room. I wanted to be alone with him, even if I wasn't claiming him just yet. Being around others wasn't something any paranormal wanted directly after meeting their fated mate.

"Of course, Master Nikolai." I offered a small smile to Kyle. I didn't know if the sight of my fangs would bother him or not, so I wasn't going to smile large enough so he could see them. I gestured toward the door and tilted my head. "It's just this way."

Kyle nodded, but before he moved even a step, he looked toward Master Nikolai. “Thank you for the warm welcome. I’m sure you will hear that I was quite unsure when I realized that this was a vampire coven, but I asked for Montgomery as instructed, and he and his mate have been so kind the past several minutes. They’ve also been incredibly reassuring and have put my mind mostly at ease.”

Master Nikolai grinned and nodded. I had to agree with the fact that Monty could certainly put your mind at ease. There was just something about the little fae that had that sort of effect.

“I appreciate the compliment. It’s always reassuring to hear that one of my coven members has such a positive effect on someone. Especially a new coven member. I know Stefan will answer any questions you might have, but I welcome all members to come to me if they have any questions, concerns, or issues with anyone—coven member or hotel or casino guest.”

“Thank you, Master Nikolai,” Kyle said. He grinned quickly and then looked back my way. “I’m ready.”

I felt a small pang in my chest because it honestly seemed as if my beloved felt as if he was given no choice about any of this, and he was simply going along with the motions because it was what was expected. I led him out into the hallway, and once I felt we were out of earshot of Master Nikolai’s office, I glanced at my beloved. He was truly stunning.

“Kyle?” I said quietly.

His blue eyes immediately gazed up at me, but they didn’t appear to be overly happy. No, they looked as if they were being led to a volcano to be sacrificed.

“Yes?”

“If you don’t wish for us to be mated, it’s all right to say so. We’ve been chosen as mates, but that doesn’t always work out. I’ve known of more than one couple that didn’t get along with their fated mate.”

Kyle immediately lowered his eyes. “That’s not it at all. Please don’t feel like I don’t wish to have my mate. I do. And you are incredibly handsome. It’s just that it was unexpected, and I know I’ll miss my family terribly.”

We came to the end of the hallway, and instead of turning to the right to head to the dining room, I instead gestured for Kyle to go to the left so we could circle around to get back to the elevators.

“Just this way. It’s the long way around, but change of plans. I promise, no funny business though. I only wish to talk.”

“Do you not wish to claim me, then?”

I felt as if I walked right into that. Immediately, I stopped walking, and with a gentle hand on Kyle’s shoulder, I turned him toward me. I wanted to clarify that misconception immediately and didn’t wish for him to think I didn’t want him. Nothing could be further from the truth.

“Please don’t ever feel that I don’t want you. I do. I would take you to my suite right now and claim you if I thought you were ready. But I know you aren’t, and that’s all right. We’ll take things slowly, but you mentioned your family. I wish to know more about them and you. If you’d like to know more about me, I’m an open book and will tell you anything.” I ran my hand up and down his upper arm gently, hoping to soothe and help ease any worries. “I certainly am pleased with being gifted my beloved. Don’t feel that I’m not simply because I’m not pouncing on you immediately.” He didn’t want that, right? Maybe he did? Or perhaps they’d been told that vampires were that way? I’d never really talked to Monty about such things. It simply wasn’t my place, and I didn’t want Fergus to smash my face because I was inappropriate with his beloved. “Unless that’s what you want?” I asked, figuring the worst that could happen was that he’d say no.

Kyle shook his head, and I suddenly felt a bit of relief. I wasn’t sure why, but I was.

“We have time. Not a lot, but some,” Kyle told me.

That was true. Although I wasn't an old vampire, I wasn't incredibly young either. I could go another week without feeding. And if push came to shove, I could go to Master Nikolai, and he could provide a pint from his bank he kept on hand for emergencies for the coven.

"Yes, so that's settled. We'll spend some time getting to know each other and see how things go." I realized something. "Did you not have a bag at all?"

"Oh, I did. I do. When I was at the front desk asking for Montgomery, it was Fergus who heard me. He told me he knew Montgomery and would take me to him. When we went behind a door, he told me that he knew I was fae and that Montgomery was his beloved. He would have him come down and meet me." Kyle grinned. "They took my bag and put it in an office and then were taking me around to see if they could find who my mate was and said that they'd make sure it got to where it needed to be." Kyle shrugged at that.

"Then I'd imagine that your bag is in my suite. I have three bedrooms, but only one has a bed. The other two are completely empty. But I'll get you set up in my bedroom, and I'll take the couch." It was the only proper thing to do.

"Oh no. I can't take your bed. I'm smaller; I should be on the couch," Kyle argued. A door opened and out came two of the dealers for the casino. I nodded to them when they started coming our way, so I took Kyle by the arm and continued on. I needed to get him to the elevators and then up to my suite, where he'd be safe and away from other unmated vampires. There weren't many, but there were a few. And with Kyle being fae, what they said about vampires being drawn to fae blood was completely true. At least until they were mated. That meant I needed to protect my unclaimed beloved.

"Hold those thoughts. We'll discuss this more once we reach the suite," I told him. I really didn't want to rush him, but I moved down the hallway at a somewhat faster pace than I normally would walk. When we reached the elevators, I finally relaxed once I had Kyle safely inside and we were headed up to my floor.

CHAPTER 4

KYLE



Being so close to my mate was causing the tingles coursing through my body to go crazy. Now that we were alone and in the elevator, they had only intensified. I knew they would lessen when we exited the elevator, but while in here with him, I had to tighten my hands into fists to keep from reaching for him. I knew all about how things worked when it came to the tingles around mates. My family was amazing and had been completely open with all of us about what we could and should expect when it came to meeting our mate.

We rode up several floors in silence, and after only seconds, the door was opening. My stomach tickled a little when the elevator suddenly stopped, but I didn't say anything. I knew I'd get used to it, and there was absolutely nothing that Stefan could do. I could take the stairs, but I was certain that we were several floors up. The hotel was incredibly tall when I was standing out in front of it.

"You're quiet," Stefan said as we slowly walked down the hallway. He stopped and waved a card in front of the door, and it clicked. When he pushed on the lever, the door opened, revealing a large and inviting place inside. I peered in, and when Stefan gestured for me to enter, I did.

"I'll make sure you get a card. Diego will have to add you to the system," Stefan told me. "He's the head of security for the coven as well as the casino and hotel."

I nodded. "There's no hurry. I don't see myself leaving your place for a while." I shrugged. I didn't know anyone—

not really—and although I was happy to have been gifted a mate, I knew things would move quickly. They did with fae.

“You’re welcome to go anywhere in the hotel or casino. Well, except others’ private suites unless invited.”

My eyes widened. I wouldn’t ever dream of invading anyone’s space. “Of course. I only meant that I don’t really know anyone, and, well...you know about fae, right?”

Stefan winced as he shook his head. “I’m sorry, no. The only thing I really know about fae is what I’ve learned from knowing Montgomery. They’re happy, fun to be around, can be mischievous, and their magic can become unpredictable when pregnant.”

I chuckled. “All true things. Although I’ll let you know that nobody in my family has ever had issues with their magic when pregnant. That’s not to say it won’t happen with me,” I said as I looked around the space. It was open, with high ceilings, and it felt...cold. I wrapped my arms around my stomach and looked back to my mate.

“Are you nervous?”

I was absolutely nervous, but Stefan was my mate, and I was almost certain he wouldn’t hurt me. I knew it happened from time to time, but it was rare.

“Aren’t you?” I asked. I was certain Stefan was quite a bit older than I was, so maybe he was very well experienced in things such as this. Did he realize that I’d not ever done anything with anyone?

“Of course I am concerned that I’ll do something to mess things up between us. We only have the chance to claim each other once. Well, for the first time. And I don’t want to do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe.”

I started to shiver, and when I rubbed my hands up my arms, Stefan tilted his head.

“You’re cold?”

“A little. I’m not used to this kind of weather. Although the snow is pretty, I’ve never seen it in person before. The fae

realm is warm and green all the time.”

“All the time?”

I grinned at the look of surprise on Stefan’s face.

“Yes.”

“Here,” Stefan said, gently touching my arm and pulling me into the suite farther. “I have a throw blanket on the back of the couch, and you can wrap up in it while I get you something warm to drink.” I followed Stefan through his space and found that although it seemed very sparse, it was nice. It was neat and organized, and it appeared that Stefan had put some thought into coordinating everything. “Sit here,” he said as he gestured to the sofa. It was black and appeared to be leather. When I sat on it, I found it to be soft, and I sank into it a great deal. Stefan went to the other end, and after he picked up a gray-and-white blanket, he opened it and spread it out around me.

“Thank you,” I told him.

“Of course. Do you like tea? Coffee? Cocoa?”

“I’m fine,” I told him. I didn’t wish to put him out nor to have him make a fuss.

“Sweater? I have sweaters. They’ll be warmer than your shirt you’re wearing.” Stefan took off, and I could only watch him leave. He seemed to be able to run faster than any I’d ever seen before, and in only seconds, he was back. He had a thick sweater in his hands, and I smiled as I held up my arms. They were still under the blanket, and it was most likely going to be more than enough to warm me, but I’d take the sweater if it made my mate feel better.

Stefan pulled the blanket down off my shoulders, and then I found the sweater suddenly pulled over my head. I laughed when I struggled to get my arms into the holes for the arms. Stefan and I obviously weren’t good at dressing me in unison.

“I can...” I told him. “I think it would be easier if I did it?”

Stefan nodded before he stepped to the side. He stood there while I got the sweater on and pulled it down my torso. It was

too big, but that wasn't too much of a surprise. Stefan was larger than I was, but he wasn't bulky like Canyon was. But Stefan was a vampire and not a wolf alpha.

"Thank you," I said again.

"You're very welcome. Are you sure you don't want some tea? I can make some quickly. Or coffee?" Stefan was fussing with the blanket again, and I just shook my head.

"I'm positive. Can we talk?" I wished to know all I could about my mate. It was quite a relief and reassuring that he was so concerned with my comfort. He'd known me only minutes. Yet he was doing what he could to make me comfortable.

"Yes, we can talk." Stefan sat down beside me but then was quickly back up. "I can turn the heat up. I have to think about you now. Be right back," Stefan told me, and he was gone before I could say anything again. I was beginning to wonder if this was going to be the norm for him. Did he run off without waiting for a response from the person he'd been talking to?

Once more, Stefan was back in no time, and he was sitting down beside me again.

"Is that a you thing? Or a vampire thing?" I asked. It was most likely a rude question, but I was curious to know.

"Is what a me thing?"

"The..." I waved my finger back and forth. What was it? "I'm not sure. The running so fast you're a blur. Is that something you do?"

"Ahh, yes. That's a vampire thing. We, like other paranormals, have advanced strength, although we're not nearly as strong as, say...dragon alphas. Or dragon omegas for that."

I smiled at my mate. "That makes sense. Dragons."

"Yes. But vampires also have the ability to run at incredible speeds. And we can tint our eyes at will. This will allow us to be able to see in the dark. Unfortunately, it also gives away our location if we're trying to hide from someone."

His eyes turned red, and I knew mine grew wide. I couldn't help but move away a little. It was unnerving to see him like that.

Stefan blinked a few times, and when he looked back up at me, his eyes had returned to their natural color. "Sorry about that. I don't wish to make you uncomfortable. I realized earlier that my eyes turning red seemed to make you uneasy."

"Oh no," I told him. "I'm sorry I made you feel that way. I've never been around vampires before, obviously. We weren't taught that your eyes turn red, and it surprised me a bit, is all."

"Ah, all right. Yes, our eyes turn red. When they do, it helps us to see things better. We can see in the dark, a lot like wearing night-vision goggles." Stefan took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He seemed hesitant to say whatever it was he was about to tell me.

"What is it?"

Stefan seemed to be arguing with himself, which was a bit cute, to be honest.

"So, vampires' eyes turn red when we become aroused. Especially when we're with our beloved."

Oh. That was interesting. "Only then?"

Stefan shook his head. "No. When we're with our beloved, of course, when we are fighting, although we don't necessarily do that for the most part any longer."

Thank the fates for that, I thought.

"They also turn red when we feed."

Ah. There it is. I had been expecting something about feeding to come up. He was a vampire, after all. Montgomery had given me a quick reassurance that I would absolutely love it, that it would probably cause me to pass out—literally—and that it would feel truly amazing. They didn't do it to hurt us, and Stefan wouldn't become obsessed with my blood like we'd been led to believe. Yes, he would need to feed from me, but at most once a week. He hadn't had a whole lot of time to

give me all of the specifics, but he'd covered those, and that was more than enough to put me at ease.

“Montgomery had discussed that very briefly. The biting and what that's like.”

Stefan visibly relaxed, and I chuckled.

“Just so you realize, fae claim by biting. I have always been prepared and expecting to be bitten.”

That surprised Stefan by the look that came across his face next. “Seriously?”

I nodded. “We have canines that will drop, and we bite, and then that's it.” I thought about it for a moment. Maybe he didn't want me to bite him? “Is that all right? I can probably claim you some other way, but I'd have to ask how.”

Stefan smirked. “You're welcome to bite me whenever you wish. Especially when we're claiming each other.”

That was a relief. I couldn't help but smile because what that meant was that we were going to claim each other. Did he know about the tingles? No, he probably didn't. He'd said he didn't know much about fae. Not many did, unless you were one or had been raised around them. We weren't from here, and although it had been common for fae to be chosen to leave our own realm and come to this realm for our mates, it didn't work the other way around for some reason. Shifters didn't come into our realm to find their mates. It just didn't happen.

Taking a chance, because I really didn't have anything to lose, I asked the question. “And we're going to do that? Soon?” I was hopeful. I really wanted to be claimed. I knew the tingles weren't really intense, but they felt it because I'd not ever experienced them before. They were new, and although they would calm to just a very subtle hum throughout my body once we'd claimed each other, I'd still feel them. I'd been told they wouldn't even be noticed after some time. I was waiting for that to happen.

“There's no rush, as far as I'm concerned. We can get to know each other, spend some time together, and go from there.”

I sighed internally. It would have been easier if I'd met my mate in the fae realm. By this point, we would have been skirted off to an empty house in the village, and we would most likely already have claimed each other. That was simply how it was done. There was no use in waiting. We were fated. We would be together forever, and that was just how fae did things.

“You don't seem happy. Is something wrong? Did you want to wait longer?”

I shook my head. “If I can be honest?”

“I always prefer honesty.”

I nodded. I'd warmed up, so I pushed the blanket down off my torso and let it pool on my lap. “Fae are highly sexual beings. When we meet our mates in our realm, there's no questions. We just go to the house we're gifted, and then we claim each other. Sometimes the new couple might share a meal and then get to it, but there's no questions or real reason to wait.” Did I go further to tell him about the tingles? Maybe I should since he seemed not in a hurry to claim me. But wouldn't he need to feed? Maybe not. Especially if he'd done so recently. I didn't want to think about that in detail because even I knew what that most likely meant. Vampires preferred to feed while being intimate.

Stefan seemed to be surprised. “You're telling me that in your realm, when you meet your mate, you just get right to it?”

I shrugged. “Yes. Why would one want to hold off? You're going to claim them anyway. They're your mate, your perfect match. Why would you risk pain just to get to know one another better? That all can happen once you claim each other. And then you have the bond that helps make that easier.”

Stefan started to say something before he shook his head. “What do you mean by pain? Claiming shouldn't ever be painful, aside from the initial pinch when bites are exchanged. But that doesn't last, and it causes nothing but pleasure.”

He'd not talked to Montgomery much. But then again, why would he? He wasn't Montgomery's mate. "Do you know anything about warlocks?"

"I know more than I do about fae, but not a whole lot. I've been around a few..." Stefan paused for a moment. "More than fae, but I wouldn't say I'm an expert. What do warlocks have to do with fae?"

"We're similar. We have magical powers; our bodies let us know we are near our mate by our auras responding to theirs. It does this by vibrating."

"Vibrating. So your body is vibrating now? Can I feel it?"

I nodded. "It is, but I don't think you would be able to feel it. You're welcome to try though." After pushing up the sleeve of Stefan's sweater and my shirt under it, I held out my arm. When his hand gently wrapped around my arm, I closed my eyes as the vibrations flashed for a moment and then calmed.

"Does that hurt you?" Stefan whispered. I opened my eyes and looked at my mate.

"No. When you first touched me, the vibrations intensified for a split second, but now they're calming. It's traveling down my arm, and it's nice."

Stefan shook his head. "I can't feel anything. You were right about that."

I smiled at him. "You will."

"How so?"

"When we claim each other, your claiming bite will sync with the vibrations in my body. When I become aroused, the claiming bite will tingle more intensely. Same goes if I'm hurt, upset, angry, things of that nature."

"I've never heard of anything like that before." Stefan moved his hand off my arm, and where it had been, the tingles flared again before calming. "Tell me why or how it hurts though. You mentioned pain."

"Like warlocks, we only have so long to be claimed by our mates when we come close enough to them for our auras to

detect theirs. As the days go by, the tingles or vibrations become more intense. Eventually, they become painful and can affect more than just physical health.”

Stefan’s eyes widened. “And if we claim each other?”

“They’ll flash powerfully but then will calm and will always be there, like a very gentle hum. Most fae say they find them soothing. Your claiming bite will be the same. It will be a barely noticeable tingle or hum.”

I was convinced I’d said something to upset my mate because he placed his elbows on his legs and, after leaning forward, started rubbing his temples.

“Don’t feel pressured,” I said quietly. The last thing I wanted was for him to claim me before he was ready.

Stefan sat up and stared right at me. His eyes were no longer dark though. They weren’t exactly red, but I could just make out a red tinge to them.

“It’s not that I’m feeling pressured, Kyle. I want very much to take you back to my bedroom and claim you. I would love to spend a week in bed with you while you go into heat.” Stefan’s mouth dropped open slightly as if he realized what he’d said and didn’t quite intend for me to hear it.

“I wouldn’t complain,” I told him. Yes, I was going to miss my family. I wasn’t the only fae who’d left our realm and left behind an amazing family that they missed. But I was here for him. To find my own mate and start our family together.

“Children. Do you want them? That usually happens when mates claim each other.” Stefan shook his head. “I don’t even know how old you are. You’re legal, right? They wouldn’t send me an underage beloved.”

I snorted, and it turned into a laugh. I couldn’t answer right away, so I just shook my head while holding up a finger to ask for a moment. When I finally had myself under control, I grinned. “I’m definitely of age. I’m thirty-one. And yes, I’d love children. Claiming does indeed lead to fertile periods. Children tend to be the result of spending a fertile period with your fated mate. Did you not want children?” He would, right?

We were matched. We would eventually figure out that we wanted the same things. That's how this worked. Wasn't it?

CHAPTER 5

STEFAN



If I'd been asked last week if I wanted children, I most likely would have said I wasn't sure. That was then—before I'd met Kyle. I most definitely wanted children with my beloved. I was already thinking about how adorable he'd be with a baby bump.

“You're smiling.”

I was and continued to do so. I let myself finally relax enough to smile to where Kyle could see my fangs.

“Did your fangs drop? Was that something I did?”

I shook my head. “No. Vampire fangs are always down. We aren't born with them. Much like shifters go through puberty and shift for the first time, we go through something similar, and our canine teeth will fall out and our fangs will grow in their place. They are always down, and we learn from a young age to hide them while smiling.”

“So you can't smile? Or laugh around other people?”

I grinned at my beloved. “Of course we can. Around other paranormals, always. Although not all paranormals are fans of vampires. We don't necessarily have the best reputation. Like with any species, there are always bad apples. Vampires are certainly not immune to that.”

Kyle chuckled. “No, certainly not. The created fae and his earliest offspring and followers were a very good example of such a thing.”

“Is that something you wish to talk about?” I wanted to know all I could about my beloved and fae in general, but only what he was comfortable with sharing at this point. It would all come in time.

“No. I mean, I will if you want to know the history of the fae. I only know what I’ve been taught, and I’m not sure if it’s actually accurate or not, but I do know the created fae was killed. He wasn’t nice, and he was greedy. He’s also the reason we were sent to our own realm.” Kyle shrugged. “That’s pretty much the quick short version. If you want the big long one, it might take a while.”

“No, I’m good.” I glanced around the room, and now that I had Kyle in my space, I realized just how sparse it was. We needed to change that. I’d take him shopping, and we’d redecorate. “Hey, would you like a tour?”

Kyle’s smile grew. “I would.”

I jumped up from the couch and held out my hand to my beloved. He grinned up at me, and after he’d untangled himself from the blanket, I helped him up off the couch.

“Your sofa is quite comfortable. And it warms up nicely.”

“It is and does. That was a major selling point for me. Unlike shifters, vampires don’t run extra warm. We get cold just as humans do, and although we can last a little longer in the cold elements, we aren’t nearly as comfortable in them as shifters. Having a couch that warmed up was a bonus.”

“Is your space always this cool?” Kyle asked.

It took me a moment to realize what he meant, and it hit me that, yeah, it was chilly in the suite because I’d not expected to be here.

“Oh. Let me go change that.” I hurried off to the thermostat on the wall in the hallway. That was something that a certain warlock and his team of warlock construction crew had done for Master Nikolai when he helped renovate the hotel. This place used to be incredibly over-the-top and hideous for the most part. Our suites were all individual hotel rooms that had been converted into basically apartments. Each

suite had its own thermostat, and I had mine programmed to reduce heat during the afternoon and evening while I was at work. I'd need to change that since Kyle was now going to be here.

I noticed that my beloved had followed me, and once I reached the thermostat in the hallway, I glanced at him. "I'm sorry for the chilly air." I motioned for Kyle to come closer. "Here," I told him. "This is how you adjust the heat up or down. And in the summer, the air up or down." I pushed the Up arrow several times, and the thermostat flashed twice, and the blower fan kicked in for the heat. "I'll change the program so it doesn't drop the temperature when I'm at work. It's not normally this cool in here. I am sorry about that."

Kyle grinned up at me. "It's all right, truly. I was simply asking. I was thinking that I might need to find somewhere to purchase some warmer clothing. I have trousers, but most of my tops are lighter weight. The fae realm is the same temperature all of the time."

That would be wonderful. I'd thought about searching out a place that was like that, but in the end, I'd ended up in St. Louis. Now that Kyle was here, I couldn't be happier about that. But perhaps he would have simply ended up wherever I'd been? I wasn't entirely certain how the fates worked when it came to pairing up fated mates.

I quickly reprogrammed the thermostat to where it was warmer throughout the day and into the evening. I still had it drop a little during the nighttime hours simply because I liked it a little cooler when I was sleeping. If Kyle was cold after tonight, I'd change that as well.

"There," I told him. "It'll now be warmer. It will take several minutes for it to become noticeably warmer in here, but it'll keep it there once it comes up to temperature."

"You didn't have to do that."

"I did. And I honestly normally have it warmer in the mornings when I'm here."

Kyle nodded slowly. He crossed his arms in front of him as he leaned against the wall beside me. “I appreciate it. Thank you,” he told me. “Do you work a lot?” he asked before I could respond.

“You’re welcome for before, and I work as much as anyone else in the coven. Although, now that you’re here, I’ll be given time off while we figure things out.” I grinned. “And of course, if you were to get pregnant, I’ll get time off when you have the baby.”

Kyle’s smile was slow, but when it grew to full force, I had to take a few deep breaths to remain in control. I wanted nothing more than to pull him into my arms and hold him. He was simply beautiful. I wasn’t sure if men could be considered beautiful or not, but Kyle was.

“How about that tour?” I asked, trying to distract myself.

“That would be nice.” Kyle stood up completely. “Unless you don’t mind me simply wandering around and going through all of your rooms and things.”

I held out a hand, and when Kyle placed his in mine, I brought his hand to my mouth and kissed the back of it. “I don’t mind you searching everything. I have nothing to hide. I’ve never had anyone here in my space except for you. And, of course, Fergus and Diego. They helped me move some things in when we first moved in. But other than them, you’re the only person who has been in here.”

I started down the hallway toward the kitchen.

“I don’t expect that you’re a virgin like I am,” Kyle said suddenly. I stumbled and just barely caught myself against the wall. Kyle banged into my side as I’d yanked on his arm when I’d lost my footing. When I looked at my beloved, it was with wide eyes. “Yeah, about that,” Kyle said.

“About that? As if it’s not a big deal?”

Kyle shrugged.

“How can you get to be thirty-one and still a virgin?”

“Because fae usually are. We almost always find our mates before we hit the half-century mark. We wait for our mates.” Kyle shrugged again. “It’s not that big of a deal to us. We’ve not had sex, so we don’t know what it’s like to have it, so we can’t really miss it.”

I was trying to calculate just how many people I’d been with in that regard. It had been quite a few, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to share that with my beloved. Apparently, my untouched beloved. What...why? Why would the fates gift me such a treasure?

“Whatever you’re thinking about so hard, don’t,” Kyle said.

I blinked a few times and shook my head. “Yeah, you don’t want to know how many...” I trailed off.

“It’s expected for any mate that we find outside of the fae realm. Even another fae. It’s how things work here.” Kyle grinned. “And with you being a vampire, I understand completely. I’m not jealous, not upset, not going to hold it against you in any way. It happens. I just hope you offer me the same courtesy.” Kyle took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I don’t know how to do things that you’ll want. I know the basics. Beyond that, I hope you’ll be willing to teach me?” Kyle said, hope filling his voice.

I couldn’t hold back any longer. Hindsight being what it was, it was most likely the worst possible timing, but I couldn’t help myself. I raised my hands, cupping Kyle’s face, and leaned down. When my lips touched his, he gasped, and I took that opportunity to press my lips more firmly against his. I didn’t take it any further, as he’d said he was a virgin. That didn’t necessarily mean he’d not kissed someone before, but by the way he wasn’t really responding, I had to guess that to be true.

After another moment, I slowly pulled away, opening my eyes. When I did, I found myself looking through a tint of red. I blinked several times to try and clear my vision, but it wasn’t much use. I was with my beloved, and we’d just shared our

first kiss. He smelled wonderful, and the look of bliss on his face only turned me on more.

As Kyle slowly opened his eyes, he smiled. I knew he could still see the red in mine, but that only seemed to cause him to smile more.

“That was nice. Can we do that again later?”

I nodded. “Yes, it was, and we absolutely can do it again later. I hope to introduce you to all of the joys of kissing.”

“I’d like that.” Kyle cleared his throat. “And other things?” he asked, his voice once again hopeful sounding.

“Oh, my precious beloved. Absolutely. Just as soon as you’re ready, we will get to all of those joyful things that we can experience together.”

I noticed his joy seemed to dim slightly, and I definitely didn’t want that. I reached out and touched his cheek again, drawing his attention back to me.

“I’m not saying no, Kyle. But perhaps you’ll humor me and let me show you around the suite, and possibly the hotel and casino, and then feed you a nice meal before we get lost in bed together? You might not realize it fully, but once we get there, we most likely aren’t going to leave the bedroom for a week.”

He had told me that fae were very sexual. Well, so were vampires. It wasn’t uncommon for Fergus to go check on his beloved “for a moment or two” and come back hours later. Adam and I would always chuckle at him, and at times, Fergus would grumble at us, but we both understood. Even if I didn’t yet have my own beloved.

“All right. I do understand. I don’t mean to sound impatient. I’m trying to take things slower, it’s just...I’ve always seen myself with a fae, and we’d just go and do things like everyone always did.”

I sighed. Did the fae not understand romance? Romantic gestures? Foreplay? He made it sound like a duty rather than a gift to find your fated mate.

“Soon,” I told him. “Let’s continue on with the tour.”

I took Kyle’s hand again and started toward the kitchen. Sadly, it was very unused. I did have things like frozen pizzas and boxes of mac and cheese, but I didn’t do a lot of cooking. I had my favorites for middle-of-the-nights

“So this is the kitchen,” I said. He smiled again, going directly to the center counter and running his fingers along it.

“This is nice. You could roll out so much dough here,” Kyle said.

“Yeah, I guess. I don’t really cook. I eat in the dining room.” Kyle looked at me, surprise in his expression.

“Do you not know how to cook? Or just don’t?”

I shrugged. “I can cook some things. I’m not a gourmet chef though. But I have some basics here,” I said as I went to the pantry. It was a good size, but sadly, it didn’t have much in it. Kyle looked at it, then at me.

“That is not the basics, Stefan. That’s pathetic.”

I couldn’t help but snort at the look of utter distaste on Kyle’s face.

“Let me guess. You’re a cook?”

“Not exactly, but my family ran my village’s bakery. I can make dozens of different types of breads, rolls, pastries, cakes, things of that nature.”

Of course he could. I wasn’t great at cooking, and the fates sent me an expert on making tasty carbs.

“Well, we can go shopping whenever you’d like, and you are welcome to get any and everything you want to stock our pantry with. I can show you how on the laptop later if you want. Otherwise, we can go to the store when we have time.” I didn’t see that happening anytime soon though. Not if Kyle truly wanted me to claim him later. I meant it when I said we most likely wouldn’t be leaving the bedroom for a week or so. I knew just what happened when couples claimed each other. The omega went into heat shortly after, and then it was several

days of sexual need that the couple did nothing more than try their best to relieve that need.

“Shopping would be good. I have funds. The fates gave me money that they said could be used in this realm.”

I reached for Kyle again. Now that I’d touched him, I couldn’t seem to stop. “I have more than enough funds for both of us. I might not be quite as wealthy as some of the coven members, but I’ve done well enough for myself, and I’ve always lived well within my means. I’ll get you cards to my accounts, and you won’t have to worry about using your funds unless you absolutely want to.” I would see that he had his own account set up as well. I knew that from Montgomery joining our coven, the fates would have given Kyle any and all papers he would need.

“Could I possibly have a glass of water?” Kyle asked suddenly.

“Of course.”

I went to the cupboard and pulled down a glass. Then I went to the refrigerator and stood in front of it. “Do you want ice?”

“Umm...sure?”

I placed the glass under the dispenser and pushed the button for crushed ice. When the glass was partially full, I let go and then pressed the other one for water. Kyle had come over to stand next to me and was staring intently at the fridge door.

“What is that?”

“This? It’s an ice and water dispenser.” I handed Kyle the glass and then opened the door. “See?” I said, pointing to the inside. He glanced at it, and I pulled out the ice bin. “This is where the ice maker is.” I closed the bin and then showed him the water line. “This is where the water comes from. It’s attached to a line that runs into the wall and into the water lines. It was here when I moved in, and I absolutely love it.”

“This is...I’ve never seen anything like it.” Kyle took a drink of the water. “And it will just keep pouring more water?”

I nodded. “The ice bin will run out of ice if you press the ice button for long enough. It has a bar inside the bin, and it stops making ice when it gets lifted from the level of the cubes.”

It was fascinating watching Kyle. He was truly amazed at something that I completely took for granted.

“You mentioned your family ran a bakery. Do you want to share more about them?” I gestured for Kyle to go to the other side of the kitchen, where we could sit at the bar. When I glanced at the stools, I decided instead on the couch again. It was just more comfortable, and I led Kyle back to the living room.

“Well, my family wasn’t overly large. My parents had three children.”

“Do a lot of fae families have lots of kids?” I asked. “I remember Montgomery mentioning that he had something like ten siblings or something along those lines.”

Kyle nodded as he took another drink and then bent to set his glass on the table. “Is this all right?”

“Yep. It’s coated, and it’s perfectly safe to put it there.” Kyle put the glass on the table, and I quickly sat in the corner of the couch and gently tugged him down beside me. He came easily, and once he was leaning into my side, I put my arm around his shoulders. Kyle grabbed the blanket again, and I helped him spread it over our laps. I had a feeling this would be an emotional discussion. He’d said he would miss his family. That told me he got along well with them.

“How long have your parents been mated?”

“Oh, umm...I’m thirty-one. Tyler is thirty-five, so I’d say thirty-five or thirty-six years.”

“Do they only have the two of you?” I asked.

“No, we have a sister in between us. Eloise. She’s thirty-three. Our dads are Randall and Kurt. Kurt was our carrier.”

“That sounds like a nice, small family.”

Kyle grinned at me. “Yeah. Eloise and Tyler are both mated. Eloise left our village when her mate found her while traveling to search for his mate. They have two kids, both girls. Tyler and his mate, Danny, are expecting their second. The little girl is one. They had just announced that Danny was expecting again this morning.”

I could see why Kyle was going to miss his family. It didn't seem fair that he'd had to leave and wouldn't be able to return to visit his family. Perhaps I could ask, find a way for him to do so. Surely there was a way?

“I'll miss them, but Dad told me that despite how much I loved all of them and would miss them, what I would find here with you wouldn't be able to compare to the happiness that they brought me. What I'd get by starting a family with you would be so much more.”

Well, there was that logic. Kyle's dad seemed like an incredibly smart man. Still though. Surely there was a way they could communicate, at least? Maybe Master Nikolai could figure out a way for fae mail? He had connections. Would that be enough? Would it make Kyle miss his family even more? I only wanted happiness for my beloved.

CHAPTER 6

KYLE



I loved my family and knew that what Dad had told me was true. Any family I created with Stefan would become my entire world. Stefan seemed to have a solid coven family, and I couldn't wait to get to know them better. Especially Montgomery. It was a complete surprise to arrive here and discover another fae.

“So your family ran the village bakery. And it sounds like you were really close to them.”

I nodded. “I was. Even though Eloise moved away, she wasn't too far away, and we still saw her and her family at least a few times a year. But Tyler found Danny in the village next to ours, and they came back to our village instead of staying in Danny's. His parents were all right from what I understand, but they were happy to not have Danny around any longer.”

“I know that feeling all too well,” Stefan told me.

“Do you have siblings?”

He shook his head. “Not that I'm aware of. I was an only child, and as far as I know, I still am.” Stefan sighed. “I've not had any contact with my family or my birth coven in almost eight decades.”

That surprised me a lot. I had to remember that my mate was quite a bit older than I was and that not everyone got along well with their family. Some just weren't good families.

“They weren't nice people,” Stefan told me. “The coven master liked to keep donors in the coven. It wasn't forbidden,

but they didn't treat them nicely, and too often, they ended up dead because too many were drinking from them in too short of a timeframe. I brought this up to my parents, but neither of them cared." He shrugged. "I saw their lack of concern for others as them agreeing with how things were, and I left."

"That's terrible," I told him. That was a lot worse than I'd been imagining.

Stefan nodded slowly while staring blankly at the coffee table. "To this day, I still remember that conversation with my father vividly. He honestly didn't care. He thought that it didn't affect him, so why would he say something about it? He and I argued that night, and I completely changed my view of the man who had sired me."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry. The last thing I want is to upset you, and I can tell talking about it is doing that."

Stefan blinked a few times to focus and looked over at me, a sad smile on his face. "No." He was quiet for a moment. "Well, perhaps, but not really. We argued about the donors initially because I refused to use them. I didn't have a beloved, and when I needed to feed, I went outside of the coven to find a willing donor. He argued that they were there for me to use and I should stop putting the coven into jeopardy by going out into town." Stefan shook his head. "I argued that it was wrong to keep them at the coven and we should do something, but he wouldn't say anything to help the donors. I knew I couldn't go to the human authorities or anything like that because I would be killed for outing our kind. Instead, I packed my things, and after I convinced several of the donors to leave with me, we snuck away in the middle of the night."

"You make it sound as if they weren't allowed to leave."

Stefan shook his head. "They weren't. They were donors. As far as the coven master believed, they were property of the coven and could be used as he saw fit. They were kept in a small wing of the coven house."

My eyes grew, and my heart started pounding. "How did you get them away?"

“I snuck into their wing, and the few I could convince, I left with them. We piled into my vehicle, and I dropped them off in different cities as I drove away. I gave each of them some money, and after I dropped the last one off, it was the next morning by that point. After I’d rested a little at a roadside stop, I decided I needed to completely change everything I could about me. First thing up was to trade my vehicle for a different one.”

“Why?” I knew what vehicles were, but I’d never been in one. I’d seen several outside of the casino and hotel. They were both parked as well as moving around with people in them.

“I wasn’t taking any chances. I was trying to get away from my birth coven, and my coven master was going to consider me a thief for helping those donors leave. Forget the fact that they were being held against their will. They’d been coerced to attend a party at the coven house and then were never allowed to leave. They had essentially been kidnapped, and it was true that when they’d been able to get away, I knew that a couple of them went to the local authorities. Beyond that, I’m not sure what happened to them.”

“Did you get into trouble?” Had my mate been hurt? Were they still going to come after him? He’d made it sound like they weren’t nice people. I had magic, and although I wasn’t a violent person, I knew I would absolutely use my magic to protect my mate.

“I got into a little bit of trouble. I was labeled a rogue vampire and deemed to be dangerous. This wasn’t unexpected.” Stefan pulled me closer for a moment, giving me a hug before he loosened his hold and continued on with the story. “I hid for a long time before I changed my identity and then made my way westward. Eventually, I heard that Master Nikolai was looking for employees willing to work on his riverboat casino. I applied, was honest with him about all that had happened, and still he accepted me. I’ve been here since.”

“How long ago was that?” Was my mate safe now? Had it been enough time?

“A little over four years.”

Not that long. Would they still be searching for him? “Are you still rogue? Are they still after you? Should we run?”

Stefan pulled me closer, and then I found myself carefully pulled onto his lap. He wrapped his arms around my waist and gave me another hug.

“No, my beloved. I’m no longer rogue.” Stefan leaned in and kissed my cheek. “It’s nice that you’re so worried about me and my safety so shortly after meeting me.” Stefan shook his head and smiled. “I still remember the day that Master Nikolai accepted me into his coven. I will never forget that or the security he offered. He has some pretty powerful connections, and I’ve been told that my former coven master is no longer coven master. As far as I know, my parents are still there, but I don’t care enough to ask about them. To me, they’re dead. I’m better off without them.”

“Are you happy here?”

Stefan smiled, and it seemed as if the worry of not long ago had left his thoughts. “I am. Especially now that you’re here. I’d very much like for you to give the coven a try before making any decisions. But if you do decide you’d like to move away, I’ll go with you. There are a few vampires in Montana near the paranormal council, and I know we could go there. There’s also more fae there.”

I gave Stefan a confused look. “Why would we leave? You just said you liked it here. You’re safe here?”

“If you didn’t want to be around so many vampires, I would move elsewhere. I know that it took Montgomery some time to get comfortable being around a coven of vampires. I mean it when I say they won’t harm you. They know not to mess with any of the beloveds. And most of them are already mated, so you’re of no interest to them anyway. But it’s not just the vampires—it’s all paranormals. There are, of course, those that don’t respect anyone, but most do and know that fated mates are treasures to not be messed with.”

I rolled my eyes at Stefan. “I’m not going to want to leave, Stefan. This is your coven. This is where we’ll make our home together. We’ll have kids here, and hopefully, we’ll have a fae or two, and they can play with Montgomery’s little fae that he’s carrying.”

“Montgomery is carrying a fae baby? Seriously? That’s wonderful news. We were all certain that they knew what they were having, but they’d not said anything to anyone. There was a bet going on as to what they were having, and the prize was getting pretty big.”

My mouth dropped open. I couldn’t believe I’d let that slip. It wasn’t my place to say anything, and I wasn’t sure how to go about covering up my mishap. “Umm...no. I didn’t say that,” I tried.

Stefan chuckled. “Yes you did.” He leaned over and kissed my forehead. “Don’t worry though. I won’t say anything to Fergus or Montgomery.”

I groaned, frustrated with myself. “I didn’t know he’d not said anything. But one of the first things I noticed was his fae baby’s aura reaching out toward me when he first came downstairs after Fergus had called for him.”

“I would imagine that was because their little guy knows he’ll have a fae uncle.”

“She...” I blurted before I bit my lower lip. It was obvious that I was terrible at keeping secrets. I’d not picked up on Danny’s pregnancy because it was obviously still very early stages, but Montgomery was only a month away from his due date, and his baby definitely recognized other fae nearby.

Stefan’s eyes widened before he threw his head back and laughed. I couldn’t blame him. I was certain that I looked like the little one that had been caught with their hand in the cookie jar after being told many times no cookies. When Stefan continued to laugh, I tried to be irritated and narrow my eyes at him, but that only seemed to make him laugh harder.

“Please don’t say anything,” I whispered once I’d finally stopped laughing. I’d only been here not even an hour or two,

and already I'd shared two secrets that weren't mine to share. I was a terrible friend, and I wasn't even that. Montgomery didn't know me, and I knew he didn't consider me a friend. We'd just met, and it was obvious that I couldn't be trusted.

"Hey now," Stefan said, raising my face to meet his. "I promise I won't say anything. You will get to know Fergus better, I'm sure. But what you should know that I found so funny was that before Montgomery, Fergus was incredibly cranky and standoffish. He's changed drastically since his beloved came into his life. But the thought of him having a sweet little girl, I find it comical because I've just never seen it. I still often see him as the grumpy Scot that he used to be."

"Isn't that how things work though? We become happier once we find our fated mate? We've found that perfect person, and they make us happier."

"Perhaps. I'm not sure. I've always been fairly easygoing, so I'm not sure I'll change much? I'll be happier for certain."

I'd only known of two couples that weren't extremely happy with their fated mate. One was an older couple who had been mated for well over a century. The other was a couple that was more of the age of my own fathers. They just didn't seem to be a good match. They were fated, though, because they'd been able to have children.

"I hope to make you happy," Stefan said suddenly.

I pulled away from him a little so I could stare at him better. "Why wouldn't you? You don't seem to be unkind. You risked a lot to help those donors, and that should say a lot about who you are." My mate was a good man, I just knew it. "You're a good one, Stefan. You can try to argue that you aren't, but I won't believe you."

Stefan tugged me close again, held me for a moment, and then let go altogether. He patted my hip suddenly. "Come. Let's continue with the tour of the suite. There isn't a whole lot to see, really. I'll show you later how to use the remote and get to all of the movie channels, as well as the gaming system, but later. I wanted to show you something," Stefan said.

I stood, grabbing the blanket as I did. I tossed it back onto the couch and took Stefan's outstretched hand as he held it out.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

Stefan led me toward the front door, and I was wondering if we were going to leave the suite. He'd said that he didn't like the idea of me being around others while still not claimed. But if we were leaving...then I'd be around others?

Instead of opening the front door that opened out into the hallway, he pulled on the door to our right. "Here, put this on," he told me while holding out a long black coat.

"Are we going somewhere?"

"In a way. We're not actually leaving though."

I was confused but slid my arms into the sleeves as Stefan continued to hold the coat out to me. Once I had it on, I tugged it closed in front of me. It was thick and warm and went almost to the floor. I turned with a smile on my face as Stefan removed another coat, this one a little bit shorter.

"You should have given me that one," I told him. "I'm shorter."

"Yes, but this one isn't nearly as long or warm looking. I'm more used to the cold weather than you are, and there's something outside I want to show you." Stefan closed the door and drew me back into the suite. He went back to the couch but went to the left of the television, and what I'd thought were large windows was actually a door. He slid it open and pulled me outside with him.

Immediately, I went to the edge of the railing and looked out at the river below us. "What is it?" I asked.

"What is what? The boat? That's the *Beloved Gem*. That was the casino and coven home when I first joined Master Nikolai." Stefan moved up behind me and wrapped his arms around my chest, holding me back against him.

"I meant the water, but tell me more about the boat. Does it still work? Can you take me on it? Did you like being on it?"

Stefan's chest jiggled behind me as he chuckled at my questioning.

"The river is the Mississippi. Yes, the boat still works. Yes, I can take you onto it. Yes, I very much enjoyed my time on it. I had planned on joining the crew this summer when they went out on one of the few voyages that they still take each summer, but now I'm thinking I'll be otherwise busy."

I leaned my head to the side so I could look up at my mate. "Why? Do you have plans?"

Stefan leaned down, and instead of kissing my forehead or cheek like I expected, he gently pressed his lips to mine. When he did, the vibrations in my body intensified for a moment before they once more settled. Stefan's hand moved from my chest to my cheek and then my jaw. When he did, I gasped a little when his finger touched my neck. Stefan's tongue softly ran along the underside of my upper lip before it pushed into my mouth and then touched my own tongue. I moaned again, this time the vibrations in my body increasing slowly and settling in my groin area. I knew exactly what was happening and thought that we were finally getting somewhere. That was until Stefan quickly pulled away. I slowly opened my eyes, finding his more than a little red.

"I think I like your eyes turning red. It gives things away," I whispered.

Stefan smiled, then gave me another gentle kiss, this time keeping it like my first one, and then pulled away more and stood up.

"Not that I am upset about getting a little carried away, but I didn't bring you out here to kiss you."

"That's a disappointment," I told him. Stefan's smile grew, and I got another glimpse of his fangs. I wondered what they'd feel like when he bit me. I knew his were longer and slenderer than mine, but would I enjoy the bite? I was sure I would. Mating was supposed to be pleasurable, and I couldn't see Stefan causing me pain with his bite ever. He would have to do so in order to have my blood so he could survive. It wouldn't hurt. I just knew it wouldn't.

“You’re thinking entirely too hard. What’s going on in your mind?”

I sighed. “I was thinking about you biting me. It’s not going to hurt, right? I don’t think it will. But I’ve never been bitten before. And you’re not a fae. Your bite will be different, no?”

Stefan nodded. “Yes, it will be different. But it will cause immense pleasure, each and every time.” Stefan leaned closer and whispered, “So much so that we’ll need to ensure that you’re not wearing anything.”

It only took a moment for me to realize what he was saying. I might be a virgin, but I wasn’t uneducated. Sure, I didn’t know how to do some things, but I knew how the basics worked, and Stefan was talking about me having orgasms from him biting me. Every time. That was...going to be quite enjoyable.

“And to get back to your earlier question,” Stefan said as he pointed down at the boat again.

I looked down at it, wondering just when I’d get to go on it. Was it closed for the winter? Would I have to wait until it was time to take it down the river again? Or maybe Stefan wouldn’t want me to come with him.

“You and I will most likely have our own little fae or vampire by the time the *Gem* goes out again.”

It took me entirely too long to realize what he was saying. When it finally computed, I wanted to shake my head at myself.

“You’re right. Fae gestation is four months. We won’t be able to take the baby on the boat, will we?”

Stefan wrapped his arms tightly around me again. “We could. But there are only so many larger family suites on it for the crew. I didn’t have one before because I wasn’t mated. And I’m not sure I’ll be ready to take our baby out on the boat at such a young age.”

I quickly did the math for months, not really certain when the boat would go out, but I figured our baby, whom we’d not

yet conceived, would be only a few months old.

“Is the boat unsafe?”

“It’s very safe. There just isn’t a whole lot of room. It’s a boat. But we can go out if you’d like. The *Gem* is actually closed now for the winter, but we still go out and check on it frequently. I can take you out there whenever you’d like.”

I turned in Stefan’s arms and flinched when something hit my eyelash. When I saw something else falling at my face, I tried to move away, but Stefan held me steady.

“It’s just snow.”

I looked up at the sky and saw that it was indeed snowing.

“Oh, wow,” I said. “I’ve only seen it in books. But the pictures showed it snowing really harshly.”

“That does happen from time to time, but this is just a flurry. We’re supposed to get heavier snow tonight though, which is fitting since it’s the winter solstice today.” Stefan leaned down and kissed my nose this time.

“Thank you,” I said. “For showing me the boat. I can’t wait to see it more.”

“You’re welcome. I wanted you to see not only the *Gem* but the view. Every day, I’m thankful that Master Nikolai invited me into this family, and I want you to know that he’ll do the same for you. I really hope you are comfortable here and can come to consider it home,” Stefan told me.

I sighed and leaned back into Stefan’s chest more. “Silly vampire. I already consider it home. You’re here, and you’re my home now,” I told him.

CHAPTER 7

STEFAN



There was more than one reason why I'd asked Kyle to come outside with me. The biggest was because after fifteen minutes of him sitting on my lap, it was difficult to keep from pressing my erection up into his perfect ass.

The cold would help get that under control, and it would give me a chance to show him the amazing view as well. I truly loved spending time on the *Beloved Gem*. It had been more of a home to me than the coven I'd spent the first fifty years of my life in.

There were a few that I missed after first fleeing, but in time, those feelings faded, and I truly became a lone vampire. Until I happened to be searching the secret paranormal web for somewhere to land, even temporarily. It was there that I'd come across Master Nikolai's "help wanted" posting. He was looking for not only dealers for his casino but a bartender. Only requirement: must not have issues with working for and around vampires. Perfect, since I happened to be a vampire. There were many paranormals that still didn't care for our kind, something I both understood and didn't. We weren't any worse than other species. Yet we were still singled out quite a bit when it came to least-favorite species.

Despite having given Kyle my warmest coat and standing behind him with my arms wrapped tightly around his chest, I felt him start to shiver in my arms. It was time to take him inside. He wasn't used to our climate, and it would take time for him to get acclimated to the differences.

“Let’s go in. You’re shivering, and I don’t want you to be cold when you don’t have to be.”

“All right,” Kyle said. When he did, I heard his voice quiver as his teeth started to chatter. We would need to get him an extremely warm coat. And gloves and a thick hat. Sweaters, soft hoodies, all of the things that would keep him warm. Thicker jeans as well. He needed all the things to keep him warm. Especially since he seemed to like to be outside for the short amount of time we’d been out there.

Once we were back inside, the difference in temperature was quite noticeable, and I wanted to kick myself for taking my beloved outside when it was so cold. I realized that Kyle was still standing next to the door.

“Are you all right?” I asked, concerned. “We can go back out, but you were shivering. I don’t wish for you to be cold.”

“I’m fine. I’m just enjoying watching the snow. It’s so pretty.”

Ah, so that was it. “You should wait and watch it falling at night. Especially if we turn off all of the lights in here. It’s absolutely beautiful then.”

Kyle turned and grinned at me. “Can we do that? I want to experience that sometime.”

I chuckled before leaning in and kissing Kyle’s forehead again. “Absolutely. Although, don’t be upset with yourself when you’re tired of all of the snow come March or April and it’s just a slushy mess everywhere.”

Kyle seemed surprised. “Does that happen? It doesn’t stay pretty?”

“No, sweetheart, it doesn’t. It stays prettier up in the mountains or in rural areas, but here in the city, it turns into a mess. Especially down by the river where we are.”

Kyle pouted, and it was utterly adorable.

“I don’t want it to become a mess. It’s pretty.”

I couldn’t keep from chuckling again but shook my head at my beloved. “We will go to the mountains soon. I’ll introduce

you to skiing or snowboarding, and you'll get all the beautiful snow your heart desires."

The pout turned into a grin, and I realized I was already in trouble. I understood then exactly why it was that the others in the coven always gave their beloveds everything they ever asked for, if they were able to. I wouldn't be able to not tell my beloved no. Already, I was smitten and was well on my way to falling completely for Kyle. But that was how we as paranormals were wired.

"I don't know that I'll be able to ski or snowboard, but I'd like to try. Is it easy?"

"It's been quite some time since I've been skiing. We can learn together because I'm certain I'll need a lot of refresher courses." I grew up in New York. We went skiing all of the time in the winter. It was something that we could enjoy because when you put on all of the equipment, it wasn't unheard of for someone to cover their mouth. Fangs peeking out wasn't an issue.

"I'd like that." Kyle glanced back at the door before he moved away. "We don't have to though. I know you have work."

"Eventually. I've met my beloved though. That means I have the next several weeks off from work. We don't have to stay here if we don't want that. We are free to travel if we so please." It wasn't recommended to travel this close to the Christmas holiday, but I'd do it if that was what my beloved wished. After we'd claimed each other, that was. And, of course, once he'd gone through his heat. That reminded me that I should probably discuss that with him.

Kyle started taking off the borrowed coat, and I readily took it, placing it and the one I'd been wearing on the back of the couch. I then took Kyle's hand and led him to the kitchen, where I pulled out one of the barstools and gestured for him to sit.

"Are we eating?"

“Not unless you’re hungry. If you are, I’ll gladly feed you.” Kyle shook his head. “Then we will wait until later to eat.” I turned around, and after checking the coffee maker, I put a mug under it and turned it on to make hot water. I had some tea bags here somewhere. “Oh, do you drink tea?” I asked Kyle. I glanced over my shoulder at my beloved. He was staring at me and slowly started to smile.

“Yes. Most fae do. Although our tea is much different than yours, I would imagine. Is that what you’re doing?”

The coffee maker sputtered, signaling the end of the cycle. I grabbed the mug and placed it in front of Kyle.

“I’m trying. Failing though. But it was the first thing I could think of to warm you up. Or maybe I should have asked if you drink coffee.”

“I do not. Tea is fine, and it would be quite welcomed, actually. Do you have tea leaves and a steeper?”

I shook my head. I suddenly remembered where the tea bags were, and I went to the small ceramic crock on the end of my counter. I grabbed it, placing it in front of Kyle and then fetching him a spoon.

“Do you take sugar in it? I have milk, but not cream.”

“Just a little sugar, please.”

I could do that. I also took a little bit of sugar in my coffee, so I grabbed the container of sugar from the cupboard and brought it back to Kyle. He hadn’t opened the crock, so I pulled the lid off and let out a sigh of relief when I saw it was at least half full of tea bags. I’d have to ask about tea from the fae realm though. I knew Montgomery drank it every time he was pregnant, as had Julian.

“They’re in paper?” Kyle reached in and pulled out a tea bag.

“Umm...I guess. I’ve never really thought about a tea bag. I don’t have loose-leaf tea. I can get some, though, if that’s what you prefer. We’ll add it to our shopping list later on.” Kyle handed me the tea bag and I unwound the string and dropped it in the mug.

“That’s it?”

“Yep. Just wait a few minutes, and it’ll be ready.”

Kyle stared at the tea, and after waving his hand over it, he nodded once, the water in the mug going from clear to brown.

“You used magic.”

Kyle nodded as he fished the tea bag out with his spoon. “I did,” he said as he glanced up at me. I held out my hand for the tea bag, and when he passed it to me, I threw it into the trash under the sink.

“Does it bother you that I have magic?”

“No. That would be similar to you being bothered that I have fangs and claws.”

Kyle tilted his head to the side.

“Claws? None of the books mentioned claws. Just that vampires were really drawn to our blood and that they could easily become addicted, so to be careful. Never was there a mention of claws. The eyes either.”

Which explained why he seemed to be upset by my eyes tinting at first. I held up my hand and slowly extended my claws. They were razor-sharp and around three inches long when fully extended. They, along with our fangs and advanced speed, helped even things when fighting with other paranormals. I watched Kyle’s eyes for any signs of fear, and when they widened a little, I slowly pulled my claws back in.

“You have claws. Like a shifter?”

“Somewhat. Not quite. Ours are longer, and we can access them whenever we need them. There are some shifters that can partially shift, though it’s not common.”

“So many things that we were never taught. Is there anything else?”

I started to shake my head but stopped. “You know that we actually do require drinking blood as well as eating food, right?”

Kyle nodded and brought the mug to his lips and took a sip. He glanced down at the tea, and after wiggling his nose a little, he took another sip. It was obvious that the tea wasn't exactly to his liking, and I'd need to send a message to Master Nikolai and ask for tea for my beloved.

"Do you also realize that once we claim each other, I won't be able to drink from another?"

"No, but that does make sense. Much like we won't be sexually attracted to another once we claim each other. How often do you need to drink my blood?" Kyle narrowed his eyes and shook his head. "You mentioned that earlier. I apologize. There's just been a lot going on."

"I can understand that. I did have a few questions for you, though, if you wouldn't mind answering them?"

"Of course not."

I leaned down onto my elbows on the counter and grinned at my beloved. "I need blood every two weeks or so. Depending on what's going on in my life, it could be as soon as every week and a half, or I could possibly go three weeks between feedings."

Kyle nodded slowly.

"As vampires age, we need blood less often. When we hit puberty and go through our initial change, we need it every other day for several months before the requirement becomes less."

"Where do you get the blood? Can I ask that?"

"You may. A lot of younger vampires are given bagged blood provided by their covens. It's not until we are a little older that we start getting it through other means." I really hoped he knew what I was saying without stating the words.

"You mean sex."

Yep, he understood.

"Yes."

“I’m not jealous. It would be pointless,” Kyle told me. “You need blood to survive; I wasn’t even born when you first needed it. I understand.”

I held out my hand for Kyle, and when he placed his in mine, I slowly closed my fingers around his hand.

“Thank you. I will never be with another now that you and I have met. The thought of having another’s blood will actually make a vampire ill. It can be done, but it has to be under serious circumstances.”

“That makes sense.”

I gave Kyle’s hand a quick squeeze before I stood up. “There was something I did want to discuss with you. There are a lot of things we will learn about each other once we claim one another, but I wanted to ask about your heats. Can you tell me what to expect?”

“I can. We’ve always referred to them as fertile periods, though heat really fits as well because of the immense heat our bodies experience.”

“Fertile period makes more sense. Especially since it’s the time you would have the possibility of becoming pregnant since you’re...well, fertile.” I was a hundred and forty-six years old. Why was it suddenly difficult to discuss an incredibly natural thing with my beloved?

Kyle nodded. “Mine have always been short, thankfully. Three days, maybe four. They’re not overly intense, but I’ve been told that most likely won’t be the case once I find my mate and we claim each other.”

That was good to know. “And children. You want them? I know we touched on it briefly earlier. But I...” I cleared my throat. “I have condoms. I can wear one if you’d like to wait.”

Kyle’s grin was telling. “You don’t have to be embarrassed. It’s actually a bit of a relief that it won’t be completely fumbling on both parts. Just mine. You have experience and can show me all of the good things. I find that an advantage, not something to be upset about.”

How did I get so lucky?

“But if you would like a baby, so would I,” Kyle added. “I’m open to children, but I’m not one of those who wants a super-large family. I have nothing against people who do. But two or three would be good for me.”

I couldn’t help but smile. I’d be happy with one, but if Kyle wanted more, we would discuss it.

“That’s good to know. I’ll need to put in an online order for some foodstuff. I’m not sure when to expect your fertile period, but I would think within a few days of us claiming each other.”

Kyle nodded. I was going to ask what he liked to eat, but there was a loud knock on my door. Kyle looked at me, concern on his face, and I stood there a moment, trying to figure out who it possibly could be. Only way to find out would be to answer the door.

“I’ll be right back. If you’d like, you can flip the switch beside the fireplace, and it will turn it on. We can cuddle up in the living room and talk about things more before we decide what to do about supper.”

There was another loud knock, and my vampire side was becoming irritated. We were with our beloved, and now were being interrupted. That wasn’t how things worked. I’d been given time off to spend with Kyle and to not only claim each other but to strengthen our bond. The fact that someone was knocking on the door so loudly just an hour after we’d left the casino was irritating.

I went to the front door, yanking it open just as knocking happened again. I saw Fergus through a red tint, and when he narrowed his eyes at me, he growled a little before he pushed his way into the suite.

“Be nice and put yer eyes away. Me beloved and I have brought you things fer yer own beloved. Fates know you don’t seem to have things here since you always eat downstairs.” Fergus just waltzed into the suite, and it was then that I noticed he had several bags in his hands. When I turned back to the doorway, I found Montgomery standing there, holding just as many bags. I reached for them only to realize that he wasn’t

actually holding them. No, they were floating there beside him.

“Is your magic working better this pregnancy?”

“Eh, sometimes. I can definitely float things. But if I tried to magically send everything to you from downstairs, who knows where they would have ended up.” Montgomery giggled. “How’s Kyle? He seemed sweet. Be nice to him,” Montgomery told me.

“Of course I’ll be nice to him,” I said as I closed the front door. I followed Montgomery, who was already almost to my kitchen. I wasn’t sure how he could move as quickly as he did with how pregnant he looked.

Kyle seemed worried as he stood there, holding the blanket we’d been cuddling under earlier. Immediately, I went to him and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, pulling him closer to me in hopes that I’d somehow be able to reassure him.

“Because Fergus and Montgomery know exactly what it’s like to claim your fae beloved, they’ve brought us things.”

“Oh. That’s quite generous.” Kyle grinned at our guests, and when he took a step forward, I let him go. He walked over to Montgomery, and I wasn’t sure what all was happening, but Montgomery nodded subtly and then headed off to the living room with Kyle. Montgomery had his arm looped through Kyle’s, and I could only stand there and stare as they walked off. I knew for a fact that Montgomery wasn’t a threat to my beloved, and even unclaimed, my vampire had no issues with him walking away with the other fae.

“I brought all of this stuff. The least ye could do is help put it away,” Fergus said, drawing my attention.

I glanced at him, nodded briefly, and then glanced back at my beloved, who was now sitting on the far end of the couch with Montgomery sitting close to him.

“Stefan, come help. I donna know where this stuff goes here.”

I finally pulled my gaze away from my beloved and joined Fergus in the kitchen. “Honestly, neither do I. You were right

when you said I didn't have things. I have very little, so there's plenty of room for everything."

"Figures. Well, those bags there go in the pantry. Get to it." Fergus moved closer and whispered as I took the bags he was handing me, "Donna worry. Montgomery said Kyle just wanted to ask about fertile periods and had a few questions about ye drinking from him if he gets pregnant."

I hadn't even thought about that and suddenly found myself concerned for the safety of not only my beloved but also the children we didn't yet have.

"Donna worry. It works for me and Monty. It works for Master Nikolai and Julian, and Julian was carrying twins. It's perfectly safe."

I nodded absently and took the bags from Fergus. I carried them to the mostly empty pantry and started placing things on the shelves. When everything was unpacked from the bags, I turned to Fergus to thank him but instead found him holding out a piece of paper.

"Important numbers. You will need them, trust me." I took the paper and noticed that it had names and phone numbers on it. I knew that Constantine was the warlock doctor who had been so amazing with all of the pregnancies in the coven. I was a bit surprised by the other one though. I knew who it was, but I couldn't ever see myself calling the created vampire for any reason. He was busy; he didn't need me calling and bugging him with trivial things.

"Thanks," I told Fergus instead. He nodded once and then held out a pair of tins. It was my turn to nod, already knowing what they were. "From Master Nikolai," he told me. "Pregnancy sickness," he said, holding up the one in his right hand. "This one will cause him to be sleepy. It will help him to rest, so be careful which ye give him."

"Thank you. I made him tea earlier, but I could tell he didn't care much for it."

Fergus held up the tin in the right hand again and gave it a good shake. "This can be drunk anytime. Offer it if he likes

tea.”

I took the tin from him and placed it beside the coffee maker. Then I grabbed the sleepy-time one and put it in the pantry. We didn’t need it just yet, so I made sure it couldn’t accidentally be used just yet.

“Donna worry about the fertile period. Monty said he would be able to sense it if he’s feeling for it and would let me know about ya needin’ foods for the two of ya. We’re family, and we take care of each other,” Fergus told me.

That was a bit of a relief. I, of course, knew about heats and such and how intense they could be, but Kyle had said his had never been overly long or hard on him. Hopefully, this one wouldn’t be any different and we wouldn’t need to ask too much of Fergus and Montgomery.

“Thank you,” I said. “I appreciate it, and I’m sure Kyle will as well.”

“All set,” Montgomery said as he suddenly appeared behind me. I turned at the sound of his voice, expecting Kyle to be with him, but didn’t see my beloved. “He’s on the couch,” Montgomery said. “Trust me when I say it’s all right to just go ahead and get to it,” he whispered to me. “It’ll seriously make things a little less awkward and unsure between you. It’s just how things happen in our realm. It really does help.”

Montgomery gave me a quick smile, and then he walked over to where Fergus was waiting. I followed them to the front door, thanking them again for their thoughtfulness. Once I closed the door, I locked it, and after leaning my head against it for a moment, I took a deep breath and steadied myself. It was time to go and seduce my sweet fae.

CHAPTER 8

KYLE



“Hey there,” Stefan said as he joined me in the living room.

“Hi.” I was doing what I could to work up the courage to try and seduce my mate. Montgomery had been incredibly reassuring and told me that once you got your vampire mate worked up enough, their vampire side would take over, and it would be nothing but bliss for hours. I wanted bliss.

Sure, I was also interested in learning everything I could about my mate, but that would be so much easier once we were claimed. Our bond would be able to set in, and we’d have that connection. It would offer us the opportunity to share our thoughts, desires, memories, everything with our mate if we wanted. And that would be so much quicker than spending days trying to learn each other. Yes, I still wanted to talk to my mate, but I was impatient, and in all honesty, I was horny.

“So Fergus brought food.”

I grinned at my mate. “So Montgomery told me. He said you’re not exactly known for being one that spends a lot of time here in your suite, and they didn’t know what you did or didn’t have.” I couldn’t help but be concerned about that. Was it that my mate didn’t know how to cook? Or that he was never home? Would he still choose to not be here even with me in his life now?

“Yes, that’s true,” Stefan told me. He reached out, and when his hand touched the side of my face, I leaned into the

touch a little. “I was single until just a little while ago. I didn’t mind covering at work so those that are mated could spend more time with their beloveds. I’ll cut back on my extra hours, though, now that I have you.”

And there it was. That was reassuring. I would hate to have a mate who didn’t want to be around me or didn’t have time for me.

“I can tell you’re worried,” Stefan said, his thumb rubbing across my cheek before he trailed his hand down to my neck. “I won’t be nearly as busy now.”

I nodded. If he said he’d have time for me, I believed him. And as long as he had no issues with me using his kitchen while he was gone to work, I knew I would be able to keep myself occupied. It wasn’t that I needed to bake. I didn’t. But I had been doing it since I was tall enough to see over the counter, and it was something I loved.

“I’ll understand if you have to work. Maybe I could find work somewhere? Would your coven master let me work in the kitchen?” Perhaps I could bake for them. Did they have someone to do that? Stefan subtly shook his head.

“I won’t stop you from working. I won’t. But I’d prefer you didn’t. At least not while we’re still having children and when they’re young.” Stefan’s hand dropped from my neck and trailed down my arm. He picked up my hand where it was in my lap, brought it up to his mouth, and kissed the back of it. “I’m not nearly as old as Fergus nor Master Nikolai, or even some of the other vampires in the coven. But I have quite a bit of funds from my grandfather, which was how it was so easy for me to escape my birth coven. You never need to work if you don’t want to. But I understand I can’t expect you to give up everything and then come here and simply become a stay-at-home dad to our children.”

I snorted at that because that’s exactly what the majority of the omegas did in our village. Danny was happy being home with their little one all day. He did come in and help out at the bakery when we were super busy, but mostly, he stayed home and took care of little Sia.

“Why the snort?”

“Have you ever had an in-depth conversation with Montgomery? Has he ever discussed his village with you?”

Stefan shook his head.

“Ah. Well, let me give you a little bit of a peek at what it’s like to grow up in my village.” I took a deep breath and let it out. “We’re born with an omega line or not.”

Stefan nodded. “Same with shifters. Although vampires and warlocks don’t have either. We present once our fated mate arrives. I had a feeling I would be a sire but didn’t know for sure until you showed up.”

I chuckled. “Can’t see yourself as carrying the babies?” I asked, joking with my mate.

“If that was the way it was supposed to be, then I would have happily done so. As it is, I was gifted with an omega as my beloved. Therefore, I will be attentive and doting on him while he’s carrying our children.”

I couldn’t help but smile at that because that sounded absolutely wonderful. I’d always dreamed about having a loving mate. Perhaps the fates had done right by that when they’d paired me with Stefan.

“Now, how about you tell me about the village you were mentioning.”

“Oh, yeah. That. Well, it’s not uncommon for the omegas to do exactly what you said you didn’t expect of me. We often become stay-at-home dads. Not that we can’t work or anything like that, but because we really feel it’s important to be with the babies those first couple of years. But usually, by then, another baby has come along, and then another. And another.” I shrugged. “Or however many the couple decides to have. I only asked about working because I didn’t want you to think I wouldn’t. I’ll be as much of an equal partner—”

Stefan stopped me by covering my mouth with his. I sighed into the kiss, wondering if and when we’d get back to kissing. I wanted many more from him and couldn’t wait to see where they would eventually lead.

I felt Stefan's tongue against my lips, and knowing what was coming this time, I parted them for my mate. He didn't disappoint, and when his tongue reached out and slid along mine, I moaned into the kiss.

Stefan took that as the enjoyment that it was and used his hand to tilt my head to the side. When I complied, he somehow deepened the kiss, and I found myself trying to mimic his actions with my own tongue. Stefan was patient, and when my tongue explored into his mouth, I encountered a fang. More than ready to get things moving in a certain direction, I pressed my tongue against it.

The sharp pinch against my tongue was accompanied by Stefan flinching and then moaning loudly. I felt his hands grab my hips, and then I was pulled down the couch while he sucked on my tongue. I knew exactly what was going to happen when I poked my tongue, and when I suddenly found myself flat on my back with my mate above me, I opened my eyes to look up at Stefan. He pushed up from me a little, and when he opened his eyes, they were a deep red.

"I'm yours, Stefan," I whispered, hoping he understood. I knew I did. Montgomery had told me that once Stefan had tasted even the smallest amount of my blood, he wouldn't be able to keep from claiming me. Was it wrong? Possibly, but not really. We were fated. I'd been brought from the fae realm to this one specifically for him. I understood he was trying to be a gentleman and all, but I didn't want that. I wanted the wildly passionate vampire that I'd been told was most likely hiding just under the surface.

"Do you realize what you've done?"

I couldn't help but grin. Stefan narrowed his eyes at me before he pushed up and off me completely. I thought I'd done something terribly wrong until I found myself picked up off the couch, and then we were sprinting through the suite and down a hallway I'd not yet been in. When Stefan gently placed me on a firm bed seconds later, he then leaned over me as he started pulling at the buttons on his vest. It was tossed to the side, and then he was yanking on his tie before he seemed to get frustrated and extended his claws again. Before I could

even think to use magic to help, the tie was sliced and pulled from his neck.

When Stefan reached out toward me with those claws, realization set in what was about to happen, and although it might be sexy later, after we'd been mated for a while, now it definitely wasn't. I thought about being naked for a second, and then I suddenly felt the coolness of the bedroom when my clothes were suddenly gone from my body.

That seemed to pull some clarity to Stefan, and he moved back a little before his eyes slowly moved down my body. When they paused and then trailed back up, I held my breath. Would he find me desirable? Lacking? I was skinny and a bit lanky for a fae, but Stefan made a noise that told me he didn't mind what he was seeing.

"You are even more gorgeous without your clothing. But this is for my eyes only," Stefan said before he yanked on his shirt.

I chuckled and helped him when he seemed to be struggling with his claws, which were in the way.

"Only you," I whispered seconds before I had my mate just as naked as I was. I froze for a moment and glanced down his body, which drew my eyes away from his face and down to the very erect penis that was standing straight out from his body.

"It'll be all right. I'll take things slow and make sure you're ready," Stefan told me.

I pulled my eyes away and met his again. I shook my head. "I wasn't worried. Just admiring the view."

Stefan growled a little before his body carefully covered me, and his mouth once again mated up with mine. I groaned as my body tingled all over where his was touching me. I knew it would change once we claimed each other and the tingles and vibrations were reduced to a barely there hum. But for now, it was a bit intense, and I wasn't quite sure how to calm it. Maybe only Stefan could; I didn't know.

His tongue continued to explore my mouth, and when his retreated, mine followed. Liking the reaction the first time, I

did it again, and when I felt the now expected prick against my tongue, I pushed against Stefan's fang harder before I rubbed it against his tongue.

He moaned into this kiss before suddenly ripping his mouth from mine and then burying it in my neck. He kissed, nipped gently without breaking the skin, and then continued on, trailing lower. He nipped at my collarbone, again not breaking the skin. When his lips trailed down my chest and then settled on my nipple, I called out at the sensation of intense tingles settling in my nipples. I grabbed at his hair and tried to pull him off, but it was no use. Stefan gently lapped at my nipple with his tongue before pinching it between his lips.

I felt a huge wave wash through me, moving from my nipple to my cock, and then I shuddered as I suddenly felt like I was floating as pulse after pulse of pleasure washed through my body. Stefan was instantly gone from my body, but I couldn't seem to make myself reach for him to bring him back. He didn't stay gone for long, and when his mouth closed around my cock seconds later, I screamed as more waves centered there now.

"Stefan!" I shouted his name as I writhed on the bed as his incredibly talented mouth sucked while moving up and down my throbbing cock. I felt his hands on the backs of my thighs and then moving across my ass until one moved into the crease in the middle. I opened my legs a little more to give him room, and Stefan took the opportunity presented to him.

When Stefan's fingers touched me in my most intimate place, the claws were gone, and I knew he felt the slick from my body. When he slowly applied pressure and easily slid in, his mouth pulled up and off my cock, and his eyes flew to mine. He narrowed his, and it took me too long to respond to what appeared to be anger or frustration.

"What's wrong?" I finally asked when he stopped completely.

"You said you hadn't ever been with anyone. And you kiss as if that is true."

"Because it is."

“You’re loose, Kyle. As if you’ve already been stretched.”

I slowly smiled. “Montgomery might have given me a pointer or two for using magic to do that to help move things along the first time or two. He said he knew how—ah!” I shouted when my legs were suddenly pushed up and out and Stefan’s body covered mine again.

I felt him reach between us, his cock rubbing up and down before stopping against my opening. He pressed forward, and I did as Montgomery had suggested and took a deep breath and let it out slowly, relaxing my body at the same time. That was all it took for Stefan’s cock to pop in through the tight muscle.

He froze, and I stared up at him, focusing on my breathing. It burned quite a bit more than I’d expected. After several deep breaths, I used a little bit more magic in that area, and that was all it took for Stefan’s body to start moving. He obviously felt my body relax completely and started slow movements in and out.

Stefan’s mouth gently touched mine, and when I opened for him immediately, his tongue softly touched my upper lip, retreating every time he seemed to pull his hips back. In moments, Stefan’s lower body was touching mine completely, and he stopped moving altogether. His mouth moved from mine back to my neck, and this time, I felt his fangs trail gently down it. Instinctively, I tilted my head to the side, inviting his bite.

“Not yet,” he whispered before he pulled his hips back and then pushed forward again. I moaned as tingles moved through my body and once more seemed to move in waves to my groin. I tried to kiss him back, but his mouth remained buried in my neck where it met my shoulder. Instead, I held on to his shoulders as his hips slowly picked up speed.

Stefan’s hips sped up, then slowed, then thrust two or three times rapidly before he seemed to roll them against me. It was maddening, and when those tingles would intensify only to dampen when his hips slowed, I became frustrated. After several minutes of the same, I finally screamed out in

annoyance when I'd been right there, only for him to steal away the pleasure.

I grabbed Stefan's hair and yanked, directing his head back to where I wanted his mouth. When he was where I knew I'd receive my claiming bite, I moved my own mouth to the other side and gently placed my teeth against his neck. Stefan's moan against my neck, combined with his hips speeding up and finally not slowing, was what I finally needed, and those intense waves of bliss I'd been chasing washed through me as I came between us. Pulse after pulse of cum filled the space between our stomachs, and that was when I felt Stefan's body tighten with need. His hips sped up to what seemed impossibly fast, his moans in sync with the inward thrusts until he groaned loudly and his hips froze. I felt his lips open and his fangs pierce my neck without warning. There was an instant flash of pain, but it quickly turned to ecstasy when a sudden warmth entered my body at that point. When I felt Stefan suck, the warmth spread through my body, and I screamed when I felt my body find a third, somehow even more powerful, release.

Instinctively, I opened my mouth against Stefan's neck and bit, my own little canines having dropped when Stefan bit me, sealing our connection. My mate's groan turned louder, and he sucked harder against my neck.

As soon as I let go of Stefan's neck, I felt his fangs pulling from mine, and then his tongue was licking over the area. I had just enough thought to do the same for my newly claimed mate before all of the intense pleasure he'd given me in such a short period of time came crashing down on me, and I felt darkness close in on my thoughts.

I gave in, letting the darkness, as well as the gentle and soothing hum, fill my body.

I came back to consciousness to the sensation of something warm and soft rubbing on my stomach and chest. The cool air that followed every swipe of the cloth was what brought me out of my too-relaxed state, and I discovered it was Stefan as he was gently wiping my mess from my body. I finally opened

my eyes and found my mate staring intently at my chest while cleaning me.

“Welcome back.” Stefan grinned. I didn’t know him quite well enough yet, but it seemed as if he was quite proud of himself. I guess perhaps he should be. He’d given me so much pleasure I’d passed out.

I lifted up on my elbows a bit as Stefan continued to clean my chest. “I wasn’t out long,” I said. I couldn’t have been. He was still cleaning me, and the mess didn’t seem to be dried anywhere.

“No. Just a few minutes. I’ve heard it’s quite common for a vampire’s beloved to pass out, even if just briefly, when being claimed.”

Stefan seemed to be finished, and when he picked up a small towel and dried me, I smiled. He was being incredibly thoughtful.

“Only when you claim me? So it won’t happen again?” Not that I would complain about that. It was intense, and I wouldn’t say no to having that much pleasure again.

“Oh, it’ll happen again,” Stefan told me. My eyes met his again, and when he winked at me, I felt my body heat. How was that possible? “Come with me. I think a soak in my tub will be good for you, and we’ll see just how much fun we can have together in there,” Stefan said. He moved off the bed and held out his hand. I took it, letting him help me from the bed and into the bathroom. I was immediately drawn to the giant tub, wondering just how amazing it would be to soak in such a thing. Lucky me, I was about to find out.

CHAPTER 9

STEFAN



I was certain I was going to love being mated to a fae. Obviously, I wanted to take the time and explore his body completely, as well as show him all of the pleasures we could experience together. I would certainly spend plenty of time introducing him to the pleasures of foreplay later this evening. First though, it was time to take a relaxing soak in the tub and discuss things that had already happened. Specifically, how was it he knew what to do to get me to the point I wouldn't be able to deny my vampire side? Now that we had claimed one another, I knew what he and Montgomery had been discussing while Fergus and I were putting the food away. I was grateful for the pointers but was trying to not be upset that he didn't discuss his concerns with me.

“Did you want me to use magic to fill the tub?”

That was going to take getting used to. I'd never spent any great amount of time around someone who could simply fill the tub with hot water by using magic.

“If you'd like, I won't say no. Don't feel you have to though. I don't want you to feel obligated to use magic for anything.”

Kyle grinned. “I don't mind in the least.” The water below me suddenly turned off, and when I glanced down at the tub, it was to see it just over half filled with steaming water. “Do you mind if I...” Kyle asked, pointing toward the toilet.

I stood and closed the short distance between us. “Not at all,” I told him. “If you would be more comfortable, I can

leave for a few moments to give you some privacy.” Kyle seemed indecisive, so I decided to help. “I’ll go grab something in the bedroom to give you a few moments, all right?” I asked. Kyle seemed relieved, so I grinned at my beloved before I left the bedroom.

I didn’t stop there though. I went to the front door, where I’d seen what I assumed was Kyle’s bag earlier. It was under the table that was in the entryway, and when I picked it up, I found it to be heavier than expected. I couldn’t help but think about the fact that everything my beloved owned was in that bag. Everything. He’d left his entire life behind to come here to be with me.

I stared at the bag as I went back to the bedroom. Once there, I placed it on the end of the bed and vowed to take Kyle shopping later in the day. We would do some online shopping as well as go out in person if that was what he wanted. My beloved needed things, and I was going to provide them for him.

“There you are,” Kyle said as he came out of the bathroom. “Oh, my bag.” He smiled as he came to the bed and reached for the bag.

“Yeah, I saw it earlier. I thought you might want to put on something clean and warm once we got out of the bath.”

Kyle’s smile fell a little. “I have some things, but I’m not sure how warm they’ll be. At least not for the weather here. I’ll have to ask that you please take me somewhere to get things that are appropriate for this weather.”

I pulled Kyle into my arms, wrapping mine tightly around him. “Absolutely. We’ll order things online this evening, and we can go shopping out in town tonight or tomorrow if you’d like.” I leaned in and kissed his forehead.

“I would appreciate that.”

“Good. Until your new things arrive, I have plenty of clothes that will work well enough to keep you warm around the suite.” I might not be a shifter, but I loved sweatpants and hoodies on my days off. They were perfect for hanging around

the house, and although Kyle was thinner and shorter than I was, the sweatpants had elastic at the ankles and drawstrings at the waist. They would work well enough for him for the time being.

“I’d like that.” Kyle grinned up at me. “Would you like to take that bath? I’m getting a bit chilled, and the warm water is enticing.”

The last thing I wanted was for Kyle to be standing out here in the cool air while we had a perfectly warm bath waiting for us in the other room.

“Let’s get you into the tub,” I told him. I led him back to the bathroom, and after closing the door, I turned on the heat lamp.

“What’s that?”

“A heat lamp. It’ll warm the bathroom up, and it won’t be so chilly when we get out of the tub and into the shower.”

“We’re going to shower after we bathe? Why?”

“I shower after a soak to not only wash my hair but rinse off in clean water.” I walked to the tub and stepped in. I held out my hands and helped Kyle into the warm water. He smiled, and when I sat, I pulled him down beside me.

“Your bathtub is huge.”

I chuckled. “It is. I like to soak after a long shift. It’s a good way to relax tired muscles.”

Kyle looked thoughtful before nodding. “That makes sense. We had a tub but no shower. I understand what it is, but we didn’t have a shower.” Kyle stretched out, leaning against the end of the tub, and closed his eyes.

He appeared to be incredibly comfortable, and I hated to disturb him, but I needed to hold him. I’d not gotten the chance to do that directly after we’d claimed each other. So I moved to where I was beside him, and with little effort, I pulled Kyle over onto my lap. I opened my legs, and after he wiggled a little, he was settled between my legs, and I could wrap my arms around his chest.

“That’s better,” I told him.

“Hmm, yes, it is.” Kyle brought his hands out of the water and placed them on top of my arm. I noticed the water level rise and then stop a few inches below the top of the tub. “There. Perfect.”

“That’s really fascinating. Can you tell me about your magic and how it works?”

“I can try. It’s just there. It’s an energy that I feel in my body, and I use it to do what I want it to.” Kyle shrugged. “That’s probably a terrible way to describe it, but I’ve never really had to. I grew up in a fae village, and once we hit puberty, everyone had magic.”

“I think it’s amazing.” I thought about a certain incident that happened on the *Gem* and shook my head at the memory. “Do you know how to make fruit fall from the middle of the air?”

“Umm...probably?” Kyle tilted his head a bit to look up at me. “Where did that come from though? That’s an unusual request.”

I grinned. “Well, at one point, Montgomery was trying some magic while pregnant with Tobias and, well, it didn’t work. The boat was suddenly filled with floating oranges.”

Kyle’s eyes widened. “How many oranges?”

“Hundreds,” I told him. “And after they floated there for a moment or two, they simply dropped. It was a mess in the dining room, and several glasses and bottles ended up being broken in the bar, but nobody was hurt.”

Kyle winced. “I’m holding out hope that I won’t have magic issues while pregnant. There’s always the chance, but hopefully, I follow in my dad’s footsteps when it comes to that.”

Kyle wiggled against me before he settled. When he sighed, I felt a pulse on the bite he’d given me. Absently, I reached up and touched it, wondering why it was occasionally vibrating. Not having had a claiming bite before, I didn’t know if this was what they all felt like right after being claimed.

“It’s throbbing because it’s now connected to my aura. It’ll always have that vibration feeling.”

I was about to ask him how he knew what I was thinking but then remembered we had a bond after claiming each other. I’d felt it drop into place seconds after Kyle had bitten me.

“That’s right. We have the ability to hear each other’s thoughts.”

Kyle wiggled again. “Yes,” he replied through our bond. “The feeling that you are experiencing on your bite will be so subtle you won’t notice it for the most part. But when I become excited, upset, turned on, or am in pain, you’ll feel that there. As my aura changes, the sensations in your bite will as well.”

“That’s truly fascinating.” It was. “I guess between that and our bond, I’ll always know what you’re feeling if we aren’t together.”

Kyle tilted his head again to glare up at me. “And why won’t we be together?”

I shook my head and gave my beloved a gentle squeeze. “Because eventually, I’ll have to go back to work, and at some point, you won’t be able to come out to the bar area because you will be too pregnant to be seen by humans.”

Kyle blinked at me a few times before his eyes widened in realization. “Oh. You’re right. I hadn’t really been thinking about that.”

“It’s understandable. This is all new, and yesterday, neither of us could have predicted that we would be mated today.” I had just started thinking that I was possibly getting ready to search for my beloved. Now here I was, taking a bath with him shortly after having claimed him.

“Tell me about this skiing that you mentioned. It’s in the snow, you said.”

I grinned. “Yes. You wear skis, which are like long and skinny platforms. They have attachments in the middle that you lock your boots into, and you sort of glide over the snow on them. You can use ski poles to help move and control you

some. At a resort, you take a lift, which is like an elevated chair to the top of a mountain that has been set up for skiing down. Then you ski your way down the mountain. It can be incredibly fun, but it takes a bit of coordination.”

Kyle was quiet for a bit, and if it wasn't for our bond, I would have thought he had fallen asleep.

“That sounds interesting. But can we just play in the snow? I want to build a snowman. Throw snowballs, things like that. I've read about them, and they sound like so much fun.”

I couldn't remember ever building a snowman. I'd grown up in New York, and we got a lot of snow in the winter, but the coven had been in the city, and we hadn't had the room to make a snowman.

“We can do whatever you want. If you'd like to go skiing, we'll do that. If it's building snowmen and having snowball fights, we can do that.”

I moved my hand out of the water and placed it on top of Kyle's, which was on my other arm. I laced our fingers together, wondering how many adventures I could experience with my beloved.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Yes. You may always ask me anything, sweetheart. What's on your mind?” Kyle sounded so serious all of a sudden.

“I'm sure it's me being silly and insecure, but are you really going to be happy with me?” Kyle sat up and turned around, staring at me. “I have nothing, Stefan.” Kyle pointed toward the door and sighed. “What's in that bag out there is it. I don't have the ability to offer you somewhere to live or provide food or clothing. I have literally nothing.”

I understood exactly where this was coming from. Fergus had mentioned it once after he'd come back to work after he had met Montgomery. It was incredibly unfair that the fae coming to our realm were leaving so much behind. Montgomery and Kyle had polar opposites for birth families, but even Montgomery had mentioned his siblings on more

than one occasion and how at times he missed them and would wonder what they were up to now.

I reached out and trailed two fingers down the side of Kyle's face. "I understand you feeling as you do, and it's not unexpected," I told him. "You left your entire life behind to come here." I moved my fingers from Kyle's neck where they'd landed to the center of his chest. "What's in here," I said, touching just above his heart, "and in here," I added after I touched the side of his head with my other hand, "is so much more important to me than anything you could have brought in that bag. Those are just things. But what you have to offer me is a caring and selfless beloved. You've given yourself to me, and I vow to do everything I can to the best of my abilities to be amazing enough to deserve such a gift. You yourself are so much more of a treasure than anything you brought." I hoped I was explaining everything well enough.

"But immediately, you have to provide for me."

I slowly shook my head. "I was going to do that for whoever my beloved happened to end up being. It just so happens that's you." I turned Kyle and pulled him back against my chest. "You are my gift from the fates, Kyle. That is such an amazing treasure. You are that treasure. If you had been a shifter from, say, Florida, I would feel the same." I didn't want to think about some random shifter from Florida, but it was how it was. "You are my beloved. I have the ability to offer a safe place to live, and I was going to offer that no matter who my beloved was." I was sure I was messing this completely up and would end up having to ask Fergus, Diego, or Master Nikolai how to get myself out of the mess I ended up in with my beloved, but I was honestly trying.

"You truly aren't upset I don't have winter clothing?"

"Is that what this is about?" I asked, confused. "Because you need to go shopping?"

Kyle shrugged. "Do I not need to go shopping? I have very little with me and nothing that is suitable for the cold weather you have here."

“Yes, but so do I,” I said. “Sure, Fergus and Montgomery brought us some food, but it’s not nearly enough for the two of us for a solid week.” Now that we’d claimed each other, I was expecting Kyle to have his fertile period within the next few days. There wasn’t too much to be concerned about that, though, because aside from informing Master Nikolai or Diego when Kyle did, I knew they would take turns bringing small foods and snacks we would need. We’d done it for all of the others; it was what family did. And once we had our first child and it happened again, the child would be looked after by the coven while we did what nature dictated.

“I wanted to ask,” Kyle said. He pulled from my arms again and turned enough to where he could look at me. I reluctantly let him go, but he didn’t go far, which I appreciated. “Do you not cook? As in, can you not? Or is it that you simply didn’t?”

I chuckled for a moment. “I can cook, but not well.” I reached for him, letting him remain sideways but close enough to where I could lean in and kiss along his cheek and neck. “I just never had anyone else to cook for,” I told Kyle before I placed a kiss just below his ear. “But I look forward to learning to be better at it for you.” Another kiss, this one halfway down his neck. He shivered, but I knew he wasn’t cold. In fact, when my claiming bite from him started to throb, I smiled against his neck.

“I like to cook,” Kyle said, his voice no more than a whisper.

“Good. You can teach me if you feel so inclined, and then we can cook together. And when I have to go back to work, you can come to the bar and have supper with me in the break room,” I added. I wasn’t looking forward to that, but it was what it was. I didn’t need to work. As far as I knew, nobody in the coven actually needed to work. But we did because it kept us from being bored, and, well, the casino wouldn’t run itself.

“I can bake,” Kyle told me as I continued to trail kisses down his neck. When I reached his own claiming bite, I opened my mouth a little and sucked on it. As expected, Kyle moaned. When I moved my left hand down to between his

legs, predictably, I found a hard cock and wrapped my hand around it.

“I would expect nothing less,” I said through our bond. *“But let’s not talk about cooking or baking.”* I ran my hand gently up his cock, pulling a louder moan from my beloved. When my hand went in the opposite direction, I felt Kyle’s hips subtly lift and smiled against his claiming bite. *“Tell me something, sweetheart. Have you ever pleased yourself?”* I would imagine so because he was in his thirties. He’d had plenty of fertile periods. But had he done it just because he was in need? The thought of Kyle with his hand wrapped around his needy and leaking cock while either massaging his balls or, even better, fingering his hole had me hard and ready to fill him again.

“I have,” Kyle told me.

“Good. I can’t wait to watch you pleasure yourself for me.” I gently turned Kyle and then lifted him to where he was sitting on my lap.

“You...you’d want that?” Kyle asked, surprise filling his voice now.

“Oh yeah. The thought of you stroking your cock for me makes me hard. You make me hard, sweetheart. Feel this,” I said, pulling him back to my chest, and my equally hard dick was now trapped between his ass and my stomach. I moved Kyle forward a few inches, enough to where I could push my cock down, and then slid him back again. It was now nestled under him, and when Kyle opened his legs wider and grabbed his ass cheeks to spread them, we moaned at the same time when my cock bumped against the underside of his balls. I felt Kyle reach down and touch the tip of my cock, and I couldn’t keep from lifting my hips even just a little.

“I want you inside me again,” Kyle said. “Can we do that again?”

I groaned. That wasn’t exactly what I had planned. I only wanted to bring him pleasure by exploring a little but wasn’t going to be able to deny my beloved.

“Yes. If you’re sure,” I told him.

Kyle nodded, so I reached down and lifted him a little, freeing my cock. It turned out to be too difficult to hold him and try to get my cock to slide into where we both wanted it, so Kyle got up on his knees above me, and that was all it took for me to be able to position us to where I slid right into him.

As he slowly slid down on me, I closed my eyes at the tight warmth that I sunk into. This time would be different. The urgency that had suddenly overcome me earlier was gone, and I could show my beloved just how much pleasure I could bring him.

I pulled Kyle back against my chest, and when I wrapped his hand around his cock, I placed mine over his and slowly started stroking him.

“Stefan...” he moaned out.

“Yes,” I whispered back. “Nice and slow. We’re going to build your need, and then when you feel like you’re going to explode, we’re going to send you over that edge. And then we’ll do it again and again,” I told him.

Fae might be highly sexual beings, but so were vampires, and I was more than looking forward to exploring all things with my beloved.

CHAPTER 10

KYLE



A week. I'd been here for a week, and it was now the new year. We'd claimed each other that first day, and sometime the following day, I'd had a fertile period. Neither of us was surprised by that. We'd had so much sex in those first five days of having claimed each other. And then, nothing. I understood that Stefan had been letting me recover from my fertile period, but it had ended two days ago. It wasn't as if Stefan hadn't been attentive. He had. He held me at night, and we made breakfast and lunch together. He had ordered us dinner both days, and it had been brought up to us. We talked on the couch for hours, and he'd shown me how to shop for groceries online and how to play his favorite video games. But he'd not touched me below my waist in two days, and I was becoming a bit concerned.

"You're dressed," Stefan said as he came into the bedroom. I grinned at him in the mirror.

"Yes. Even though they're really comfortable, I can't live in your sweatpants." To be honest, I was getting a bit restless. I needed a little change of scenery.

Stefan tilted his head to the side. "All right. Did you feel up to doing something today? I could take you out in town and show you around certain places. We could go to a nice restaurant, do some shopping, things like that."

I wanted to ask how he knew but then remembered—our bond. He'd read my thoughts.

“You don’t have to. I’m happy to just hang out around here again.”

Stefan narrowed his eyes at me. “We both know that isn’t the truth. Please don’t do that,” Stefan told me. He came in my direction, pulling off his shirt and tossing it toward the bed. When he was standing at the foot of it, he pushed his sleep pants down his legs and let them pool on the floor. When he stepped out of them, I bit my lower lip and quickly looked the other way. No matter how many times we’d been together, seeing Stefan naked did things to me that he obviously wasn’t interested in doing again. At least not at the moment.

Stefan went to his dresser and took out a pair of briefs before he pulled them on. Then he grabbed a pair of socks he tossed toward the bed, and after picking a pair of pants, he stepped into them and pulled them up as he moved back toward the bed.

“It’ll be cold outside. Do you mind using magic to either make my coat smaller to fit you properly or perhaps one more to your liking?”

“We don’t have to do anything,” I told him as he pulled on his second sock.

“Nope. We’re going out. It’s time to show you around—at least the casino so you know where things are. We’ll need to get your cards and badge as well.” Stefan grinned up at me, then stood and winked as he buttoned and zipped his pants. Of course, it drew my attention, and I began to wonder if maybe he wasn’t uninterested. I needed to just talk to the man; he was my mate, after all. We’d done...*so* many things in the past few days.

“Yeah, I can do the coat thing. Just let me know which one you want me to make fit me, and I’ll do that.” I couldn’t magick a coat because I didn’t know where to get one from. I guess I could try, but what if I accidentally took someone’s coat? I’d never tried to create anything with my magic before like that. When I used magic, it was always with things around me. I used flour and other ingredients to make the breads and the pile of vegetables to make the stew. The mess in the kitchen

was set right with magic. Things of that sort. But where would the coat come from? I had no idea.

Stefan went into his closet and came out not only with a sweater on but holding the bag I'd brought with me. It had been placed there at some point when my fertile period hit. The clothes I was wearing were the pants I'd been wearing that first day, as well as the shirt, but I also had on the sweater that Stefan had given me to wear when we first arrived in his suite.

"Is there anything you need out of here?" he asked. "I'm not referring to your money either. I'll purchase anything you want or need today," Stefan told me.

"I don't think so," I told him. I moved over to the bed, where Stefan had placed the bag. When he stood there with his hand on the flap, I rolled my eyes. "Well, open it. I guess I forgot about it until now. I should have unpacked a couple days ago."

Stefan undid the buckle. "No, you've been recovering from your fertile period. You seemed a little weak that first day, and yesterday, you appeared worn down still." Stefan studied me, and when he reached out and touched under my eye and gently rubbed, I blinked at him, wondering what he was thinking. He wasn't actively projecting his thoughts, and I wasn't probing into them.

"The dark circles under your eyes are finally gone. That's a relief," he told me. "I've been worried about you. It was difficult to get you to eat during your fertile period."

"Is that why you've been avoiding me?" I asked before I could stop myself. It had been such a frustrating couple of days. I'd not realized that he was worried about me. But why wouldn't he be? He was my mate. He had told me that first day that he was going to be incredibly attentive and protective. So yeah, if he was concerned, of course he wouldn't wish to add to my tiredness.

"I obviously haven't ever had a beloved before, and I've never helped an omega through a heat or anything like this. We know what happens for the most part, but they're different

when experiencing them firsthand.” Stefan cupped my face and leaned in, giving me a soft kiss. I kissed back and held on to his sides. He pulled away before either of us could deepen the kiss though. “I’ll always worry about you, Kyle. You’re my beloved. You are mine to take care of, my gift from the fates. I’m sorry you thought I was avoiding you. That wasn’t my intent ever. I didn’t realize you felt that way.”

That made perfect sense. I shrugged. “We...you know. We were really busy. And then...not.”

Stefan nodded slowly and then smiled a little. “I understand.” Stefan slid his hands around my waist and then quickly pulled me to him. “Tonight, I’ll make love to you if you’re up to it. I still very much desire you, Kyle. That will never change. But I don’t *need* to have sex with you every night. I’m certainly not against it, but it’s not a requirement, and please don’t feel it is. You are allowed to simply not be up for it. I’m happy to hold you. That amount of intimacy with you is just as important as that deeper connection, possibly more.”

I fell in love at that moment. I was completely gone then and there. Was it too early? Maybe. I wasn’t sure. We weren’t humans, and there was more than just our emotions in play here. We were paranormals, and we connected on a different level.

“Thank you,” I said instead of sharing my feelings just yet. I was sure that Stefan knew, at least on some level. I could sense he felt a deep connection to me, and not just because I had given myself to him so freely. Stefan had feelings for me. Why else would he say what he just did if not? “Are you ready to go, then?” I asked.

“I can be. Maybe we should first see just how many shops we should visit.”

I looked up at Stefan, confused.

“Your bag. Let’s unpack and see just what we’re working with. It can be humid and hot here in the summer, although it’s always comfortable here in the casino. The riverboat is a different story. It’s out on the water and will almost always be

breezy when you're on deck, and the rooms are climate-controlled, but even the family suites there are small."

"How small?" I asked, moving closer to the bed and opening my bag.

"About the size of this room and bathroom," Stefan told me as I picked up my bag, turned it upside down, and gave it a good shake. Out came my things, and when dumped out on Stefan's bed as they were, I realized that I had basically nothing. It was sad to look at.

"Here's the funds for my clothing I'll need," I told my mate as I picked up the envelope that the fates had told me about. I had some funds from my realm, but they weren't the same as they used here.

"You won't need that," Stefan said, taking the envelope from me and tossing it toward the pillows.

I glanced at it, shrugged, and then pushed the pile of clothing over. I hit something hard with my hand, but it was Stefan who picked it up.

"Did you bring a picture with you?"

"Umm, no. I don't have any pictures," I told him. My eyes widened, and I gasped when he turned the rectangle over in his hands. That was my family. We had been standing there like that in the bakery just before I left with the fates.

"Is this your family?"

I reached for the picture with shaking hands. "Yes," I said, the image of it suddenly blurry.

"Hey, here, sit down." Stefan directed me over to the bed, and I sat on the edge. He handed me the picture and then knelt in front of me. "Tell me about them. Who are they?"

I couldn't believe it. I had a picture of my family to remember them. This was the very last time I would be with them, and here it was, frozen in time in this image.

"This is my father, Randall," I said, pointing to my alpha father. "And this is Dad. His name is Kurt."

“You look like your omega dad, then.”

I nodded.

“And since he looks like Randall, I’d say that’s your brother, Tyler?”

I chuckled. “Yeah. They’d always said they each had a mini, so they were good for children.” I touched the picture, smiling at Sia. She was sleeping against Danny’s shoulder. I’d really bonded with my brother’s mate during Danny’s pregnancy. I would miss this one completely. Maybe I would find myself pregnant soon though.

“I’m sorry, Kyle.”

I glanced up at Stefan, and after blinking a few times, I set the picture beside me and swiped at my eyes. “Why? You’ve done nothing wrong.”

Stefan sighed. “I know. But you’re here to be my beloved. And you obviously love your family a great deal. I wouldn’t dream of giving you up, but it’s not right you had to leave them behind.”

“I’m not the first fae to leave their family behind for their mate, Stefan. I won’t be the last.” I glanced at the picture before placing my hands on Stefan’s cheeks. I leaned down and kissed him quickly before I stood. “I’ll miss them, but I know you and I will have an amazing life together and that you will always be more than enough for me. Don’t think otherwise.” The last thing I wanted was for Stefan to believe I would rather not be here with him. He gave me happiness in ways my family back home couldn’t. I didn’t want to go back to that. And I wasn’t just talking about the sex, although that was pure bliss for certain.

“I still feel bad,” Stefan told me.

I shrugged. “I do too. Not a whole lot that can be done. I’m thankful to have this one photo though. I didn’t know it was in there.”

“How did you get it?” Stefan asked as he picked it up. He placed it on the bedside table before coming back to me.

“The only thing I can think of is the fates.” I glanced at the picture and smiled. “That’s my family’s bakery. Canyon took that picture with his phone. I guess he somehow used magic to get me a picture.” I swiped at my eyes again because they were just determined to leak. “He must have put it in the bag and I didn’t realize.”

I became frustrated with myself and swiped at my eyes again. It just wasn’t working though, so I went to the bathroom, leaving Stefan behind. Or so I thought. I let out a sob as I grabbed on to the sink. Familiar arms wrapped around me from behind and held on tight. I felt myself being turned around and then lifted. I clung to Stefan as I felt myself being carried through the suite. When we lowered down somewhere, there was suddenly a soft cloth wiping at my face. I reached for it, realizing it was a tissue.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I don’t regret coming here. I want you, and I’ll never leave you. I just...” I had to stop and wipe my nose because it had started to run just as much as my eyes. When it continued to drip, I blew it, and there was suddenly another tissue in front of me. It was traded with the wet one, and I first wiped my eyes and then blew my nose again. I took several deep breaths before I was finally able to get myself under control.

“Feeling better?” Stefan asked.

I started to say yes, but I honestly wasn’t so sure. He seemed to pick up on that and pulled me closer and then kissed my temple before he simply held me.

“I’ll always be here for you. Feel free to cry all you want. I won’t judge, and I’ll always be here to hold you.”

I took another deep breath and closed my eyes. I’d lucked out, and I knew it. I’d seriously won in the mate department. Not only was he sexy and had dreamy eyes that could make my entire body flush hot with just a look—I’d say it was a smolder—but he was genuinely caring. He had been so amazing with me during my fertile period. There’d definitely been stretches of deliriousness, but Stefan had shared those

moments with me through our bond, and his care for me never faltered.

“Let’s talk about it when you’re ready. Maybe Master Nikolai can get in contact with the fates. Perhaps we could get you back to your family.”

I felt a stab to my chest. The thought of leaving Stefan pained me. I pushed up and away from his chest and glared at my mate.

“And if looks could kill, I’d be in serious jeopardy at the moment.”

“I just told you I’d never leave you and I don’t regret coming here. Why would you say something so cruel?”

Stefan looked confused. “I didn’t. At least, I don’t think I did. It hurts me to see you so upset about leaving your family behind. Maybe we could go there? Is that possible? Would you like that?”

My flash of anger softened. Again, he was only thinking about me. I shook my head. “As much as I’ll miss my family, I don’t want to go back, Stefan. I want to be here with you. This is where we are supposed to be, and this is where we’ll spend our lives. At least, in this realm, that is.” I took the tissue and wiped at my eyes again, finally feeling as if they were drying up.

“I’m sorry, Kyle. I don’t want you upset,” Stefan said. He ran his fingers through my hair, and I leaned into his touch when he rested his hand on my cheek.

“I know you don’t. And that’s sweet of you. I’m going to be all right. You were right a bit ago when you mentioned how I was really tired and run-down after my fertile period. I didn’t want to admit that this one was stronger than any I’ve ever had before, and it’s taken me a little longer to recover. But you’ve been amazing, and the last thing I want is for you to think or feel that I don’t appreciate everything you’ve done for me already.” He had stepped up when he didn’t have to.

“That’s what mates do, sweetheart. They care for one another and take care of each other. You needed me; I wasn’t

going to not see to your needs in any way I could.”

So lucky. I truly was, and I knew it. I smiled at Stefan before I looked around. “How did I not realize we were in the living room?”

Stefan winked at me. “You were a bit preoccupied. But this was where the tissues were, so that’s why we’re out here instead of in the bedroom.”

I took a deep, cleansing breath.

“Are you feeling better at all? I could take you out for chocolate cake. Everyone likes chocolate cake, don’t they?”

I shrugged. “Maybe? I’m not sure, though, because we don’t have chocolate in the fae realm. Have you fed me chocolate already? I don’t really remember everything I ate while I was...you know.” I didn’t exactly want to say *out of my mind with intense sexual need*. Stefan had been more than attentive during that time, but that didn’t change the fact that I was still pretty much not all there mentally.

“All right, to the dining room we’re going. They always have chocolate cake, and we’re getting you some. Then we’ll have a day out shopping and eating out at an amazing diner, and then we’ll come back here and spend the evening curled up together.” Stefan stood, easily taking me with him. I called out, and he chuckled. I knew he had me securely, but that didn’t change the fact that he was once again walking through the suite with me in his arms.

“I can walk, Stefan,” I said while laughing. He carried me to the front door, where our shoes were, and after slipping them on and grabbing the coats, we left the suite.

“We need to get your key and badge before we leave the building, but first, we’re going to get you some chocolate cake and tea. You need to experience the cake that Master Nikolai keeps on the menu here.”

“Well, I’m willing to give it a try. You make it sound like it’s the best thing.”

“It’s amazing,” he told me. “Come on.”

I let Stefan take my hand and pull me along the hallway. It was empty, but I guess that wasn't unusual. It was midmorning, and most everyone else was most likely at work. Or maybe they were like we had been just a little while ago—inside their suite.

We waited for the elevator for only seconds, and when it dinged, I was more than ready to enter when the doors opened, but Stefan quickly pulled me back and behind him slightly. The car had several others in it, and I wondered what the issue was.

“Going down?” someone asked. I felt hesitation from my mate through our bond, but he nodded and took a step into the car.

Once inside, I realized I'd seen the one guy briefly. I glanced at him a few times, and when he saw me, he winked. I grinned, but when I looked to the other side, I found Stefan glaring. I rolled my eyes and pressed into Stefan's side.

“What's wrong?” I asked quietly.

“Nothing,” he grumbled.

“You'll get used to him,” someone said from the back corner. I turned to see who it was, and when the blond vampire stood, he had a friendly smile on his face. “I'm Diego, head of security for Master Nikolai. Congratulations on your mating,” he said, holding out his hand. I grinned and took the offered hand.

“Thank you. It's been quite a week,” I told Diego.

“I would imagine so. Once you're up for visitors and Stefan is ready to let you out of his sight for a little while, you'll have to come and meet Nigel.”

I raised my eyebrows. The door dinged and opened, and all of us slowly exited the car. Diego was directly behind me, but I really needed to know who Nigel was.

“Who's Nigel?” I asked when he was walking beside me.

“My beloved. He's at home with the kids though. It's morning naptime, which is where I was. We have Noah, who

is a penguin shifter like Nigel, and my amazing beloved just gifted me with our daughter, Mira, last year. She's a little vampire."

My heart melted at the thought of a little vampire. Diego looked over my head at Stefan and shook his head. "You're in trouble, Stefan. I'd say your beloved likes that idea."

I couldn't help but grin. I wanted one with Stefan's black hair. She'd be so adorable.

"I want a little girl," I told him.

Stefan chuckled. "I'll try, sweetheart, but I don't have too much control over that. I realize I'll decide to some extent, but I can't really control which swimmer wins."

I understood that. I did. But now that I was thinking about it, I really wanted a little girl. I could put adorable bows in her hair and teach her how to make all of the pretty pastries, and we could visit Stefan at work before they got busy. I sighed, thinking about the thought. If only.

"Are you ready?" Stefan asked. I glanced at him and blinked a couple of times.

"For a little girl? Yes."

Stefan chuckled again. "No, silly. For cake. Diego said he'd have your badge and card waiting for us when we're finished eating."

"Oh," I said, trying not to be too disappointed. I knew I'd love our children no matter what, but now I couldn't seem to stop thinking about a precious little girl. Would that be possible? Time would tell, I guessed. I nodded and followed my mate to what I had to assume was the dining room to get our chocolate cake.

CHAPTER II

STEFAN



It was amazing how fast life could go by once you met your beloved. It felt as if I'd just met Kyle down in the bar, but that had, in fact, been a month ago now, and it was time for me to go back to work. I was finding that more difficult than I imagined it would be. Especially since my precious beloved was not only pregnant but had pregnancy sickness. All the time.

I glanced down at Kyle where he was camped out on our couch. He had his tea and some sort of shortbread cookies or something. I wasn't quite sure. I wasn't exactly a fan of them, but he was, and once he'd had a chat with Montgomery about a certain type of flour, he'd ordered that flour and used magic to make them.

I knelt down next to Kyle and ran my fingers through his hair. "I would call in if I could, sweetheart. But with Montgomery giving birth last week..."

"I know. But little Everlee is just the sweetest, and Fergus needs to be there for Montgomery and to help with Tobias."

I ran my fingers through Kyle's hair again. My beloved was the sweetest, but he would argue with me that the babies were. I agreed that they were cute, even more so now that he and I were expecting our first. But he was right. Fergus needed to be with his family. And technically, he wasn't a bartender any longer. He was the floor manager, and that meant I was lead bartender.

"We have our bond," I told him.

“I know,” Kyle said. “I’ll use it if I need to. But I’m thinking that the sleepy-time tea I just finished was what I needed right now, and I’ll snooze through your shift. Then when you get home, I’ll be awake enough to spend some time with you.”

That would be nice, but I imagined that he’d be completely out once I came home, and I’d simply shower before crawling into bed beside my beloved.

“I’ll be up for supper, all right? I’ll bring you some soup, and we’ll have a nice meal together before I have to head back to work.” I couldn’t seem to draw myself away from my beloved.

“I’d like that.” Kyle sighed and closed his eyes.

“Do you need anything before I leave?”

Those gorgeous icy-blue eyes opened and looked at me. “Just you. But since you have to go back to work, I’ll just tell you that I love you and that I’ll be waiting here for you when you get finished. We knew this day would come.”

My breath caught in my throat when Kyle said those three words. I knew he loved me. I’d felt it through our bond, and it showed every time he looked at me and in the way he touched me. But he’d not yet said those words to me.

“I love you too, sweetheart. More than I can ever tell you, I’m sure.” I should have told him before now. I should have been the first to say those words and not held them because I didn’t want to rush him. “I should have told you weeks ago when I first realized I was in love with you.”

Kyle gave me a sleepy smile. “It’s all right. Me too.” He sighed and closed his eyes again. It seemed as if he’d lost his fight with sleep, which most likely wasn’t a bad thing. He needed the rest because he was carrying a little vampire baby for us.

“Rest, sweetheart. I’ll check in on you frequently,” I whispered. I leaned down and kissed his forehead before I stood. I fixed the blanket around him, making sure he was tucked in and wouldn’t get cold. Kyle moved his head toward

my hand, and after I trailed my fingers down the side of his face one last time, I left the room and walked to the door.

He would be fine, this much I knew. Julian was going to check in on him for me, but he himself had three children now. But Master Nikolai was all about family and often had their children in his office with him. Julian would hang out and help, or he would sometimes drop in around the coven and check up on others.

I glanced over my shoulder at the door, unable to see Kyle, but knew he was just on the other side of the couch, fast asleep. I exited the suite and made sure the door was locked once I was on the other side. I found it difficult to walk away from the suite and my beloved but knew from talking to Fergus that it would get easier as time went on. Well, until the baby arrived. Then it would be even more difficult to leave the suite.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself as I walked down the hallway toward the elevator. It was, for some reason, on our floor, so I stepped in and pressed the button for the ground floor. I needed to check in with most likely Diego. Fergus was going to be out for the next month or so, and that left Diego.

I chuckled as the elevator doors opened on the ground floor. Master Nikolai was going to need more coven members if he was going to have enough of us to keep the casino running. We were all getting mated and having babies with our beloveds, and with several of us out at the same time, it made things thin in some areas. With that thought in mind, it was a bit surprising to see Fergus standing across the way, talking to Diego. They noticed me and motioned me over, and I closed the distance to talk to the second- and third-in-command of the coven.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen. Is everything all right?” I asked, glancing between Diego and then Fergus.

“Afternoon,” Diego said. “Everything’s fine as far as I’m aware.”

I nodded and turned my attention to Fergus instead. He shouldn't be down here. Montgomery had just had a baby last week.

“Fergus? Is everything all right with Montgomery and the children?”

That brought an instant smile to the Scot's face. “Aye. 'Tis well. Not sleeping much yet, but it's early still.”

I could only nod to that. I understood that would be what we would be facing soon enough, but I knew it would be worth it. And once Kyle got to hold our little one, any disappointment of not having his little girl the first time around would disappear. At least, I hoped that was going to be the case.

“I guess that will be us in a couple more months,” I told them.

“How is Kyle feeling?” Diego asked.

I winced. “Let's just say that the tea that makes him sleep is his best friend right now.” I felt terrible for my beloved. “If he goes more than four hours without drinking the tea, he's rushing to the nearest bathroom.”

Fergus and Diego both winced. “I'll get you Constantine's number. Maybe you should have him come check out Kyle, just to be safe?”

I shrugged. “Wouldn't hurt, but even Kyle has said it's just pregnancy sickness. He just has it all day instead of first thing in the mornings.” I glanced between the two of them. “I guess his dad had it as well, but not his brother-in-law.”

After that breakdown when Kyle discovered the picture in his bag, he'd been open and talked to me about his family and what they'd been like growing up. The life he'd had when younger was immensely different than the one I had experienced. He grew up in a warm and loving family. I had grown up in a coven that was stuck in what felt like the dark ages. Then again, perhaps the coven master was from those years. I knew little about him other than he demanded loyalty.

“It happens, I understand,” Diego added. “But after what happened with Matteo, we’re just being overly cautious with all of the omegas and carriers, you know?”

I nodded because I did know. I didn’t know Matteo nearly as well as Diego and Fergus did. He left shortly after I’d joined the *Gem*. He seemed like a great guy, but he’d had severe pregnancy sickness to the point that he struggled to drink from his beloved. It had been a serious situation, from what I’d heard.

“Good,” Diego said. He pulled out his phone and started touching the screen. “Here’s the contact,” he told me. I was quick to take out my own phone and input the contact information into it. I would give the warlock doctor a call later on when I had time.

“I’ll call him later and discuss what’s going on with Kyle with him and see what he suggests,” I told the pair of them. My gaze bounced between the two, landing on Fergus and staying there. He really should be upstairs with Montgomery. “Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Nay. Matthew is upstairs with Monty, and they’re catching up,” Fergus told me.

“Ah, all right.” I stood there waiting, wondering if I should just go to work. “I guess I’ll go help Adam,” I said.

“Yeah, about that,” Diego said. There it was.

“Please don’t tell me he’s quit.”

“What? No.”

Instant relief. The thought of having to run the bar completely on my own for the next however long was not something I wished to do.

“There’s been some additions since ye had yer vacation.”

“Additions?” I looked between the two.

“Yeah, and Master Nikolai was supposed to be here when you came back, but something happened up in Montana, and it directly affects Monty and Matthew, so he got detained a little.”

I was not only concerned but getting a bit annoyed with these two. “Does one of you want to tell me what’s going on? Because I’m starting to get a little annoyed at the moment. My pregnant beloved is upstairs sleeping on our couch, and I’d love nothing more than to go back to him and take care of him, but I’m here. Yet the two of you are being a bit cagey with information.”

Diego laughed, and Fergus sighed. “’Tis nothing wrong. We just had more members join since ye were here last. Two are bartenders, three are dealers, and four others work elsewhere in the casino.”

“Nine new coven members?” That was a lot more than I’d ever heard about joining at any one time before.

“There will be more incoming in the spring as well,” Diego told me. That was news as well, but if there were vampires needing a place to call home, I couldn’t argue that our coven wasn’t a good one. It was, and Master Nikolai was incredibly fair.

“Well, that was unexpected, but we’ve been holed up for the past three weeks, so I can’t say I’m surprised that things have changed some since I was here last.” We’d spent a week after claiming each other and then being in the midst of Kyle’s fertile period. Then we had one day where we went out and spent the day out seeing sights and shopping for a few clothes, but after that, Kyle had discovered the joys of online shopping beyond for more than groceries. Although he was especially thrilled he order his groceries online and they would be delivered to the hotel.

“Let me introduce you to them,” Diego told me.

I nodded, and as we started to walk away, I stopped when Fergus placed his hand on my shoulder. “I’m going back to Monty and the little ones. I’m sorry I couldn’t be here full-on when you came back.”

I shook my head. “Don’t worry about it, Fergus. I understand, and everyone else in the coven does as well. At least they should,” I told him. His beloved had just given birth to a baby, and although we’d not seen little Everlee yet, Kyle

and I had heard the news and had sent congratulations to the new-again parents. “Go back to your family and enjoy your time with them,” I said, offering a genuine smile.

Fergus seemed torn, and Diego sighed before he pushed Fergus in the other direction. “Go. You heard the man. He’s been running the bar for how long? It’ll be fine, Fergus. I wouldn’t want to piss off Monty, and if we suddenly have falling fruit in the casino this evening, I’ll know it’s your fault for staying away from your beloved and new baby girl for too long.”

Fergus seemed to take that to heart because he nodded once and then took off toward the elevator. Diego chuckled, and I fell into step beside him as we continued on to the bar. We were just outside when something Fergus had said earlier registered.

“Wait, Fergus said that Master Nikolai was held up in Montana?” I looked to Diego. “I didn’t know he was going to Montana. Did Julian go with him?”

Diego shook his head. “No, Julian and the kids are here. Theobald came to visit while Master Nikolai went to Montana.”

I wanted to ask but wasn’t going to because it wasn’t my business. Not much got past Diego though. “You can ask, you know.”

I shrugged. “Not really my personal business,” I said.

“Not directly, but it affects Monty, which in turn will have a huge impact on Fergus, and since you have to deal with him, it affects you in a roundabout way.”

I sighed. “Fine, I’ll bite. What’s going on?”

Diego’s face gave nothing away as we stepped through the door that opened to the bar. “Matthew and Montgomery’s brother is here, as in, he’s here in this realm and is in Montana. He was mated with a wolf shifter there,” Diego said, leaning close to me.

I blinked at Diego, confused. “How is that bad? Isn’t it good when we find fated mates?” I whispered. We were now

in the bar, and although it wasn't packed, it wasn't empty either.

"I don't know all of the specifics," Diego said. "But he wasn't alone. He had to bring their two youngest siblings, and he's been raising them for some time."

Just how many siblings did Monty have? My confusion was apparent because Diego patted me on the shoulder.

"I'd tell you more if I knew more. That's all I've been informed of. That and the fact that their brother wasn't exactly nice to them. He was pretty self-centered, so I'm not sure what's going on. Someone being described as being self-centered doesn't sound like someone who would be raising younger siblings all on his own."

I glanced around, noticing Adam immediately, but he was chatting with an unfamiliar face. Must be one of the new bartenders. "Where are the parents, then?" I asked. I'd never inquired about Monty's home in the fae realm. It wasn't unheard of that they would have shit parents like I did. It could happen. But he was just so happy and amazing that I'd always assumed that he had been like Kyle and had wonderful parents.

"That's one of the things Master Nikolai is trying to find out. He was having a meeting with the fates because his father-in-law was able to arrange that. Because...apparently, the created ones have access to them now? I'm not sure. It's all way over my head."

I shook my head. That was all way over mine as well. I had met the created vampire and the created warlock, and of course, I'd seen Julian's alpha father in passing, but that was the extent of my connection with any of the created ones. The fact that our coven master was just out there talking to them as if it were an everyday occurrence was more than I would be able to do.

"Anyway," I said, hoping to move things along. "About the new bartenders?"

"Yeah, come on."

We walked over to where he was standing next to Adam. They were laughing and carrying on while working, much like Adam and I usually did. It was good to see that Adam was able to be equally friendly with the new guy.

“Hey, Stefan. It’s good to see you back,” Adam said as he noticed us.

“Adam,” I said, nodding at him, then looking to the new guy.

“Stefan,” Diego said, “this is Chase. He’s one of our two new bartenders.”

“Hey, Chase. Nice to meet you,” I said, holding out my hand. He reached for it, and after a quick shake, we both dropped our hands.

“Same,” he said. Immediately, he went back to work, pulling his attention away from us and toward the bar.

“I should get back to work as well,” Adam said. He, too, went back to the bar, leaving me wondering if I was intruding. It seemed like it.

“Hey, so, call if you need anything. I’ll be in the office for a bit, then I’ll be out making rounds,” Diego told me.

I nodded at him.

“Oh, and I’ll be by later with Sofia.”

Now, I was confused. Diego’s kids’ names were Noah and Mira. Who was Sofia?

Diego chuckled. “She’s one of the new joins. She’s in security with me, which is great because with the size of this place, we’ve been needing more help in all areas.”

Wasn’t that the truth. It was fine when we were on what in comparison was a little boat, but now that we were stationary and the casino floor was over twice the size, and we had even more hotel rooms, we needed more people.

“Good. I’ll look for the two of you later.”

Diego waved and then was off. I glanced around the bar and went to the computer terminal. After clocking in, letting

the coven know I was now on duty, I went into the back and grabbed my tablet so I could keep everything up to date. I rejoined the other two, jumping right in to help.

“Are you glad to be back?” Adam asked next to me while I pulled an IPA for a customer.

I shrugged. “It’s not a bad thing to be back, but I wouldn’t complain about not being here.” That pulled a laugh from Adam, and Chase joined.

“I get that,” Chase said. “When my younger brother got married, he didn’t want to go back to work ever. He ended up annoying his wife so much she kicked him out of the house and told him to get back to work.”

I shook my head and grinned. “Yeah, I haven’t annoyed Kyle to that point yet,” I told them. I placed the beer in front of the customer, and he handed me a twenty. I made change, and he took off after leaving a small tip. I placed it in the tip jar, where it would be added to the coven’s funds at the end of the night. We all were paid a very nice salary and didn’t require the tips. The customers didn’t know that though, and any and all tips were simply added to the coven’s funds, which all came back to the entire coven and its members in the end. It was all a win-win situation for everyone.

We finished with that small group of customers, and then when we had a lull, Adam pulled me toward the back of the bar, where we had a little more privacy. “Seriously though, how’s Kyle doing?” he asked. “I’d heard he’s sick.”

Chase joined us, and I nodded in agreement. “It’s not as bad as Matteo was, but he’s sick a lot if he doesn’t drink the special tea. He’s taken to drinking the sleep-inducing one, which causes him to spend a lot of time sleeping. He’s not losing weight or anything, but he looks a little pale.”

“Did the doctor check him out?” Adam asked.

“Not yet. The sickness just hit earlier this week. Diego gave me the doctor’s number, and I’ll call him later and set up a time for him to come out and check him out.” I shrugged. “Kyle said it wasn’t unexpected since his dad had been sick

when he was pregnant with him and his siblings.” I knew very little about pregnant omegas.

Another guest came up to the bar, and it was Chase who took off for him. I glanced that way and saw how he was quite easygoing with the customer, which was a good thing in my book.

“How’s he doing?”

“Great. He and the other guy, Cooper, both have previous bartending experience.”

I nodded. “That’s good.”

“Yep. I’ll open tomorrow with Cooper. You close tomorrow with Chase.”

Sounded like a plan to me. “Then you’re off now?” I asked, wondering why we had three on a Thursday night.

“Not quite. Not until eight.”

It was going to be different having four of us. We could do shifts of two, with an overlap in the middle. And it would help when I had to take time off once Kyle had the baby.

Another group came up to the bar, this one louder than the others. Adam and I glanced at each other before we joined Chase at the bar. Hopefully it stayed busy and I could get back to Kyle without being too late.

Through our bond, I felt when he woke a few hours later. My stomach had a dull ache in it, and I wondered if Kyle was sick again and that was why he’d woken already.

“Are you all right, sweetheart?”

I heard the clanking of something through our bond. *“Yep, making tea. The other one now though. I need to eat something too. Maybe some crackers or a sandwich.”*

I handed the mixed drink to the guy across from me and grinned. “Anything else I can get for you?”

“Naw, not now. I’ll be back later though,” the customer said. He held up his drink and then walked off. I watched as he joined a group that was sitting in the corner.

Chase joined me, watching where I was, and gently bumped my shoulder. I glanced at him, curious what his thoughts were about the group.

“Trouble?” I asked.

“Not so far. Adam said they’d been here every night this week.” Chase shrugged. “I was off the last two days. But I guess their group comes in, drinks for a couple hours, and then heads out to the casino. They’ve not caused any issues from what I’ve heard.”

That was good. I didn’t want to have to deal with unruly customers the first day back. Our night only got busier, and by the time one in the morning came around, we called last call. The casino was open all night, but the bar had to close by one thirty. We only had a few customers left by that point, and once Chase followed the last ones out and we finished cleaning up the last of the mess, I was more than ready to get back to Kyle.

“I won’t ask you to walk with me back to the suites,” Chase said with a laugh. “I’ve seen you watching the clock for the last three hours.”

I cringed. “Sorry.”

“Hey, don’t be,” he said, patting my shoulder. “Get back to your beloved. I get it. I hope I find mine sometime.”

I nodded. “Well, I’d say your chances are probably pretty good while you’re here. It seems that we are lucky in that department.”

We said our good nights, and I entered the elevator while Chase seemed to be headed to the dining room. I didn’t blame him. I could definitely eat, but my need to see Kyle was greater. I hurried down the hallway when the elevator doors opened on our floor, and after waving the key card in front of the door, I entered our space. I loved that it was our space now.

I reached out to Kyle through our bond and found him sleeping again. I left my things at the table and headed to the bedroom, where I found my angel fast asleep in our bed. I was calmer and content to simply stare at his beauty for a moment.

I needed to shower off the yuck of work before joining him, but that wouldn't take long.

It had been a tiring shift, but Diego had told me it would get easier. Especially after the baby was born. I'd have to see if he was up for it. For now, I needed a shower and then to join my beloved in bed. I would be content just holding him.

CHAPTER 12

KYLE



I never knew I was so indecisive, but I absolutely could not decide on a nursery color. I had my left hand resting on my rather large stomach and was rubbing the pressure that our little guy was pushing on the left side by where my kidney used to be.

I flicked my right hand toward the walls, turning them from buttery yellow to a sage green. I sighed because that wasn't much better than the yellow. A little, but not much.

"I liked the blue."

I turned at the sound of Montgomery's voice. He had little Everlee strapped to his chest in a baby carrier, and I resisted going over to have a little peek at her. She was just the most precious and adorable little fae.

"I just can't get over her hair. So pretty for someone so young," I told him.

Montgomery snorted. "Yeah, that's all Fergus. In fact, I'm positive the only thing she got from me was the fact that she's fae. Other than that, she's all her sire."

I chuckled at that, and Montgomery went to the plush chair Stefan and I had picked out for the nursery. Once he was sitting and comfortable, he flicked his hand, and the walls went from sage green to a gorgeous teal that I absolutely loved. I sighed.

"So pretty," I said.

"Then use that color."

I shook my head. “It’s too dark and doesn’t go with the bedding.” I was more hung up on the bedding than I was on the wall colors. So much so that I was tempted to just keep them white since I couldn’t decide what color I wanted. “Where’s Tobias?” I asked.

“Fergus took him to the childcare center down on the second floor. He wanted to go play with some of the other kids, so Fergus said he’d drop him off on his way to work.”

I smiled, but it quickly turned to a wince once the sharp pain hit me in the side again. I pressed against my side, hoping our son’s knee that was pushing against it would move.

“Are you all right?” Monty asked.

I sighed as he finally moved his knee. “Yeah, just a sharp pain in what I think is my kidney. Well, where my kidney is? He’s actually pressing his knee into my side.”

“What is?” Monty asked, quickly getting up and walking over to where I was still standing in front of the crib. That was easy enough to pick. We’d gone with natural wood, and it went with every color wall. I just had to decide what I wanted on the walls. “Are you sure it’s just his knee? What if it’s labor? You were due four days ago.”

I groaned at that. “Don’t remind me. I never thought I’d be the one to carry the baby longer than I was supposed to.”

Monty was now standing in front of me, and when he held out his hand, I knew exactly what he was doing. He looked up at me with narrowed eyes.

“Did Stefan check your omega line this morning?”

“Yeah. He checks it several times a day.”

Monty dropped to his knees in front of me and reached for the waist of my sweats. I didn’t fit into anything beyond Stefan’s sweats anymore, so everything was incredibly easy access.

“You know, I’d say that if either of our mates caught us in this position, we would have some explaining to do.”

“Umm, Kyle? Does your line hurt at all?”

“Not really, no. Should it? It’s been red for well over a week. It hurt when it first started changing, but it’s just kind of there now.”

“Kyle, you’re in labor. I don’t think that’s your little guy pressing against your side. I think those are contractions.”

“What?” I asked, worried. “No. I wasn’t in labor this morning. Stefan checked the omega line. It was still red. It wasn’t opening.”

Monty stood up after he repositioned my pants for me. “Well, labor can start at any point, day or night.”

I was in labor? How had I not realized that? I had read the book Dr. Constantine had given me. I found it incredibly helpful. It was written specifically for omegas and omega line births.

“Stefan?”

“Yes, sweetheart? Did Montgomery not find you?”

I flung my hand at the wall, and they were suddenly a nice dove gray. On somewhat shaky legs, I went to the chair Montgomery had just been sitting in, and maybe I shouldn’t have sat there.

“Stefan, Monty said I’m in labor.”

We heard a shout through the suite. Monty and I shared a knowing look, and then I winced. “Monty, I hate to ask, but could you call the doctor for us, please?”

Stefan came sprinting into the nursery and without a thought swept me up into his arms. I looked at Monty over Stefan’s shoulder as he carried me out of the nursery and toward our own bedroom. Monty was giggling, and we both rolled our eyes.

I’d had an idea that Stefan was going to be a mess when I actually went into labor, and so far, it was looking like that actually was the case. I humored Stefan and let him carry me into the bedroom and then gently place me on our bed.

“Stay right there, and don’t move.”

Stefan took off out the door, and immediately, I sat up. Monty came into the bedroom, his phone in his hand. He waved it at me and nodded. “Constantine said he’d be on standby. All we had to do was let him know as soon as your waters broke and he’d be here as soon as we could text.”

“Perfect,” I said. I swung my feet over the side of the bed and stood.

“Are your legs feeling better?”

“Yes. I think it was just the initial shock that I’m actually in labor.”

“You know, you never shared the name you picked out.”

I sighed. “Only because we haven’t decided. We love several, so we figured we would wait until he was actually here and met him. Maybe one of the names will just...fit then?”

“I get that completely. You should know that Diego and Nigel didn’t have a name for Noah for a while after he was born.”

I smiled at that. “How long?”

Monty shrugged. “I wasn’t here yet, but I think it was a week? Maybe two. We could ask though. They just didn’t have a name picked. There was a whole lot going on with the coven then, and it wasn’t their most important thing at the moment.”

“What are you doing? You should be in bed,” Stefan said as he came back into the room. He took my arm and tried to get me to lie back down.

“I actually don’t want to lie down, Stefan. I want to go back to decorating the nursery. Our son is going to be here soon, and we still haven’t decided on a wall color.”

“What’s wrong with the teal and gray?” Stefan asked.

Monty grinned and then shrugged. I left our bedroom, and when I stepped into the nursery again, it was perfect. I stopped just inside the room and turned around.

“You didn’t!” The walls went from gray to teal, fading in and out of each color. It was perfect. The teal alone was too much, but with it fading to a lighter teal, then into gray, which subtly darkened, was the perfect final thing for our nursery.

“Well, your aura is saying you like it.”

I was about to agree when there was a sharp pain in my side again. This time though, it was more intense. I could have dealt with that, except it was then accompanied by a large gush of fluid.

“Well, I guess it’s time to call the doctor back,” Monty said. Everlee started to fuss, and he leaned down and kissed the top of her head. “I’m going to call Constantine for you again while Stefan gets you cleaned up and into bed. Then I’ll let myself out, but you need to message me just as soon as you know your little guy’s name. I’m curious to meet him.”

“Thank you, Montgomery,” Stefan said. He swept me up into his arms again, and I called out in pain. Stefan froze, looking to me for guidance.

“Just hold me, but maybe let me walk? It hurts my stomach to be crunched up like this now.”

Stefan nodded, and once I was back on my feet, he led me to the bedroom. We went to the bathroom, and Stefan helped me to step into the shower, where he undressed me while the water heated up at the other end of the enclosure.

“Are you ready to be a daddy?” I asked Stefan. He helped me into the water and to clean the mess from my legs and feet.

“I am. Now that it’s finally here, are you changing your mind?”

I snorted at that. “You’re not serious, right?”

Stefan looked up at me from where he was kneeling to help me wash my legs.

“No, but I thought I’d ask. You asked me a silly question. Doesn’t it merit one in return?”

I thought about that and had to nod in agreement. I glanced down at my now soapy legs and wondered how we were going

to get them rinsed without me getting water in my open omega line. “Umm...I could have used magic. Or Monty could have.”

“I realize that. I wanted to take care of you,” Stefan told me. He moved over to the showerhead, pulled the handheld portion down, and helped me rinse my legs. When he was finished with that, he replaced it and turned the water off.

“All right. Let’s get you dry and then into bed.”

I stepped out of the shower, using magic to dry myself as I did. Another pain hit, and when it did, a smaller gush of fluid came out, and I glared down at it as it ran down my left leg.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said and used more magic to clean it up. “Did you want dried?” I asked simply to try and distract myself. Now that I was here, ready to give birth, I was nervous. I had always seen myself as having Dad here with me when I gave birth. Now, he wouldn’t even know I had mated to a vampire and was about to give birth to a little vampire baby. I helped Stefan dry his own clothing and self, and then he helped me back into the bed. The contractions were coming quicker now and starting to become quite painful.

Stefan covered me with a light blanket and then knelt beside me to where he could run his fingers through my hair. It was always soothing when he did that, and I often fell asleep from it. “You’re trying to put me to sleep?” I asked.

“No. Just relax you some.” Stefan did it again and then leaned forward and kissed my cheek. “I love you, Kyle. Everything will be fine, and we’re going to be holding our little guy soon enough.”

He wasn’t wrong. We would be holding him sometime today if my contractions were any indication.

“Knock, knock.”

Stefan jumped up, and I looked to the door at the familiar sound of Dr. Constantine’s voice.

“Hello, Dr. Constantine.”

The warlock doctor chuckled at me. “Hello, Kyle. I hear you are in labor.”

“So Montgomery tells me.”

“His water broke in the nursery,” Stefan said.

“That is a very good indicator. Can I take a look?”

I nodded. I had nothing to hide from the doctor. He’d seen everything already, and I was about to have a baby. I wasn’t really worrying about being naked and in bed. Constantine pulled the top of the blanket down just enough to expose my omega line. He seemed to study it closely and then nodded.

“Yes, definitely in labor.” Constantine’s hand started glowing bright green, and when he moved it from where it was to about my knees, I suddenly felt amazing, and the pain was no longer there. In fact, I couldn’t feel anything.

“That must be that floating feeling I’ve heard about,” I said.

“Somewhat,” Constantine said. “Kyle, has the baby been moving a lot in the last few days or weeks?”

I shared a look with Stefan, curious about the question.

“The baby hasn’t stopped moving,” Stefan told him.

“Wiggly every day?”

I nodded. “Is he all right?” I was really concerned now.

“He’s fine,” Constantine told me. “He happens to be backwards though, and instead of a head right there, I see feet.”

My eyes widened. “What does that mean? Is he going to be able to come out?”

Constantine nodded and offered a friendly smile. “He is. I’ve asked Miles to come help though. I’ll need him to take the baby so I can help you recover. Your little guy is breach, and although he’s not overly large, it will still be a more difficult delivery because you won’t be able to push him out as easily, if at all.”

Stefan crossed his arms in front of him and glared at the doctor. I reached for my mate, hoping he wouldn't upset the doctor. We needed him at the moment.

"What exactly does that mean?" Stefan asked.

"Nothing too terrible," Constantine said. "He just needs to be delivered in more of a C-section way as a vampire carrier would deliver. The way the baby is positioned simply doesn't work for a delivery where the omega can push him or her out."

Stefan relaxed, and I tugged on his hand. Stefan looked down at me, and his harsh expression suddenly softened.

"I'm right here," he told me.

"I know. Could you come back down here and hold my hand?"

"I'm here," Miles announced as he came rushing into the room. "Sorry, I had to find Grandpa. I finally found him, but he was in a meeting, so I left the triplets with Theo. He was going to take them all swimming, so they're going to not only be occupied well but incredibly tired when we finally get back home."

Constantine leaned in and kissed his One quickly. "Smart thinking," he told him. "The baby has been continually moving, and although he was head down during the ultrasound, he's now feet down, and they're tucked tightly under his behind. His knees are spread out a bit, which is what's going to cause the biggest obstacle."

"So it was a knee in my kidney," I said as I reached for my side even though it no longer hurt. In fact, I couldn't even feel my contractions anymore.

"Stefan, if you'd sit beside Kyle and hold his hand, we'll get your baby delivered. Miles will take the baby and see to his care directly after the birth while I help Kyle recover."

"Sure," Stefan said. "Just let me get a chair."

"All taken care of," Constantine said. Stefan glanced behind him, then bent and pulled a chair closer. Immediately,

he took my hand and held it in both of his. I gave a squeeze, my breathing becoming heavy. I was definitely nervous.

“All right, Kyle. I’m going to start now. Just try to relax,” Constantine said. I looked up at the doctor with wide eyes.

“Please don’t let our baby die,” I told him. I was suddenly terrified that our baby wasn’t going to make it.

“He and you are both going to be fine. His legs are just too spread for you to deliver him. I have to open your omega line more and deliver him one leg at a time,” Constantine said, his voice steady and sure. “How about a little bit of help to relax?”

I nodded quickly, my breaths coming even quicker now. There was a tiny green ball that started floating toward me and then landed on my forehead. It disappeared, and almost instantly, there was a calmness that overcame me. I looked to Stefan and grinned.

“What did you do to my beloved?” Stefan asked, glaring up at the doctor again.

“Nothing that will harm him or the baby. I just relaxed him a little. He’s...well, somewhat drowsy. He’s calm now, and his stomach is no longer tight, and his breathing is evening out.” Constantine looked over to his One, and I could tell they were communicating through their bond.

“I’m fine,” I said to Stefan. “Tired, but I do feel so much calmer feeling.”

Stefan’s face relaxed. “I only wish for you to be all right,” he whispered close to me. He kissed my forehead this time, and I gave his hand another squeeze. I felt my body moving a little, but that was it.

“First leg is out,” Constantine said to the room. There was more moving of my body and then quiet talking between Constantine and Miles. “Second leg,” he said a moment later. I felt my body wiggle one last time, and then Miles gasped, and I wanted to glance down, but I couldn’t take my eyes off Stefan. I stared intently at him, waiting. The room was filled with silence until it wasn’t.

That first gasp and then loud wail was all I'd been waiting to hear. My eyes suddenly filled with tears, and I couldn't hold back if I tried. Our son was here, and he was breathing.

"Shh...it's all right, sweetheart. He looks as if he's fine," Stefan whispered near my ear. He was once again running his fingers through my hair and kissing me softly.

"Here he is, daddies," Miles said, bringing the baby around to us to see. Our little guy was still fussing but was wearing a diaper and a blue onesie and hat. "Let me get his measurements, and then I'll wrap him up for you."

"Thank you," Stefan said. He leaned down and kissed me again. "See?" he said to me. "He's fine. He has quite a set of lungs on him, and in no time, you'll be holding him."

I swiped at my eyes, not even trying to hold the tears back. I, of course, had been concerned that something could go wrong, but our little one had been so active. Then to realize that he was upside down and spread out, I felt like I'd done something wrong because he couldn't be delivered easily.

"You did great," Stefan told me. I just nodded. I'd not done anything, really.

"All right, back," Miles said to us. After Stefan sat up, he carefully handed our son to him.

"Shouldn't Kyle hold him first?"

"No, Kyle needs to be healed up still. You can bring him down to him though. You two have a chunky little guy. He's only seventeen inches tall, or long, I guess. He's also a nice size at nine pounds and seven ounces."

"Are vampire babies normally that short?" I asked. It wasn't unheard of for fae, but our little one was a vampire. He would be tall and slender, wouldn't he?

"Heights change all the time," Miles told us. "I wouldn't worry about it right now or ever, really. He'll hit a growth spurt or two before he's finished growing."

He wasn't wrong. Miles left us to meet our son and then went to help his mate. My heart melted at the sight of Stefan

holding the baby. He looked amazing holding a baby. Specifically ours.

“He’s precious, Kyle,” Stefan said. He leaned down again, holding the baby close to me so I could get a good look at him. I reached out and pulled at the hat a little. He had dark hair. Stefan’s hair, then.

“His eyes are blue, and his hair is dark,” I said.

“Yes, but either could change,” Miles said from the foot of the bed where he was.

“He’s gorgeous, Kyle,” Stefan told me again.

“I mean, look at his daddy,” I said, winking at my mate.

“Not to interrupt, but I’m finished here, Kyle,” Constantine told me. “I’ve left the blocker on for a little longer than normal. It’ll wear off in a few hours to give the sides that I had to cut time to heal.”

“Thank you,” I told him.

“It’s my pleasure,” Constantine said. “I’ll be here for a while. Until you are up and walking, at least.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Yes, thank you so much,” Stefan added. “Can he sit up? Even a little?”

Constantine nodded. “Of course. No walking until the feeling in his legs comes back completely. Miles and I will be here if you need either of us.”

Miles was beside Stefan a second later. He took the baby, and when indicated, Stefan helped me sit so pillows could be placed behind me.

They made sure I was comfortable, and then the doctor and his One left the bedroom. Stefan was cooing at the baby, and I couldn’t wait until I could hold him. I didn’t have to wait long. Stefan slowly handed the baby to me, and once I had him secure in my arms, I immediately pulled him close and held him.

“Hello, baby Kieran,” I said. Stefan looked at me while I stared at him, shocked.

“Kieran?”

“No? It was on the list. He just seemed like a Kieran to me.”

I kissed the hat again.

“We can go with Kieran. I was thinking Alex or Jaxon.”

“Oh, Jaxon. I love that name,” I said. I glanced down at the baby, and I just couldn’t see it. I looked back to Stefan, who seemed to realize it the same time I had.

“No. Kieran,” Stefan told me. “We can see if Jaxon fits with the next one for a name.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be.” Stefan came around the bed and crawled in beside me. He wrapped an arm around my shoulders and kissed my temple. “I like the name Kieran. It fits with him, and you’re right. It just calls out and says that’s his name.” Stefan sighed. “I can’t describe it any other way.”

I understood that. “Thank you,” I told him.

“I’m not sure what for, but you’re welcome.”

I sighed again and closed my eyes. “For loving me. For everything you do for me simply because you love me and it’s the right thing to do.”

Stefan kissed my temple again. “Sweetheart, loving you is the easiest thing I’ve ever done. I’m looking forward to loving you for a very, very long time.”

I fell in love even more then. I wasn’t sure how it was possible, but I did. I grinned at baby Kieran, who was now sleeping in my arms. I was a father now. I sent a thought out to my family back in the fae realm, wondering if they thought about me. Tyler and Danny’s second baby would have been born already. And now I’d given birth to my own little one. I sighed and let Stefan hold me.

“I love you,” I said. I felt another gentle kiss in my hair as I let the drowsiness overtake me. A little nap would be all right, wouldn’t it? It didn’t matter; I couldn’t really fight it.

I felt the baby being gently removed from my arms, and that was the last coherent thought. That and I was incredibly lucky to be gifted such an amazing mate. He loved me, and now we had a son to show for that love. My life truly was amazing.

CAN’T GET ENOUGH of that fae magic? Don’t worry, there’s double the magic coming next in [Connor!](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thank you for spending time with Stefan and Kyle. I hope you enjoyed their little novella. You'll get a glimpse of them here and there again in future stories. They will make appearances in future Council Enforcer as well as Destined Paranormals series book! I can't say thank you enough for all of your continued love and support. I truly couldn't do this without you.

xx

Taylor

Stay up to date by visiting my webpage

www.taylorrylan.com

[Join Taylor's newsletter](#)

[Taylor's Troublemakers Facebook Group](#)



ALSO BY TAYLOR RYLAN

Paranormal Mpreg

Honey Creek Den Series

War's Mate

Troy's Warlock

Ryker's Enchantment

Grayson's Enlightenment

Gage's Serenity

Jules's Sanctuary

Timber Valley Wolf Pack Series

Forest's Hope

Sterling's Treasure

Alistair's One

Tucker's Trouble

Jude's Whisper

Canyon's Choice

Warlocks of Amherst Series

Cornelius

Balthazar

Constantine

Grantham

Fenwick

Edison

Vampires of the Beloved Gem Series

Diego's Heart

Giovanni's Jackpot

Fergus's Hurricane

Matteo's Whirlwind

Nikolai's Beloved

Paranormal Council Enforcers Series

Ambrosius

Atticus

Reinhold

Garc

Everett

Benjamin

Raiden
Parker
Ramsey
Castiel

Destined Paranormals Series

Aleric
Monroe
Calum
Stefan
Connor
Knox

Contemporary

Men of Crooked Bend Series

My Forever, My Always
My Choice, My Chance
My Survivor, My Savior
My Truth, My Future
My Love, My Valentine
My Heart, My Home
My Christmas, My Crooked Bend
Logan's Loves
Jacob's Joy
Simon's Surprise
Rhett's Gift

Sulfur Springs Series

Protecting My Commitment
Rescuing My Angel
Saving My Sanity
Surrendering My Affection
Disarming My Destiny
Healing My Amor
Wrangling My Heart
Accepting My Desire
Love My Sulfur Springs

Broken Arrow Ranch Series

Gabriel
Kitt