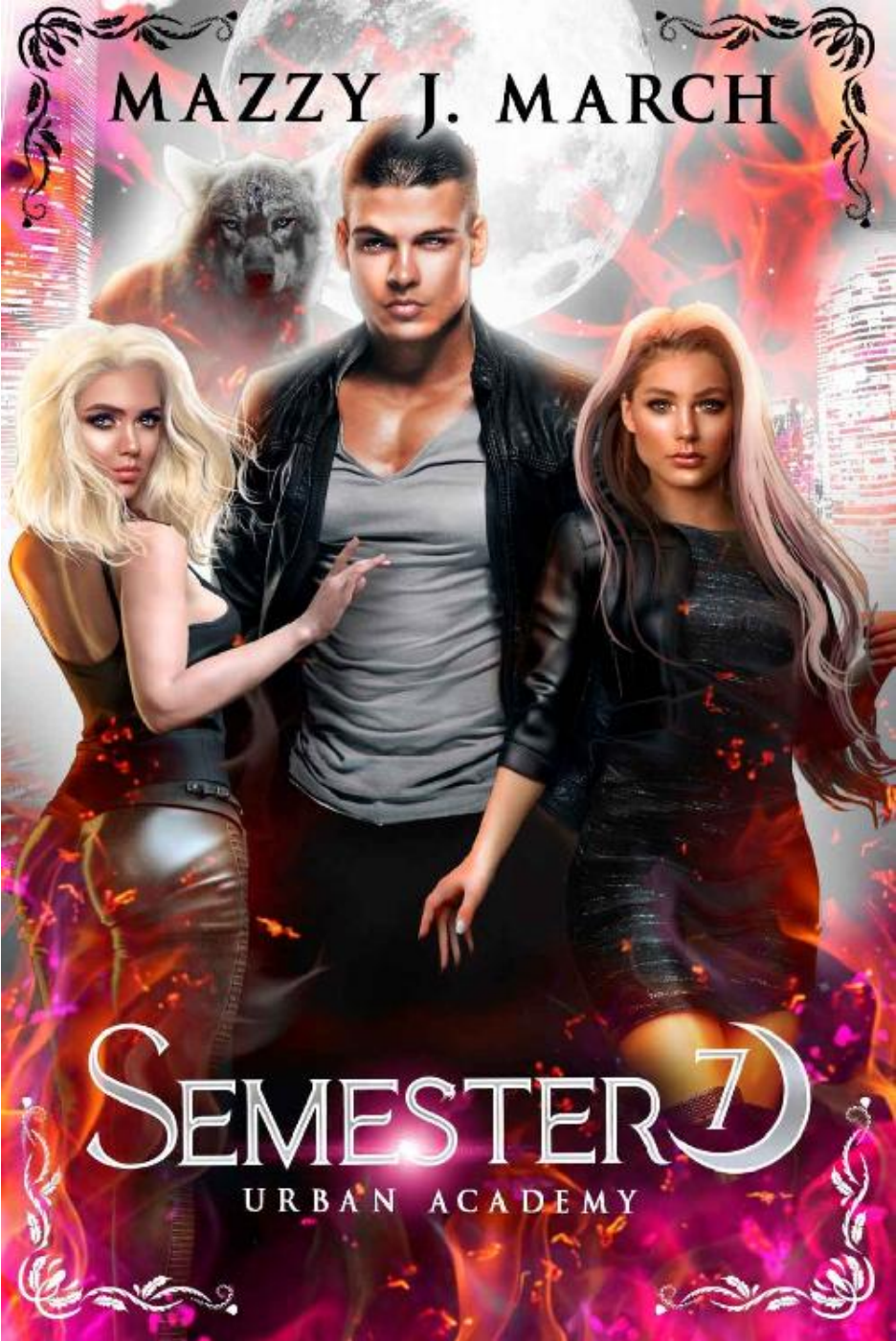




MAZZY J. MARCH

SEMESTER 7

URBAN ACADEMY



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Semester 7

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Onyx

Why is three so much harder to wrap my head around than two? Valentina has no problem with four, but it's a very different kind of relationship than this would be, and there is the distraction of dear Daddy trying to kill my cousin and me and steal the powers bestowed upon us by our ancestor Circe. It's a real buzzkill.

Raven

They are my mates. Asher, the black wolf shifter who saved my life, and Onyx, the gorgeous bartender who makes my heart beat faster. My wolf recognizes them both as mates, but it's two steps forward and three steps back. Maybe after we fight the next battle and save the world, we can take this to bed and see what happens.

Asher

They are my mates. They just need to realize it because my wolf is getting impatient. I think they are waiting until the dust settles with all of this evil Dean business but the truth is, I want them now. If we wait until the circumstances are perfect, the three of us are going to spend our lives miserable and alone.

Urban Academy Semester 7 is the seventh story in the Urban Academy series by bestselling author Mazzy J. March. The

first books follow the story of Valentina's new life in the city at The Academy where she learns that the world is much broader and more varied than she ever dreamed and sometimes a human girl's fate may twine with that of another kind of being. Or three. In book 7, we bring some focus on Valentina's friend Raven and cousin Onyx and the male wolf that fought at their sides as well as building toward the final battle with Uncle Dean and his vampires and dragons and other creatures of the darkness.

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Urban Academy Semester 7

By

Mazzy J. March

Chapter One

Asher

Sometimes the best way to get a fresh perspective on things was to find a third party, someone removed from the situation. There was no one in my life more removed from Urban Academy, and unfortunately me, than my twin brother.

“Blaze,” I said, when he answered. We texted all the time but video-chatted on Saturday mornings. A proof of life, so to speak, but I wasn’t seeing his face. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Oh. Had the camera the wrong way. I’m running for coffee. I thought you were going to call earlier. I waited and then decided to run for coffee and...never mind. How are things?”

“You hate coffee,” I replied quickly. If my brother was getting coffee, it was because he needed it. He hated all things with that flavor and even groaned in the mornings when we were still at home and coffee was brewing.

“Yeah, but I need it. Had a late night last night.”

“Studying? Cleaning your room? Wait, no, let me guess—volunteer work.”

He held up the cup. It was large. Damn, the night before must’ve really caught up with him. “Sure. Let’s say that. My grades are fine. That’s all that matters.”

“Is it?”

He huffed out a laugh and, for a second, I caught a flash of the angry Blaze as his eyes flashed golden. The one who was mad at the world and everyone in it—except me. “It’s going to have to be enough. You didn’t answer my question. How are things? You look tired.”

“Is that your way of telling me I look like shit?” I asked, laughing.

“Kind of. Now, stop beating around the bush and tell me what’s on your mind. That line in your forehead is deeper than ever. Spill your guts, Brother.”

“I found my mates,” I blurted. I hadn’t really spoken to anyone about it until now, and saying it out loud to someone I trusted felt good.

“Mates. Plural. Our moms are gonna love that. Dad, too. But why does that sound like a problem, Ash? You certainly don’t look happy about it. I’m the miserable twin, remember?”

I blew out a breath and lay back on the floor. “Well, they aren’t really...”

“What? They don’t like you? I mean, you’re no me, but you’re okay.”

“Shut up,” I barked, joking and not at the same time. “It’s like they are blocked from just letting go and letting it happen—on defense against happiness or some shit.”

“Maybe their families are the straightlaced type? More than one mate is frowned upon? What’s holding them back? Do you even know?”

I wished I did. Whatever it was, I would fix it for them. Raven and Onyx had become an obsession to not only me but

to my wolf. The three of us always seemed to take three steps forward and two back—or eight, which was what it felt like now.

Raven and I had kissed, but our throuple had to all come together—puns intended—or our mating would never be complete. Plus, that was the way my wolf knew it was supposed to be—all or nothing. The last thing I wanted with Onyx and Raven was nothing.

Fate had spoken, and we were losing time.

Yeah, there was the threat of Onyx's father and all of that war-and-battles business, but if we waited until all the planets lined up and the stars were in perfect formation, well, we might not ever be mated.

“Asher?”

“What?” I asked, shaking myself out of my thoughts.

“You've got to do something. If they're scared, you've got to make them feel safe. If our moms and dad are any example, it's that they are safe in their mating. Mating should feel like coming home, right?”

I laughed. “Are you sure you belong in the Rejects Academy? 'Cause that was kind of genius.”

He flipped me off. Nothing new. “I'm not here because I'm a dummy. I'm here because my wolf is feral and a slave to his whims and anger.”

“I thought that was you, not your wolf.”

He chuckled and took a long swig of the coffee only to nearly gag. “Oh, is that strong. Anyway, one and the same,

Ash. One in the same. Look, I've got to go. Text me a picture of your mates. I need to see what my sisters-in-law look like. Maybe they have sisters who like a bad boy."

"I'm hanging up."

While I pressed the end button, my brother was laughing. The only picture I had of my mates was in my mind.

But, Blaze was right. I had to do something. They were scared to take a risk.

Maybe it was time I took it for all three of us.

Chapter Two

Raven

Things were changing. Unlike Valentina, I had never had to be concerned about money. Not that I came from billionaires or anything, but my parents were comfortable and considered educating their children a priority. Therefore, we were provided with not only tuition and books and other school necessities but also “pocket money” that more than met any needs or wants I might have. I wasn’t sure about my siblings, some of whom had more expensive taste than me. But what I did know was that I always had a healthy balance when I went to buy snacks or clothing or just about anything else.

Until today.

When my debit card didn’t work at the coffeehouse.

“I’m so sorry,” I mumbled, digging in the bottom of my purse for change and glad I’d only had a coffee and not the piece of cake that had been calling my name. “I’m sure I have enough here. I can’t imagine what happened that my card isn’t working.”

“It’s okay, hun.” Betsy stopped chewing her gum long enough to cast me a sympathetic smile. “Happens to everyone, especially students. I’ll cover it.”

Since I’d only found a quarter, a mint, and one of those little packets that keeps things dry, I had no choice but to accept her generosity. “That’s very nice of you. I’ll go straighten it out and pay you back. It’s so weird.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re a good customer and a great tipper so I don’t mind. I’ll just take this away.” She whisked the check off the table and turned to go. “Hope everything works out.”

Yeah, I did, too. Glancing around to see who had witnessed my humiliation, I thought I was clear. Until I spotted a gossipy fellow student, Angela, whom I didn’t know well but who managed to irritate me by breathing, smirking into her cappuccino. Awesome. She and her clique would blab it around school that I stiffed the coffeehouse and no doubt make it much worse than it was. Not that I cared. But I didn’t need to hear it.

Determined to straighten this out immediately, I headed for the bank instead of my first class.

The bank teller listened to what I had to say, took my card, and excused herself to find someone to help me. She returned and pointed to one of the desks lining the walls. “Have a seat and Mr. Harlen will be right with you.”

Oh hell. Probably fraud on the card, and a new one would have to be issued. Why hadn’t I thought of that before? I gave the teller a nod and marched over to sit down. I would need a new password, wouldn’t I? Or did they just give out a new card and the password stayed the same? Perhaps it depended on whether they thought the miscreant had the code or not?

“Raven?” The man’s deep voice made me jump. “I apologize.” Mr. Harlen, I presumed, sat opposite me behind the desk. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“That’s all right. I just need to straighten out whatever happened to my debit card. I presume it got hacked?”

His gaze darted away from mine, the first clue there was something more wrong, but even when I left the bank a few minutes later, I didn’t have the full picture. I did know my account was closed. By my parents. I had no money at all beyond that quarter and any other bits I might find in my room. I never used cash, so I had low expectations for what I might be able to put together. But there had to be a good explanation. Perhaps they’d decided to change banks again. It wasn’t something that had affected my personal funds though, just the main investment accounts, so far as I knew. I’d actually asked the bank officer, but he said he could not discuss any accounts with me that I was not a signer on.

I stopped on the sidewalk outside and fished my phone out of my purse. A text to my mother wasn’t immediately replied to, but that didn’t surprise me particularly. She was a busy person with all her socializing and volunteering and actually wasn’t a fan of texts. But I wasn’t going to have a full conversation about this on the public street where Angela or one of her friends might overhear. I wasn’t sure how they always knew everyone’s business, but they sure seemed to. And ordinarily I didn’t care about gossip, but I did value my privacy.

I was just climbing the steps to the front door of the academy when my phone buzzed with a notification. Finally, Mother was replying. I paused to read the screen.

A car has been sent to bring you to the lake house. No need to pack. You will be back at school this evening.

Considering the lake house was two hours away, it wasn't exactly where I'd be going just for an afternoon, but before I could put much thought into it, I heard the low rumble of the luxury sedan behind me. Turning on a heel, I marched back down the stairs and to where the driver already stood beside the open door.

Once ensconced in the back seat, I settled back and began to worry in earnest. If my parents had simply changed banks, which they had before and this time decided to take my little money along with it. They could be asking me to come to get my new debit card and for a minor check-in.

But I didn't think so. They would be seeing me in a few weeks for an academy family weekend. Unless something was wrong, they'd be content to wait for that. A chance to speak with my professors and be sure I was not doing anything to shame the family.

The road wound through green forested hills, but I was too concerned about this meeting to appreciate the beauty, even when the blue lake water appeared between the trees as we started down the final slope into the valley. I hadn't been summoned home ever, unlike a couple of my brothers whose mischief during their years at the academy were still spoken of in hushed tones.

But I couldn't think of anything I had done. My grades were good. I'd not so much as been in trouble for talking back to a professor. Not because I agreed with them on everything but because I couldn't be bothered. Had they heard about the battle with Onyx and Valentina's relatives?

Possibly...but that was some time back, and surely I'd have heard from my parents sooner if they were concerned. As the car came to a halt and the driver moved around to open my door, I returned to the thought that they wanted to discuss finances in some way.

Then I entered the lake house, saw my parents sitting in their favorite most throne-like chairs and glaring at me, and I knew it was more.

I had no chance to sit down before my mother launched into her version of a tirade. Not that she raised her voice or stood up or otherwise did anything recognizable to the average shifter.

“What is this we hear about you and some barmaid?”

I reeled. Of all my thoughts of what this meeting might be about, Onyx was not it. And we hadn't...we weren't...

“We are not the kind of pack that dates local trash. And she's not even a wolf!” It went on for nearly two hours while Father sat and I stood, both silent and waiting for her to finish. She never even asked if I was doing as she thought. I could have told her the truth, that while I was very drawn to both the progeny of Circe and Asher—whom she probably would have been a lot happier about—I had not mated with either. Why bother protesting? She'd already made up her mind.

Finally she said, “And you are cut off until you remember who you are, who we are, and end this nonsense.”

Cut off. From pocket money or everything?

“And my tuition?” Because there was no point in going back to school if I had no place there.

“It’s already paid for this semester. Unfortunately. If you have not seen the light by the end of that time, you’ll have to figure things out for yourself.”

Disgusted with Father for not backing me up or at least giving me the benefit of the doubt, I still approached him and pressed a kiss to his cheek. She made him at least as miserable as me, and, because I knew it would make his life much worse if I didn’t, I kissed Mother’s cheek as well. One does what one must.

Which was why I would seek out work as soon as I got back to town. Both for my pocket and for the next semester’s tuition. I’d come too far to give up without completing my education.

And Asher and Onyx? They were always on my mind.

Chapter Three

Onyx

With so little knowledge of my past and the people who came before me, I felt adrift. My father no longer in my circle, I couldn't even ask him for information that could help me navigate forward in my life. Asher and Raven were not part of this cursed line and were perfect for one another. They came from packs well-known among the wolves, nearly royalty. Both of them. And while my ancestress was some sort of goddess, I didn't know what that meant to the wolves or, for that matter, to anyone.

Although I had more experience with being who I was than my cousin Valentina, I just didn't have the information I needed to survive Father's war against Valentina and me. But why did he think our death would send our powers into him?

When I arrived at work that evening and saw Valentina behind the bar, I wondered if she'd have any ideas about how we could learn more and maybe end this once and for all. She finished pouring a tray of triple-layered drinks for a group of pixies. Purple, pink, and foamy brilliant-yellow topper—a brand new recipe V had developed all on her own. And judging from the applause when the server arrived at the table, a huge hit.

"Looks like they love it." I joined V behind the bar.
"What are you calling it?"

"I don't know. I just went over there and told them I had something new in pretty colors and they all wanted to try."

Leaning to see past an ogre taking up two stools, she said, “They’re still drinking...that’s good, right?”

“Pixies? You were daring to even suggest it to them. Sure, they like colorful drinks, but they’ve sent so many back that Jo has threatened to not let them in at all.”

“Really? I guess I haven’t seen too many here. I just thought of them because the drinks almost match some of their dresses.”

The server, Genie, was back at the bar with empties. “They want more.”

“Show me how to make them, V.” I laid out a row of glasses. “You get off in a couple of hours, and I have a feeling everyone is going to want them.”

“Not the vamps.” Genie grinned at us. “But almost everyone.”

We made them until we ran out of the ingredients and had to swear we’d replenish our stock by the next night before people settled down and went back to their usual. “You didn’t get to leave.” I rinsed out a blender used strictly for deep-red frozen drinks favored by our vampire customers. V preferred not to know what the drink base was made from. “Your mates are going to be upset.”

She pointed to a booth in the front corner. “Not so much. They’re here and seem to be having fun.”

With everyone served for the moment, she leaned on the bartop. “I just want to breathe a minute. How are you doing? I don’t think I even got to say hi.”

“Doing okay. But I’ve been thinking a lot about our ancestry and how we can use it to survive our battle with my father.”

She stood straight again and stretched out her back. “And what did you come up with?”

“Not a lot. I can’t figure out who can tell us more than we already know. Your sister doesn’t have any information, right?”

“No. She lives a pretty ordinary human life, and I would rather she got to continue that. With the new baby, she’d freak if she had the least clue what we’ve been through. I was amazed how well she took me having three mates or ‘boyfriends’ as she and my brother-in-law refer to them.”

“We got very lucky in that last battle, and my father will be ready for what he’s already seen us do.”

“You haven’t called him your father for a while.” Val moved away to fill some beer mugs and then came back. “Feeling forgiving?”

“No, but he is who he is and it actually makes me madder to remind myself of that fact. Any ideas on what we can do to gain more knowledge?”

“Maybe Netflix will do a series on Circe.” Despite the joking words, her expression held nothing but bitterness. “Seriously, I might have an idea. The academy has a huge library that holds more than just shifter history. There are some pretty ancient books tucked away in there on a variety of paranormal topics. I can’t swear our great-great-great, etc.

goddess mother has a section, but maybe there's something. It can't hurt to try, right?"

I opened my mouth to protest then snapped it shut. What could it hurt? "Do you think they'll give me access to the library?"

"We can ask...or even better, you can just stroll in with me and we can ask forgiveness later. I don't think it would be a no, but why take a chance? Especially since we're going to want to seek out the old and valuable books and documents."

"I would very much like to do that. My father claims that if all the females in the line are dead, the powers may transfer to the male."

"Do you know why he thinks that?" V looked as startled as I'd felt when I recognized what this meant. "And what about my sister and the baby and any further children?"

"That's why we need to learn more."

Chapter Four

Asher

“Asher, I’m not trying to be an ass but...” Bishop clapped me on the shoulder—hard.

“Don’t listen to him. He’s always an ass,” Storm interrupted with a chuckle. I’d heard of harems where the men were enemies and some where they were all friends. Clearly, Valentina’s harem was a case of the latter. Bishop, Storm, and Fox moved like their own pack, even when Valentina wasn’t around. I was happy for them but, at the same time, they only served as a reminder of what was missing from my life.

“Okay,” I drawled. “You’re not trying to be an ass, but what, Bishop?” I stopped in my tracks, my stomach reminding me of my goal before they caught up to me. I was starving, as usual. Every night, for the last few weeks, I had run my wolf into the ground. This whole mates thing was tough on him. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. You were supposed to meet your mate, have an instant connection, and then give into that connection, fully and completely because Fate knew what she was doing.

Clearly, my mates didn’t get that memo.

In the meantime, I did what I had to, trying not only to quell his need but to shut him up for a while. Of course, when my wolf stopped, my human mind began—replaying every encounter I’d had with my mates and examining them, dissecting them until reality blurred and I fell asleep or the alarm went off. Lately, I’d only gotten a few winks, and my

body was making up for it by eating everything in sight. Energy was energy after all.

“You look like shit, dude. Have you even slept in the last decade? What’s going on?” Bishop—so eloquent.

“First of all, fuck you. Second of all...well, there’s a mates’ situation. It’s hard to sleep. Wolf is unruly, and my brain isn’t giving me any breaks, either. I’m living off carbs, coffee, and adrenaline, and not necessarily in that order.”

Fox scrunched up his nose. “I think we’ve all been there, Ash. So, what’s the plan?”

I huffed out a humorless laugh. “I don’t know. I need to do something, or else we’re going to be geriatric and still not mated. It’s driving me nuts. Both of them are holding me and each other at a distance. I’m just not sure why. If I had my way, we’d have happily mated weeks ago.”

The four of us ended up having lunch together and discussing my girl trouble during the meal. We ruled out gifts because my females weren’t really the diamonds and rubies kind. I was sure that roses would wilt in both of their presences. They were both so tough and capable—it would take something unique and purposeful to get their attention.

Storm checked his phone and cursed under his breath. “Time for class. I’ve got finance with Fox.”

Bishop grumbled about his literature class but claimed he was only taking it for Valentina. She loved when Fox read to her, and he wanted to share that connection with her as well.

“I’ve got defense,” I said, picking up my tray.

“Holy shit. That’s it, Asher. Your girls are tough and like to take care of themselves. Why not teach them your skills?”

“My skills?” I asked, feeling like a parrot.

“You won some archery championships, right? You’ve got some trophies if I remember correctly.”

We walked out of the cafeteria after returning our trays. “You want me to teach my mates how to shoot arrows with a bow? When they aren’t that fond of me? Why does that trigger my sense of self-preservation?” I laughed.

Bishop chuckled. “Hey, man, they are your mates. They’re not going to hit you with an arrow just because the timing has been off on your mating. It will happen. Try it. You might impress them.”

“Okay. Thanks, guys. I won’t keep you any longer.”

Storm rolled his eyes. “Oh yeah, it’s such a pain to talk to you when we could be in class.”

“Well, that’s true but now it’s different.” I pointed to someone behind them. “I’m keeping you from her.” I had seen Valentina over their shoulders as we spoke outside the dining hall. She had her arms crossed over her chest and her hip was cocked. A smile played at her lips.

All three of them turned around, and I was instantly forgotten, and rightfully so.

When Onyx and/or Raven was around, there was no one else in the world. My eyes only saw them.

Raven wasn’t an easy person to find, though, and Onyx was even more elusive. I had their phone numbers, but that

seemed so impersonal. Still, I hadn't seen them and I wanted to see if this would work.

And going to the bar was like banging my head against a wall. Onyx and Raven were usually there, but conversations were more like shouting matches. Still, I had only so many options when the both of them were making the space between us so expansive.

So, I texted.

Our first group text.

I wished it was something good. Like a morning-after text or maybe a naughty one. Maybe just to tell them both how beautiful they were. Or how much I missed them. I looked forward to those texts.

If they wouldn't put themselves out there, I would.

After all, there was no pride in mating.

I held my breath and sent the message before shoving my phone back into my pocket.

If this didn't work, I was back at square one. Square one sucked ass.

Chapter Five

Raven

No one texted me except my parents and sometimes Valentina. My mom and dad weren't really on team Raven at the moment, particularly Mom, so when my phone buzzed with a new message in the middle of class, I thought for sure it was one of those spammy texts or maybe a wrong number.

I was wrong.

Asher had texted, not only me but Onyx and me at the same time, which felt dirtier than it actually was.

I read the message and paused for a moment, looking around, certain I was being pranked somehow.

Archery? He wanted us to come to an archery lesson? With pointy arrows and a bow as a propellant to said pointy arrow?

The man had a death wish. I was once banned from taekwon do classes because I kicked a fellow student in the nuts when he got smart with me.

I was seven.

I scrubbed my hand down my face and put my phone facedown on the desk.

"Is there a problem, Raven? Something you don't agree with?" the professor asked, prompting the entire class to turn and face me. Gods, I was in a constant nightmare lately.

"No. Everything is fine."

The woman squinted at me, looking over the top of her glasses. “I see. Let’s move on.”

Angela’s gaze lingered a little longer than necessary, and I didn’t miss the fact that she eyed my phone. She was probably making up scenarios and stories about what secrets I held. Lately, there were more than I cared for.

Like my wolf had confirmed that Asher and Onyx were my mates.

Asher was on board, but Onyx was a wild card in life and in love. Her part in our throuple was giving me whiplash.

Once Angela had moved on, I responded to Asher. I was in. If I could shoot an arrow at Onyx’s father, maybe right in the eyeball or the other balls, perhaps this shadow over our lives would be gone.

Asher replied to my text. *See you there.*

For the rest of the day, no attention was paid in any of my classes, not that I was all that interested anyway. There were too many things in play in my life, things that were in the hands of others.

I hated when my life teetered on other people’s actions. I felt out of control—riding in a car with no steering wheel.

If I had my way, Onyx, Asher, and I would get over ourselves and whatever hang-ups we had and get to being happy. My parents would forget their qualms about who I mated and bring back my allowance. Onyx’s father would dig a hole and bury himself, never to be thought of again.

Those things clearly weren’t happening today or anytime soon.

But I could go spend time with Asher. At least there was that.

Another text came through and to my surprise, it was Onyx. Her answer was simple. *I'm in.*

I laughed a bit, leaving my last class and heading back to my dorm room to change. Onyx had avoided me and from what I knew, Asher for the last few weeks. And now, with the hope of violence and learning a new skill, she was suddenly all in.

If only our mating could be that easy.

Maybe I should text them a suggestion. *Hey, let's put down the shields and mate already. All three of us.*

I shuddered just thinking about the prospect.

And then cringed, knowing that what I wanted, what my wolf wanted and knew was her fate, would mean losing my family. Because taking away my allowance and not paying for school was the threat, but the real insinuation was that my place in our family was only secure if I was living the life they wanted me to live—and that included choosing a mate they approved of.

I sat on my bed to tie my sneakers after putting on a pair of black shorts and a black tank top.

They were worth losing my family over. First of all, what kind of family pushed you out because of your mates? Second, did I want to even be in a family that acted like a bunch of snobs?

No. That wasn't who I was.

And living my life without my mates seemed like more of a prison sentence than being shunned by my parents ever could.

They were already embedded inside me. We were bonded though we were physically not.

My parents thought by taking away my money and not paying for school that they had the upper hand. They had no idea that their actions were only driving me right into my mates' arms. Their embrace was the only place I would ever feel whole.

My parents had forgotten what it meant to be mated. They were so busy all the time. I couldn't remember ever seeing them go on a date just to enjoy one another's company—only fundraisers and business trips.

They didn't even kiss or hug each other in the morning on their way out of the house.

Perhaps they forgot what a mate meant in your life and to your animal, especially to a wolf.

Asher and Onyx were my pack.

And I wouldn't give them up, even if that meant quitting school or getting a few jobs.

Chapter Six

Onyx

Asher's text came as a surprise. We three had been dancing around one another so long, I wouldn't have blamed him if he just focused on Raven or maybe neither of us. He was handsome, athletic, smart and, as we'd witnessed in the battle, brave. What she-wolf wouldn't want him.

Oh, I understood the mates thing was important to shifters, but I also knew couples who came in here all the time and, although not fateds, they seemed perfectly happy. Neither Raven nor I offered Asher anything so far but frustration and a need to be rescued. Maybe that did appeal to him? Not a chance. If I wasn't acquainted with V and her mates, I'd have doubted that wolves would want anyone like us. We weren't even shifters.

Raven, well despite her prickly attitude, she was everything anyone would want. Beautiful, smart, feisty, and, like Asher, brave. They were really well suited to one another, and if I had the least bit of honor, I'd step back and let wolf nature take its course. Instead, I accepted the invitation to take archery lessons from Asher, along with Raven. He phrased it as an invitation to a workshop of sorts, but in fact, it would be a date. How could it be anything else?

However, his choice to ask this way made it possible for me to accept without committing to something I wasn't quite ready for. And the fact that I was standing in my closet trying to decide what to wear in the girliest fashion possible was

messing with my mind. I'd never been the type who cared about clothes. I had more fun with the makeup illusions I'd learned how to do when I was too young to wear the real thing and my father...

Hell, my father.

As if I'd summoned him with the memory of being a teen who wasn't allowed to wear mascara, my phone rang and the number I'd blocked showed on the screen. When dealing with my father, there was no such thing as blocking, I supposed.

Tempted to let it ring, I was also smart enough to know he wouldn't give up easily. If I didn't answer, he'd put it on some kind of magical auto-call until I did. Still...ugh.

"Hello." I might have gone back to referring to him as my father, but I wasn't going to address him as such. "To what do I owe the displeasure?"

"No sweet greeting to your daddy?" He chuckled, and it made me nauseous. "I should be hurt, but I suppose I can't expect better. I'm just calling to see how things are going with your little friends?"

"My friends?" I wasn't going to feed him information. "What are you talking about?"

"I have heard rumors. That big black wolf and that girl? Oh, and of course your cousin and her mates?"

"Why do you care about them? They're barely acquaintances, except for Valentina. But I wouldn't even say I know her well. Just *blood thicker than water* stuff. I don't believe you just called to ask how my friends are. You hate them."

“That’s such a strong word, hate, and I don’t think I’d waste that much emotion on them. I was just making pleasant conversation.”

“Is it over? The pleasant conversation?” If I had to stay on the line much longer, I’d say things that would only exacerbate an already militant relationship. As in, my father was plotting to kill me. And my cousin, possibly her sister as well.

“Yes. The pleasant part is. I just called to tell you to come home and stop the nonsense. If you think I’m going to stand by while you link up with a pair of dogs, you have forgotten who you come from.”

“Wolves,” I gritted out. “They are not dogs, they are wolves, and we are not ‘linked up.’ Not that it’s any of your business. If I want to date giraffes, I will do so without asking your permission.”

“Giraffes I’d be fine with.”

“I hate you. You know that, right?” And I wasn’t even sure why I continued this conversation.

“Of course, but we have to reach some sort of detente if you want your little friends to survive. Your cousin excepted, of course. The fact she’s still breathing is an embarrassment to the family.”

“What are you talking about and why are you calling me at all?” Last time I’d seen him had been a battle nearly to the death between us. “I’m going to hang up now.”

“I wouldn’t.” All the smarmy humor was gone from his tone. “Not until you reassure me that you are not bedding those dogs—”

“Wolves.”

“All right, not bedding the wolves. You come from an ancient line, and we do not engage in bestiality.”

“You know it’s not that. Shifters are people just as much as we are. If I was involved with them, which I am not, there would be nothing wrong with it. Now that you’ve tried to control my dating life—again—I’m hanging up.” My entire existence prior to coming to the city, where he’d sent me to kill my own cousin, flashed before my eyes. “You have no control over anything I do. Not anymore.”

“I’m glad to hear you are not doing anything foolish. It would be a shame if one of your little friends were hurt in any way.”

Now I did disconnect the call. But his threat chilled me. He’d never directly threatened Raven or Asher, even though they’d fought at my side against him. How did he know about them? We weren’t dating or anything.

And maybe we shouldn’t. I was a real danger to anyone I got involved with.

Especially anyone I cared for.

Chapter Seven

Asher

“She canceled.” Raven held up her phone. “No explanation.”

“I didn’t get anything.” She must not have used our group text. “Bummer. I was looking forward to teaching both of you.”

“And I was looking forward to learning from you, but I guess we’d better put it off until another time.”

We were standing in a clearing on the school grounds where I’d set up some targets. Archery was taught there, and I’d been able to access the equipment. Helpful, since I had only my bow and a single quiver of arrows. I needed more than that for our workshop.

“No need to do that.” Despite my disappointment at Onyx’s bailing, I wasn’t totally surprised. “We can go on without her.” And we might have to. In more ways than one. “No reason at all?”

“I asked. She says her father called, and she isn’t in the mood.”

Her father...Dean was an asshole who had tried to decimate the female portion of his family, both Onyx and Valentina. So far as I knew, he’d made no move on her sister, but the South Pacific was very far away, and according to Valentina had no powers of any kind. Neither did her child. I did tend to believe the distance made a difference, at least for

the time being. If she'd been close by, he might have killed her just because.

“Raven, do you know why her father did not kill off Valentina's side of the family years ago?”

A puzzled frown down tilted her lips. “That's a great question. He sent Onyx here to do the deed herself, but it's all extremely confusing. V's parents died in a questionable way, never called anything but an accident though. Did he take out his own sister? And if so, the two girls shouldn't have been a problem for him. Maybe he waited to see if either showed any power?”

“If that's the case, her sister shouldn't be in danger, but since he decided Onyx was also a barrier for him, both she and Valentina are constantly in peril.”

“We hoped we'd shut him down enough after the battle to at least get a break, but that phone call makes me nervous. What did he say to her?”

“She isn't replying anymore. I don't want to push too hard. You know how she can be, or do you?”

“Not as well as you, probably, but I agree. If we try to make her do something she doesn't want to, those walls will go higher and end up with razor wire on top.”

Raven's eyes widened. “Perfect image. I used to think I was prickly and hard to get to until I met her. I did it on purpose, but I believe it's just her innate way of existing. Of course, if I'd grown up in her family with her father and those brothers, I'd probably encase myself in concrete if that's what it took to get away from them.”

“Don’t do that.” I reached out and gave her cheek a swift but tender caress. “You’re much prettier without that kind of outer shell.”

She hadn’t even flinched. But I also didn’t want to make a liar of myself. I’d invited them both to learn archery, something that might be useful in the war we found ourselves in. Not that I could picture a scenario where we’d have bows and arrows at hand, but it never hurt to learn defensive skills.

“So, are we going to do this, then?” She pulled a hair tie out of her pocket and fastened her hair back. “And how is this helpful to us?”

“I am glad you asked. Let’s sit down and I will give you my famous Parts of the Bow 101 lesson.”

“Famous?” Skepticism lit her eyes, but she sank to the ground, landing cross-legged as if by magic. “With whom?”

I shrugged. “A few young people in my pack, so far. But hopefully with you soon.”

“I’m intrigued.” She patted the grass next to her. “Gonna join me?”

“You bet.” I brought over the bow as well as a quiver of arrows and set them down before sitting down with much less grace than Raven had. The sun filtered through the trees at the edge of the clearing, flattering light on my wolf mate. “Be prepared to be impressed.”

“Oh, so impressed already,” she crooned. “So, lecture away, prof. I’m your willing student.”

Biting back all the remarks that brought to mind, I launched into an explanation of the parts of the equipment as

well as how to string the bow and the sometimes more difficult unstringing. She truly was an excellent student, asking pertinent questions and trying out what I showed her.

“There’s a lot more to archery than I thought.” She trailed a finger over the smooth wood. “Is the actual shooting difficult?”

“Yes. It takes a lot of control and focus, but I believe you can master those things.” I stood up and reached for her hand. “But the first thing you need to work on is stance.”

“All right. Care to demonstrate?”

“I could, but what would be the fun in that?” I was riding the line here...but when she flushed and licked her lips, I’d have to be a lot less red-blooded wolf to resist. “Come stand in front of me, and I’ll get you into position.”

“Why do I think you are using this as an excuse to get your hands on me?” Despite her words, she stepped closer to me. “I’ve got my eye on you.”

“Strictly professorial.” I turned her away, palming her hips in the process. “Okay, relax. You’re stiff as a board.”

“Someone else here had better not be,” she grumbled, easing into my hold.

Again...red-blooded wolf. I was stiff whenever either of my mates appeared in my view or, worse, got close enough for their scent to intoxicate me. But I wasn’t foolish enough to say so. “Move that leg back and...” *And I’ll try to remember I’m teaching you a useful skill instead of bringing you back to grind against your sweet, sweet rounded bottom. Try hard.*

Chapter Eight

Onyx

Well, isn't this interesting? I arrived in the clearing to find Asher and Raven a lot cozier than I'd expect an archery lesson to bring them. *Maybe I shouldn't have come.* I hadn't planned on it, had even informed Raven of the fact, but once I set the phone down, an inner voice I'd never noticed before took up a chant that drove me back into the closet. What did a person wear to take an archery lesson? If, she were, indeed, planning to do so. Unlike me who was taking the wiser path and stepping away from Raven and Asher. Neither of them needed the baggage I hauled along with me wherever I went.

A broken family, a psychotic narcissistic father, and the threat of imminent death. If I kept away from them, they'd be safe.

Wouldn't they?

No.

There was that voice again. My subconscious was choosing a fine time to step forward.

Call me what you will, daughter, but know that your mates will not be protected by your leaving them unguarded. That misbegotten male descendent of mine will hunt them to the ends of the earth for taking part in the battle you won.

Okay, it was hard to call someone saying these things my subconscious or conscience or inner voice or something.

Learn to use the bow. It will be needed. As will the mating bond if any of you are to survive.

I was not this creative. Raven and Asher talked about their wolves speaking inside them, but there was a small problem with that in this case. As in, I didn't have a wolf. Nor any other animal. To the best of my knowledge, I had zero shifter blood. Besides, when would a wolf have called their person a daughter? Or said any of the rest of this.

Who are you?

Silence. I knew who I thought it was, but how could that be? I had to be making this happen on my own. Making it up. After all, who wouldn't want a goddess on their side? Maybe I was more creative than I thought? Circe, my many times great-grandmother, was more than human, enough to have passed down some pretty astounding powers to both Valentina and me. Did goddesses die, or were they immortal? I really needed to get into the Urban Academy library and learn more. Since the topic first came up, we'd talked about it more than once, but Valentina was busy with school, work, and mates, and I hadn't made it in there yet.

At least I didn't have any trouble getting onto the campus after I put on a pair of black yoga leggings and a teal-and-gold striped tunic as well as low boots. The outfit had a Robin Hood feel, I thought, and while the tunic was one of the flashiest things in my closet, bought for I didn't know what at a steal, it just suited my rebellious mood.

If I truly believed it would do Asher and Raven good, if it would save them from any further trouble to cut them out of my life, I would. But whatever part of me had arisen from the

depths made sense. Why would Daddy Dearest let them be just because I wasn't involved with them? They'd already crossed the line and would be on his hit list. My best action would be to improve my fighting skills, up to and including the bow, and be prepared to defend them when the next battle—and Circe willing the last one—came.

But the sight of Raven enfolded in Asher's embrace in the fakest "lesson" I could imagine brought doubt to the surface. They were laughing and teasing one another, and in the ten minutes I stood there watching not one arrow flew toward the target. My feelings for them were so strong, I wanted both to fling myself into their arms *and* do the noble thing—leave them to their moment of happiness.

What did I bring to this relationship besides my murderous family? I didn't have money or connections or anything useful. And I'd never be as beautiful as Raven. Or as free. She let nobody tell her how to live or what to do, and, until I came to the city, I was very much under my father's thumb.

Who else but a brainwashed ninny of a daughter would agree to kill her own cousin?

Heart breaking, I turned away from the pair of them. They were better without me, but I would always defend them to the last drop of blood in my body.

"Onyx! You came!" Raven came up behind me and gave me a big hug from the back. "I was just saying I was sorry you hadn't been able to. Come on." She linked her hand with mine and tugged me toward where Asher stood, holding a bow and

watching us warily. Did he think I'd pull free and run away? Or maybe he hoped I would.

But a smile broke out like sunshine from behind clouds and he met us halfway. "I'm glad to see you."

"Your top is beautiful." Raven traced the embroidered neckline. "Perfect for archery. Very Sherwood Forest."

She totally got me. But...

"You two were probably almost done," I insisted. "I just came to say hello. Maybe I can come next time."

"Oh, no." Asher grabbed my other hand. "You're not getting off that easily. We have time and then maybe we can grab a bite after? Unless one of you has plans."

"I'm working up an appetite," Raven asserted. "And Onyx doesn't work tonight."

She knew my schedule? Interesting. And that broke down the last barrier, at least for this afternoon. Asher was a great teacher, showing us everything we'd need to know to be prepared to shoot arrows, and we planned another day's lesson when we'd actually get to try doing it. Before we left, Asher complied with our request to show us his own skills. He hit the bull's eye every time. It was a fun afternoon, and we were just about ready to head out when a shadow darkened the ground in front of us. I tipped my head up to see what caused it, thinking a cloud...but it was not.

Chapter Nine

Raven

“I’ve never been here.” Onyx’s mouth made a perfect O while her brown eyes scanned the place. It wasn’t that fancy. My mother and father wouldn’t have set foot in a place like this, but to those, like us, who ate at the Midnight and the dining hall, it was bougie as could be.

“I haven’t, either,” I muttered, tugging at the hem of my babydoll dress. It wasn’t fancy, but black was really the only color, or lack of color, I wore outside of the academy.

Asher walked around us, his fingers skimming my arm and sending chills up to my shoulder. “Table for three, please. Private, if you don’t mind.” I didn’t miss the handshake where cash was exchanged with the host.

I’d never really asked Asher about his parents or his family. His apartment was modest, and nothing about his belongings screamed rich but then again, I didn’t know a lot about my mates—either of them. I knew their families or what my parents knew of them but them personally, not as much as I would’ve liked.

“I wonder why a dragon shifter was flying around. I mean, it was right there. If the humans had seen it, there would be a dramatic news story about it, but I’m seeing nothing,” Asher prompted as we sat down and were otherwise silent. He had scrolled on his phone for a bit, and now I knew why.

The awkwardness between us needed to stop. We knew what we were to each other and needed to take a chill pill and

let go of the shields we'd all had up since the beginning.

“Are there dragon shifters in the academy?” I asked. I knew that our academy was for wolf shifters but there were exceptions, like Valentina. I knew there was one raven shifter that sat next to me in civics class. I wondered why she didn't go to the Academy of the Ravens, but that was none of my business. I had enough to fret about. Mostly about the two people next to me.

Asher shook his head. His thigh leaned against mine under the table, and neither of us made a move to stop that from happening. I didn't want it to stop happening. Their presence calmed all the demons inside me.

Honestly, if this somehow didn't work out, I didn't know how I would ever be settled again.

“I don't think so. But even if there are dragon shifters, wouldn't they have to go somewhere else to shift? Why fly in broad daylight where they could be spotted?” The wolves had the private areas to shift, but the sky... anyone could see the sky.

Onyx ran her finger in circles along the rim of the wineglass that was filled with water. “Because it was a warning.”

The waitress came to the table before I could ask for clarification, so I placed my order. “Um, I'll have the garlic steak and potatoes, please. No salad.” Gods, I hated salad. I mean, if I wanted that, I would shift into my wolf form and have her go to town on some grass.

The beast inside me always wanted steak.

And I happily agreed.

Asher and Onyx ordered the same.

Finally, we had something in common to build on. That and the fact that Fate had tethered us together in this life.

Steak and Fate. Not a bad combo.

“Onyx?” Asher reached across the table. My gaze fixed on his hand as it moved and took hold of hers. I didn’t breathe again until she did. “You were saying the dragon was a warning? What did you mean by that?”

Onyx didn’t pull free. “I, um, well, since dragon shifters aren’t really a thing around here, in the city...”

It disarmed me to see that part of her, those defenses melting away. Onyx sighed before answering, “It sounds like some crap my father would do. He once told me psychological intimidation was key to winning a war. If he has a dragon in his command, it wouldn’t be shocking to know he sent a warning, especially right over where the three of us were. Dad probably has spies in the school.”

“Do you think? I wonder if he knows that you and V have been sharpening your powers?”

She shrugged one shoulder. So damned sexy. Never had I thought that body part could be something to lure me in, but Onyx’s were drool-worthy. It didn’t help that she always wore an off-shoulder shirt or one of those suddenly back-in-fashion tube tops when she was at the bar. I bet she knew how attractive she was in them. At this point, she was just teasing me.

Teasing us both, apparently. Asher’s heartbeat fluttered.

“Can we change the subject?” Onyx asked. “Especially if we are here to eat? I get queasy when I think about...”

“Of course.” Asher squeezed her hand. “Raven, what’s going on with you?”

Nerves washed through me. These were my mates, and I wanted to share everything with them but, at the same time, were we there yet? I knew it would be amazing to get everything off my chest, especially in the presence of two people who cared about me... “My parents have kind of...they threatened to disown me. They cleared out my bank account and after this semester, I’m on my own.”

“Why?” Onyx asked, sitting up straight as did Asher. This was supposed to be a happy dinner with hopefully all three of us breaking some kind of ground on our relationship, and here I was bringing us all down.

“They aren’t exactly approving of my mate. One of them. They don’t even know about the other.”

There. I said it. Out loud. We are mates.

My audience went dead silent. Our food was set before us but no one moved to eat or speak. I’d broken them.

My mates were broken.

Good job, Raven.

“Parents are the worst,” Onyx said, laughing, breaking the ice that had built up between us.

“Speak for yourself,” Asher said. “My parents are the best. But clearly, both of yours need some lessons. I can’t

imagine doing to my children what your parents are doing to both of you. It's...well, it's disgusting, actually.”

“Your parents are like...good to you?” Onyx asked. Gods, there was desperation in her voice. Parents didn't realize the pain and anguish they heaped onto their children until it was too late. “Having a stable mom and dad must be nice.”

Asher took a bite of his steak and from the tingle-inducing moan that came from him, he must've approved. “My dad and moms, actually. They were polyamorous before that was a word. And yeah, they're amazing.”

Chapter Ten

Asher

While I had only planned on taking my females to dinner, we ended up back at my apartment, talking and watching movies. Raven was a horror movie fan, while Onyx and I liked action. We settled on *Constantine*.

As they walked through my door, leaving for the night, my heart shattered a bit more. We all knew what we needed—each other. We craved the bond that only occurred between mates. The tether that solidified what Fate had crafted so well for our good.

Even though Raven announced we were her mates at the table, they were still just words.

Sex and mating were only a part of having mates and spending your life with someone, but it was certainly a step that had to be taken.

My body and apartment felt hollow without them here. I had soaked up every bit of them while we were together. Onyx was lithe and lean. Her shoulders and neck begged for my mouth to lick and suck her skin there. I wondered what sounds they made when they were needy and wanting more.

There was something about Onyx's eyes that bothered me. When she was speaking, she would pause and look somewhere else. Almost as though she had a glimmer of something haunting her. I wanted to take that from her. Replace it with joy and love, both of which she deserved and had clearly not had enough of in her life.

Yes, her father was a problem, but she wasn't part of that. She hadn't done his bidding, in the end, and she didn't want to.

She was her own person. Strong. Brave. Honorable. And might I add, sexy as hell.

Raven and I could help her forget about who he had tried to make her become and realize who she was. And if that took a lifetime, we would be there to support her through it.

All I wanted was a chance to be her mate. She had let me in tonight—a fraction of what I wanted, but it was more than she ever had.

Raven had blushed at dinner when she spoke of us being her mates.

It was profound to hear her say it even though all of us knew the truth all along.

She'd stopped at her room to change on the way and wore a dress that hugged her curves. It must've been custom made for her. She paired it with heels with straps across her feet. She'd taken them off when she got to my apartment.

At least someone was making themselves at home here.

I wasn't anymore. Not really. My home wasn't these four walls or even where I slept.

It was with Raven and Onyx.

I plopped down on my bed and opened my laptop, fully intending to get some studying done. My parents supported me in all ways, financially being the least of them, but I wanted to support myself and, now, my mates. Onyx loved her job and

because of her attitude and her charisma, she racked up the tips, along with Valentina. They were both the hot topic in the city and the academy, and I didn't see that blowing over anytime soon, especially with a war on the horizon. She did well for herself.

I didn't know where she lived, but she didn't seem to spend much time there. Maybe it was somewhere hidden, where her father couldn't find her.

Or maybe it was a little apartment, lonely and echoey like this one.

Valentina's mates texted me a few minutes after I sat down and asked if I wanted to go to the Midnight and have a drink. I agreed and met them there, although it was Onyx's night off.

"Dude, the archery thing was a good idea, right?" Storm elbowed me after sliding a glass in my direction.

"Yeah. Thanks. We went out to dinner tonight and then they came back to my apartment."

Bishop waggled his eyebrows. "Hell yeah."

"We talked," I quickly corrected him.

Fox chimed in, but his eyes were on his mate who was serving drinks at the bar alongside Josephine. "Talking isn't bad. At least they aren't acting like you don't exist anymore. Or like all three of you are strangers. It's a step, man."

"I know we talked about this before, but I want to give them something. I want to give them something concrete, otherwise, did it even happen?"

All three of my friends groaned. Storm finished his drink, and he and Valentina shared a look. I thought there was a drink order in that look somewhere. Gods, it must've been nice to be in sync with your mate. "Let's put it this way, Ash. Worst-case scenario, they don't accept the gift and you're back at square one."

Square one sounded like me being very cold and very alone.

"We could be wrong," Fox offered. "What are you thinking? Not sure flowers and chocolate would go over well. V would eat that shit up, but Onyx and Raven?"

I already had an idea of what I wanted to buy them. It was cheesy, and there would be no doubt about our connection if they chose to wear them.

Maybe it was just my male brain wanting them to have something I gave them on their body. Proof of life—or proof of mating, maybe.

My testosterone was clearly calling the shots tonight.

"I need another drink," I mumbled, not really speaking to anyone in particular.

The words hadn't been spoken for a second when the new waitress pushed her chest against my arm. "Did I hear someone is thirsty?"

Fox, Storm, and Bishop all turned their heads. The waitress was wearing a tight corset that pushed all of her assets forward. "I could use another drink. Something to relax me."

The woman winked at me. "Coming right up, handsome." My wolf growled inside me. She was too close. Too flirty.

Too...not Onyx and Raven.

I turned back to the guys. “You know what the worst thing in the world is?”

“What?” Bishop asked.

“Being mated but not being mated.”

Chapter Eleven

Raven

Onyx picked up the phone on the first ring and groaned into the speaker. “What?” I must have woken her up. Not the way I wanted to do that, but she did answer.

“It’s Raven. Did I wake you?”

I heard shuffling on her end. “It’s okay, Rave...what’s up?”

Rave? That was new.

“Did you get one, too?” Of course, Asher wouldn’t have gifted me anything without including Onyx. He would be the best at all of this, coming from polyamorous parents. Because none of this would work if anyone felt like a third wheel. It would take effort on all of our parts, but we were fated, so I knew it could happen.

Onyx cleared her throat. “I did. There was a package on my doorstep. Looked like the delivery guy threw it from a distance.” Onyx laughed about it, but my chest tightened. I didn’t know her address but putting together clues from the things she had said, I knew one of my mates didn’t live in the best part of the city. I knew she was more than capable of taking care of herself, but she stayed there in an effort not to be found by her father. And working at the Midnight gave her some safety since Josephine made sure all the supes knew her bar was neutral territory—everyone was safe there.

I hated that she lived in a dangerous place, but telling Onyx what to do or what you'd like her to do was like putting your finger in an outlet—it never turned out well.

“It’s...” I started but didn’t quite find the words to describe what I was looking down at.

“A cuff,” she said, flatly.

I groaned and threw myself backward on the bed. I got mine first thing that morning. The delivery person knocked on the door. I had nearly pissed myself, immediately thinking it was the headmistress or someone telling me I’d screwed up. My nerves were firing all over the place lately. Once I opened the teal bag, I found a box of the same color. Inside that hinged box, a tiny light that shone down on a silver cuff bracelet. On top was a cameo frame with a capital R in the middle. I assumed Onyx’s had an O.

Did Asher buy himself one? Did he really think we were the matching-bracelets type of throuple? And even if we were, these bracelets must’ve cost him a small fortune. We had just last night admitted out loud that we were all mates, or at least nobody denied it when I said the words. “It’s too early for this. I need coffee.”

“You wanna meet me at the coffeehouse? The coffee is strong, but it will wake us up so we can deal with this issue. Damn. You probably have class. We can talk later, babe.”

A silent pause hung between us. She had never called me a name like that. Ever. Hell, I didn’t even think she had it in her to call anyone a pet name. I pressed my fingers to my cheeks, noticing the heat that had blossomed there. Gods, I wanted to hear that from her again. “I don’t, actually. It’s

independent study day for students. Administrative meetings day for the teachers.”

She laughed. “Then aren’t you supposed to be studying and not hanging out with—”

“My mate? Probably, but I’m feeling like breaking all the rules lately. Thirty minutes? At the coffeehouse?”

“See you then. Bring the cuff.”

I dressed in jeans and a black-and-white-striped crop shirt and ran a brush through my hair. I put on a thin layer of mascara and applied some lip gloss. This early, that’s all that was happening.

“Raven,” she called out from one of the booths to the left of the entrance as I walked inside. When I got to the table, I set my teal bag down and she put hers on top. I moved to sit in the seat across from her, but she patted the seat to her right. “Lemme see it,” she said, smiling. There were dark crescents under her eyes. Her voice was hoarse.

We exchanged bags and both gasped as we opened the matching boxes inside. Asher had gone too far. He had scaled the mountain, traversed the top, and then climbed back down to the valley.

“You know where this bag is from, right?” I asked, taking in Onyx’s bracelet. It was different than mine. A chain bracelet with charms on it. A martini glass. A book. The rest were sapphires and one large charm had an O on it. The only thing our gifts had in common was that they were both silver—sterling silver. Not coated, either. Pure—silver.

“I know I’m not country-club shifter but, yeah, I know where this bag is from.” She looked down. “I didn’t mean that. It’s...that thing about your parents is really bugging me. It’s me, right? The one they didn’t approve of? You can tell me.”

I took her hand in mine. “I don’t care about that. I haven’t ever, but I can take care of myself. If they choose to cut me off because of who my mates are, then I’ll find a way to pay for school and everything else. They don’t even know you.”

“And you do?” she asked, the corner of her lips raising in a smile.

“I want to. Asher does, too.”

She bit down on her bottom lip, teasing me. Damn, I wanted to do that for her. To her. “Well, one thing is for sure, if worse comes to worst, we can sell these bracelets and live for a decade off the profits.”

I sat back and groaned while Betsy put coffee on the table, along with plates heaping with enough breakfast foods to feed a shifter army. “I’m not keeping it.”

“Yeah, me, either. I just don’t know how to not accept it without hurting his feelings. I care, too, as much as I know how. How do we give these back without stabbing him in the heart?”

We didn’t talk while we ate, but our hands kept finding each other’s throughout the meal. I must’ve had three cups of coffee before an idea came to me.

“I’ve been to his house. He helped me out of the rain. He helped us learn archery. He took us out to dinner. What if we did something for him?”

Onyx nodded. “That’s a good idea. What did you have in mind?”

Chapter Twelve

Asher

It was an independent study day for the Urban Academy, so I chose to spend it at my apartment—brooding. I had sent the gifts by express delivery, and my text messages confirmed that Onyx received hers the night before, and Raven received hers this morning—early.

Jo had done me a favor by giving me Onyx's address from her paperwork at the bar. Well, technically, it wasn't a favor. She said she couldn't give me the information and then walked away with Onyx's file sitting open on the desk.

I had used a search engine to look up the location, which only planted fear in my chest for my mate. She lived in an unsavory part of town, and that was being kind.

Now I had more to be worried about. Perfect.

Finance classes were the most boring of all, but they were at least useful in the world of humans—shifters, too. Things like shifter history would only take you so far in the shifter world and nowhere in the human spectrum.

I had finally found my focus when a text came through. A cold sweat broke out along my brow and my heart took up a rapid beat.

It was Raven and Onyx. Finally, someone other than me was taking advantage of the group chat—or at least initiating.

We wanted to make you a meal since you took us out to dinner last night. Tomorrow. V and the boys' house. Seven?

I sat back and stared at the texts for a while, not even trying to tame the big smile I could feel on my face. My females were asking me to dinner. They were making me a meal with their own hands. Raven was a shifter, but Onyx wasn't. I wondered if they knew how much it meant to me for them to cook for me. My dad cooked for my moms just about every night. But, on occasion, they would cook for him, and he was always gushingly grateful.

Appreciation was a big theme in my family.

It didn't miss my attention that they hadn't said anything about the gifts.

Dinner sounds great. I'll be there. Can I bring anything?

Onyx answered, *I think you've done enough. We got the bracelets.*

That didn't sound promising.

And?

Silence. It only lasted for five or so minutes, but it felt like ages.

It was Raven who responded after several dots flashed on the screen, signaling they were typing and then deleting. *Let's talk about it over dinner tomorrow night.*

That wasn't "thank you," or "they are nice," or anything like it.

I texted Bishop and asked him about what was going on. His reply was that V had told them I was coming over for dinner, and Onyx and Raven were cooking. That was all he knew. He asked how the gifts went over.

I hadn't told him about the bracelets. They only knew my almost-drunk plans to buy...something for my mates.

They are cooking me dinner now. Maybe that's a good sign?

Bishop texted back quickly. *We will see. Maybe they're trying to poison you. Then sell the gifts and laugh over your grave.*

Thanks for that, Bishop.

Anytime.

I reminded myself not to text Bishop when I needed romance advice. He had the empathy of a piece of granite. He was probably the opposite with Valentina. I hoped for her sake, he was.

I concentrated on my studies for the rest of the day. Raven, Onyx, and I would work as a team once we made everything official, and I knew that. I looked forward to it. But my inner male wolf was also making claims. He wanted to provide for them—both of them. Yeah, I had a trust fund, and my stipend would double once I was officially mated. It would be enough not only to take care of me for the rest of my life, but it would take care of my mates—my family—and generously so.

I didn't tell Raven or Onyx about it. Didn't really know how to have a conversation about the fact that my parents were by all standards rich, and my brother and I were taken care of for life. But, on the other hand, I wanted to tell them. It felt like a secret, especially since Raven was troubled about her

parents cutting her off financially. I would take care of her. Of both of them.

Getting them to let me was the problem.

I was ready to move forward. There was enough room here for them to move in, if they liked, or we could get a new apartment completely.

The possibilities were endless, but they were just that, possibilities.

Still, this whole gift thing fit the bill. They would have to see me again to either thank me or to return the gifts. I suspected they would do the latter.

No matter which path they chose, I would get to see them again. Bishop was right. I had done something, and it had paid off.

Chapter Thirteen

Raven

“Are you serious?” Valentina asked, cocking her hip out as she did so much when she had the upper hand.

“What? I just found out he was my mate a few weeks ago. You’re telling me you know all of your mates’ favorites? I don’t know what to make him.”

She rolled her eyes and pulled a yellow notepad from the drawer in front of her, along with a pen. “Easy. I’m their favorite.”

“Their favorite thing to eat? Oh gods, never mind. Let’s just stick to what we know, shall we?” Onyx groaned and leaned against the counter. Neither she nor I were very good cooks, but I could make some simple things. I mean, Asher was a man. Anything we put in front of him would be eaten. Right? Or maybe he wasn’t that type of male. Gods, this was difficult. The three of us needed to fill out some surveys or something so we could get to know the basics. How V kept it all straight was beyond me.

There was some snickering from the living room where V’s mates were watching some kind of football game. There was a commercial on, so I knew they were laughing at what Onyx said.

“What did he eat at the restaurant the other night? You said you all ordered the same thing, but you didn’t tell me what?” V’s words prompted Onyx to bump her hip against mine.

I didn't know us having dinner was a state secret. "What? She's my best friend. If something happens, I'm probably going to tell her. Get over it. And he ordered steak and potatoes."

"I'm your best friend?" Valentina swiped at suddenly shiny eyes.

"Back to the subject, V," I said. "This is critical."

"Hey, boys?" V said, raising her voice. All three of her mates stood, and Fox turned down the TV. "If we went to a restaurant and had steak and potatoes, would you absolutely hate me if you came home from a long day of school and found I'd made steak and potatoes again?"

"Female of mine, if you made me that for dinner every day for the rest of our lives, I'd be a happy man." Bishop. Never minced words.

Fox cleared his throat. "Asher is a regular guy. Besides, his mates are cooking dinner for him. You could serve anything short of dog food and he'd be happy. Anyway, do you guys remember when we were little and there was Salisbury steak on the menu at school? He was always first in line. He's a meat-and-potatoes male for sure."

Storm slapped Bishop on the arm. "Remember when he used to hit the drive-thru and order like five apple pies after soccer practice?"

"Are you not writing all of this down, V?" Bishop asked.

She shook her head a little. Her mind was somewhere else or on someone else. Three someone elses. "What? You want to

us to make burger patties and gravy with drive-thru apple pie? What exactly am I writing down?"

Bishop came into the kitchen and leaned against the counter, pulling V into his embrace. "You girls are overthinking this by a mile. He is your mate. We are shifters. Well, the men in this scenario are. We like food, particularly meat. Having that meal with your mates is always a good thing. But having her prepare that meal is... Storm? Fox? Help me out."

Fox came over and kissed V's temple. "It's an honor to eat something prepared by the woman, or women in this case, who are your mate or mates. It means something not only to us but to our animals. And if I may, steak and potatoes with apple pie seems like not only the simplest but the best meal choice. Not a long list of ingredients. It works. He will love it."

Valentina sighed. She always swooned at Fox. I didn't blame her. He had a way with words.

"Now I can make a list," Valentina said. We watched as she made a detailed list. She had all of the cooking utensils, and Fox stood next to her, reminding her of rosemary and butter, since they were running out. I learned he was the one who usually did the shopping, and V insisted he come with us. He didn't mind. He whispered something into V's ear that made her blush and whisper something back. They were almost sickeningly cute...or so I would have thought once. Now? Just adorable.

I wondered if Asher and Onyx and I would ever be like that. Completely in love and not caring who knew it.

“Can we see them?” Bishop asked, already putting his nose into the gift bag.

“How do you know what they are?” I asked, squinting.

“I don’t. Asher wouldn’t tell us. I even tried Blaze, but he didn’t know shit, either.”

Onyx eyed me. “Okay, I’ll bite. Who in the hell is Blaze?”

The three males exchanged a look. “You don’t know that Asher has a twin?”

My knees went weak. I thought Onyx and I were the ones with secrets, but tonight was showing me we were all working with surface knowledge of each other.

“Does he go to the academy?” V asked, tearing off the page from the notebook and thrusting it in my direction.

Storm answered, “Uh, no. He got kicked out. He’s at the other academy. Maybe Asher should be telling you all this. I feel like I’m sharing someone else’s story.”

“I’m sure he will in his own time,” I said. “Let’s go.”

The four of us, V, Onyx, Fox, and I hopped into Fox’s truck and drove to the market. We had plenty of time, but I wanted as much leeway as possible just in case something went wrong.

Chapter Fourteen

Onyx

“I can’t remember the last time I went into an actual grocery store,” I muttered to myself. I must’ve forgotten I was hanging around wolf shifters and was mated to two. If I wanted to mumble something and not have it heard, I needed to do a better job.

“How do you eat?” Fox asked. He wasn’t accusatory, more curious.

I stopped in the soda aisle, my mouth wide open in awe. Yeah, clearly it had been a while. Why in the hell did there need to be so many varieties of sugar water? Then again, I worked at a place that concocted a vast variety of drinks for supes, so I had no room to judge the humans. “I eat at Josephine’s, and then, usually, she sends me home with leftovers. I can cook, a little, I don’t know why...”

When V and Fox went to the next aisle. Raven touched my fingers, making them tingle. “You really need to take better care of yourself, Onyx. If not for yourself, for your mates.” She studied me, serious as all get out, but then a smile grew on her face. Gods, she was gorgeous, even under these blinding fluorescent lights.

“Do Pop-Tarts count?”

“Where do you get Pop-Tarts if you don’t go to the grocery store? Or is that something you’re thinking of taking up?” She stepped closer, so close that I could smell the strawberry bar she’d grabbed at V’s house and eaten on the

way. Her eyes dipped to my lips. My breath hitched. My heart stammered. She picked a grocery store of all places to kiss me?

I would have let her...

But at the last second, she moved back and winked, showing me that she had reached behind me. "I'm buying them today. Someone's gotta make sure you eat."

"That doesn't really count," I choked out, barely getting hold of myself.

"Better than what you've been having," she said.

"What is that exactly?" I asked, moving so that I didn't do what I wanted, which was to grab her to me and kiss the life out of her.

"Leftovers. Air. Souls of your enemies," she said in a sultry voice making my knees go weak. "You've lost weight over the last month. I can see your clavicle, Onyx."

"Hey, you two. Can we get shopping instead of almost making out in the damned store? Only I get to do that."

Fox came around the corner where V had popped out from to scold us. "Are we doing that? Do we get to do that?"

V rolled her eyes. "Not today. Well, maybe today, if we can get all of these things without any more delays. Move your asses, girls."

It took another thirty minutes to get the shopping done but, once we did, we checked out and were back to V's house in no time. All of this made me wonder about all three of us

sharing a home one day. Apartment, townhouse, didn't matter to me as long as we were under the same roof.

We took the short route and bought one of the premade pie crusts. It wouldn't taste as good as a well-crafted homemade one, but as the boys pointed out again, Asher wouldn't care. He would be enamored with any meal we made him. Also, I harbored strong doubts about either of us being able to mix flour and water and whatever else went into it and have it resemble anything edible.

“Shit!” I had nearly destroyed the pie crust, trying to make it pretty. My pinched finger and thumbs ended up tearing the dough and before I knew it, it looked like a raccoon with long claws had gotten to it. “It looks so easy on cooking shows.”

It was all downhill from there. V and the boys kept asking us how it was going and, despite the quicksand we were in, we kept saying it was okay. We were figuring it out.

Everything was going to be okay.

“Oh my gods. Why...I think I burned it.”

Raven gripped one of the steaks with some tongs and held it up. The damned thing was raw on one side and blackened on the other. She'd forgotten the potatoes in the oven, and so had I until they were overdone and mostly dehydrated. You couldn't even tell that there was seasoning on them since they resembled coal more than potato wedges.

“At least we have the pie,” Raven said and put the other side of the steak down only to see smoke rise from the pan where there once was butter.

“It’s in the oven!” I reached for the oven mitts. My pie had been under the sheet pan of potatoes. Good thing I had a timer on it because... “Oh gods. No. We don’t have a pie. We have a burnt lump of apples or what once was apples. Shit!” I glanced at my phone and, while I had set a timer, in my haste, I had never turned it on.

We were trying to make this great dinner for our mate, and now it was a disaster.

Such was my life.

Chapter Fifteen

Asher

Valentina and the guys lived in a much better part of town than Onyx, and I suspected that was part of the reason they'd asked to use their kitchen to cook me dinner. Also, they were probably better equipped. I gathered the two large bouquets of flowers from the passenger seat and started up the walkway, only to be greeted by Valentina and her mates exiting, coughing.

"We're going out to eat." Valentina's eyes were red and streaming. "We will give the three of you some privacy."

"Good luck, bro," Fox said before bursting into laughter.

V slapped him on the arm. "Just for that, you can clean up when we get back."

Fox paled but then laughed even more. "It's all right. I'd like to say I've seen worse but..."

"Enjoy your dinner," Bishop called over his shoulder.

Although I'd not had any reason to think my mates were chefs, Bishop's smirk and the others' comments had me just a little worried. But no matter what they prepared, I'd smile and eat it. Probably something like quiche that they figured I'd hate. And that had V laughing until she cried, judging by her red eyes. I'd eat whatever girly food and love it because they made it for me.

The fact they tried was good enough for me. And in the future, I'd cook if they didn't want to, or we could all take

classes together. It would be so cute, the two of them bundled up in aprons with chef's caps on while we created homemade pasta or stuffed casings with deliciously spiced sausage mixture.

I knocked on the door, excited again for an evening having dinner with my mates. Any time spent with them was better than time spent anywhere else with anyone else. And even the greenest, most protein-lacking salad would taste good with them.

Nobody answered, and after another attempt, I tried the knob. It was not locked. Twisting it, I pushed the door open and called, "Onyx? Raven? I'm here?" Maybe one day I'd be saying *I'm home*. They still didn't answer, and I took a step inside before choking on the smoke pouring from the back of the apartment.

My wolf went on full alert, and it took all my strength to keep him at bay while I raced through the living room and down a short hallway. Danger had all the hairs on my body standing on end and while I appreciated the wolf's desire to take the lead, he was more useful outdoors than in a home—usually.

Female voices rose to high pitches as I stepped into the smoky kitchen. No actual flames rose from the stove where they shuffled back and forth, waving their hands and coughing. A lot like the others had been, but I'd been too focused on my plan for the evening to give it the thought I should have. Striding forward, I grasped each of my mates by an arm and moved them back from the stove.

“Go outside and breathe,” I ordered while turning off the burners and reaching up to flip the switch for the overhead fan. Without waiting to see if they obeyed, I opened the windows and took the pans off the stove. Setting them on the tile counter, I noticed a baking sheet covered with something else burned and a pie pan filled with...fruit? I couldn't be sure, but I did know that if we were going to live together on some blissful date in the future, either I'd be cooking, or we'd be signing up for those cooking classes.

When the last of the smoke wafted out the windows or was sucked up by the ventilator fan, I got a good look at the damage and winced.

“Pretty bad, huh?” Onyx came through the kitchen doorway, looking abashed for the first time since I met her. “All did not go as planned.”

“I sensed that.” Bending, I opened the cabinet under the sink in search of the trash can and cleaning supplies. I grabbed the pie plate and scrutinized the charred lumps. “Apple pie?”

“It was.” Raven pushed past Onyx, patting her shoulder as she moved. “But now I'd call it charcoal pie.”

“And what else were you two making me?” I was fighting my twitching lips. They were both flushed and splattered with things, and a total mess. A totally adorable mess.

“Steak,” Onyx said.

“And potatoes.” Raven glanced at the sheet pan. “Ugh.”

Unable to stand it any longer, I swept the two of them into my arms in a big hug. “Perfect choices. I would have really enjoyed them if...” I tried to think of a tactful way to finish

that sentence. “I take it back. I am really enjoying them because you went to so much trouble to make a meal you thought I’d like.”

“But don’t eat any of it,” Raven blurted. “We don’t want to poison you.”

“A little well-done food never hurt anyone,” I protested, reaching for a potato and praying they’d stop me. I was about to close my fingers on them when Onyx, who I’d had to let go of to do this, slapped my hand away.

“I’m not sure that’s an accurate description of what we cooked.” Onyx gave the pan a push out of reach. “Maybe we’d better try this another day.”

I brought her back into the group hug. “Or maybe we just clean up the kitchen so we’re still friends with Valentina and the guys, and then we go out for something to eat and maybe have a run?”

Nobody answered right away; we just stood there together soaking up the first time we’d all been this close together for so long. But, finally, my stomach growled, and my mates giggled and stepped back.

“If we can’t cook for him, I guess we’d better get moving before Asher faints from hunger.” Onyx grabbed a sponge.

Chapter Sixteen

Raven

Cleaning took longer than I'd anticipated, making me wonder how people did this every day. Then an image of the two of us stumbling around and destroying perfectly good food flashed through my mind. Of course, most people didn't leave smoke stains on all the cabinets and a stove that required heavy-duty scrubbing. My family had a housekeeper who did most of the cooking, and I'd never gone into the kitchen and seen anything like the debacle we'd created.

But the three of us buckled down together, and we managed to return the room to the neat and clean condition we'd found it in. As we headed out the door to Asher's truck, we encountered Valentina and her mates returning from their dinner date.

She drew me aside and whispered, "How did it go?"

"We've been cleaning your kitchen since you left, so I think it's okay. And we took the food to the outside bin. We couldn't entirely get rid of the smell though. I'm really sorry."

"It's okay. I had some experience cooking when I lived with my sister, but I still managed to make a few really bad meals. Somehow that gave them the impression I wasn't any good at it." She winked.

"You never cook?"

"Oh, I have a few specialties, but not often."

“Coming, Raven?” Asher was standing by the open passenger door. “I think I know just the place.”

With Onyx in the back seat, we drove along the main highway out of town until we came to a rest stop, and Asher signaled and pulled in.

“I thought we were going to eat somewhere?” Onyx said. “Oh sorry, it’s a pit stop?”

“No, it’s food.” Asher drove around behind the buildings housing the restrooms and a sort of tourist area in the middle and parked. Right next to a big red-and-black food truck with a line stretching halfway around it. “See?”

“What a crowd. What do they have?” I was trying to see around all the people to get a look at a menu.

“Steak and potatoes.”

“You’re kidding.” My face burned at the memory of our attempt to make this supposedly simple dish.

“Would I joke about dinner? I’ve really worked up an appetite.” He moved to the end of the long line and stopped. “It’s a long wait, but totally worth it.”

“At a food truck?” I was skeptical, but one small mean part of me hoped they wouldn’t do all that much better than we had. Then I watched a couple take their plates and walk away toward a large group of picnic tables. Their food looked even better than the delicious steak at the restaurant the other day. And a changing breeze brought the scent of grilling meat to my nose, making me light-headed with hunger. “Never mind. I can tell it’s going to be great.”

And it was. We shuffled forward a half step at a time until we reached the order window where Asher told the smiling middle-aged woman that we'd have three specials. He'd informed us about halfway along that he recommended we have that, and we'd agreed. Then we had another five-minute wait before our number was called, and we had our hands on our plates of steak and potatoes with not a vegetable in sight.

We hadn't made any veggies, either.

But the menu had no pie on it. I'd checked.

We found places at one end of a picnic table. It seemed people shared wherever they could find a spot, and the raccoon shifters at our table were entertaining as all get out. They told stories about their "trash panda" route in town and how they blended in with the animal raccoons in order to be able to shift as often as they liked.

When they finished, they gathered their garbage and stood up. "Where are you all headed?" asked one of the ladies in the group.

"Just looking for somewhere to shift and run," Asher told her. "Do you know of anywhere close? I've stopped at the truck before on my way in or out of town but never gone running right afterward."

"It is hard to get going with a full belly." The lady's mate patted his stomach. "But we hate to miss the chance to get down by the waterfall and play in the water a bit."

"There's a waterfall nearby?" Onyx's eyes sparkled. "It's probably too cold to swim..."

“It’s not that bad,” I protested then remembered only two of us would be wolves who could run for miles without stopping. “If it’s not too far.”

The lady raccoon smirked. “We aren’t long-range types, and after all that food? As my mate said, a full belly makes it hard to get going. You can stay parked in the rest stop here and go past those trees...”

She gave us detailed directions to the waterfall and left saying maybe they’d see us later.

We continued to eat and talk, but my wolf was excited about getting to shift with Asher and show off for Onyx. She was very proud of her form and even willing to leave some steak behind to get going. But I was not so willing, and my mates were still eating, so there was no reason to waste good meat and potatoes.

Fifteen minutes later, we were on our way, and just past the tree line, we spotted the clothing the raccoons had been wearing hung from tree branches just off the pathway as well as a whole lot of other pants and shirts and shoes and things. And we were grateful for the directions because we had apparently happened upon an area of multiple intersecting trails with enough animal pawprints to show us it was frequented by many, many kinds of shifters. And maybe regular animals as well, although they tended to avoid the shifters of their kind.

We found our own branch to hang our things on, and Asher and I took our fur while Onyx lounged against a tree trunk and watched. I hoped she didn’t feel bad that she couldn’t shift as well, but her sparkling eyes and smile didn’t

indicate any negative feelings. And when we padded over to her, she buried her hands in our fur, stroking and petting us until I rubbed against her, my wolf nearly tipping over with pleasure at being with our mates in this way.

We kept our speed to hers, walking the wide path to the waterfall side by side with Onyx in the middle, one hand resting on each of us for most of the stroll. It wasn't too cold to swim, but the raccoons had stirred up so much mud in the pool, we decided to enjoy it another day. We hadn't run into them on the trail, so they must have gone on another way. So instead of swimming, we took the opportunity to frisk around and race and generally show off for our mate. She wasn't one to clap and cheer or anything like that, but her smile was everything.

Chapter Seventeen

Onyx

They were extraordinary, my mates. Two beautiful wolves with fur much thicker than I'd ever dreamed possible and a way of moving that made my heart beat double time. We didn't do anything extraordinary together on our date. Cleaning up the disaster of a dinner we attempted to cook led to eating a very good dinner in a most unlikely place. And then a fun time in the woods with the two of them.

They really had to slow down in order for me to keep up with them, and I wondered if I should start running in the mornings and see if I couldn't get at least a little bit of speed and endurance built up. I'd never be able to keep up with them, but maybe I could make it more fun?

When we emerged from the woods, the food truck was still there, neon lights outlining the vehicle's form. And even though it was pretty late, maybe after eleven, there were still plenty of people lined up to enjoy their savory delights. But we needed to head out, get back to town, and our evening was over. Asher asked us to come over to his place for a pie-baking lesson, and Raven said, "Okay, but you're awfully brave."

That girl always said just what she was thinking, and it was one of the things I liked best about her.

They both walked me to my door and kissed me good night. On the lips, but only a sweet, friendly kiss because we weren't there yet. While they drove away, I watched from the

window, ready to go to bed and dream of wolves. Two in particular.

Bang, bang, bang.

The dream the knocking on my door dragged me out of was more about burning down a kitchen and less about wandering a landscape with gorgeous wolves. But since almost nothing good ever pounded like that, I didn't want to answer.

Whoever was out there was not going away, so I pulled a jacket over my long T-shirt and staggered to the door. Probably a crackhead; the neighborhood was full of them and other drug users, sellers, and generally people I didn't want to let into my house late at night. Or ever.

"Go away," I shouted without opening the door at all. "We don't sell drugs here."

"I don't want drugs," the person outside said. "I am delivering a message."

"A message? From who?" My irritation rapidly shifted to concern.

"Just open the door, Onyx. It's me, Freedo."

I let my head fall forward to rest against the wall. Freedo was one of my father's minions. A generally creepy little guy who ran errands and committed minor mayhem for him. And the not wanting drugs bit? He mostly got paid in them, or so I'd heard. Could be rumor.

“Freedo, whatever you have to say, I’m not interested. Just go away and tell my father I wasn’t home or whatever you need to say to keep out of trouble.”

“It’s a note.”

“What?”

“He wrote something down, stuffed it in an envelope, and sent it along. So I don’t know the message.”

“Liar. You opened it the minute you got out of his sight.” Because of course he did. “So you might as well tell me.”

“He sealed it. And I’m not getting in trouble for failure to deliver, so here.” The message came sliding under the door. “It’s all yours. I don’t know what you did to make him so mad, but I’d be careful, Onyx.” And then his footsteps tapped away.

I wanted to shove the note back under the door, but it wasn’t like he was out there waiting to take it back, and whatever it contained, the porch druggies didn’t need to read, so I picked it up and tossed it in the waste basket.

Returning to bed, I tossed and turned and couldn’t go back to sleep. That note was going to be nothing but annoying, but curiosity is a terrible thing, and I finally gave up and retrieved it. I hated that he knew where I lived. I’d moved here to get out of his line of vision. My tips would have allowed me to live somewhere much nicer. All the inconvenience and barely livable conditions had been for nothing.

Cursing under my breath, I tore the corner of the envelope and let the paper slide into my hand. Opened it. Cursed much more loudly when I read the contents.

Word has reached me that you have mated with the dogs— or as good as. Despite our differences, I never thought you'd lower yourself so far. But, it seems you have feelings for the creatures. If you value their lives, you will meet me at midnight tomorrow. You know where.

He didn't sign it, but why would he? He addressed me as "Daughter" and nobody else I knew would call my mates dogs.

Enough. I couldn't just pretend there was no issue, go to dinner and on walks. Make pies. No, I couldn't make pies. Asher loved teaching us things, and it was fun to learn from him. But fun couldn't be a thing I had anymore. It wasn't my destiny.

Every minute I spent with them made leaving them harder, and if we went much further, I'd never be able to do it. Either I had to resolve the situation or give them up right away. But first:

Sorry to cancel, but I can't make it to the pie lesson tomorrow. You two have a good time together.

Chapter Eighteen

Asher

I had a choice to make. I could either sit here and ponder all the reasons why Onyx couldn't go, or I could go tell Raven to come anyway. If nothing else, she would learn to make pie and we could spend some quality time together. It wasn't ideal, but my wolf and I were wanting to see at least one of them.

Perhaps together, Raven and I could figure out a way to break through the Onyx wall permanently instead of only punching holes in it.

At least there was progress. Yeah, they had returned the gifts I bought for them, but it was fine. I wouldn't take them back to the store—they were custom and not returnable, even if I had wanted to. Instead, they would be gifts at our mating ceremony one day.

If we had a ceremony.

Valentina and the guys hadn't had one, but they didn't seem like the formal type. Plus, Valentina's family was across the globe. They might have a celebration in the future, but they hadn't said anything about it.

My parents would want a big gathering. While the people in my mates' lives weren't too happy about our mating, my parents were out of this world excited and happy for us.

I'd told them everything in a weekly email. Something our family did. At first, it was a way to keep tabs on Blaze, but

now, it was a fun way to know what was going on in everyone's lives when we were scattered for the time being.

I missed my family. My old one and my new one. It was hard for fated mates to be apart. Maybe it was different for Raven and Onyx, but it was killing me and my wolf.

We got a taste of them here and there, but it was like begging for a nibble when you were starving to death.

Are you on your way? I texted Raven with a prayer on my lips. I hoped she did. I was miserable without them. Gods, two months ago, I was fine on my own. Thriving. Now, it was as though every breath hinged on their presence.

Mating sucked—and was amazing—and shook you into a thousand pieces only to put you back together again.

Almost there.

I had done the grocery shopping since all things food preparation were a bit traumatic for my girls. Gods, I wanted us all in the same home so I could take care of them. Yeah, they were capable of taking care of themselves, but I wanted the honor and the privilege.

And to make sure Onyx ate something other than what was left over at the bar or that the witches had cooked up.

“Hey,” I said, opening the door when a faint knock rang through my apartment. Raven wore black pants, a crop-top sweater, and peacoat. Black. Her favorite color.

And mine since finding her.

Onyx liked black as well. We complemented each other. Now to convince them of that.

“Hey. It’s getting cold out.”

“Come in here and get warm.” I pulled her inside and couldn’t resist tugging her into an embrace. She stiffened at first but then relaxed into it fully, both of us letting out a sigh.

“It’s cozy in here. My dorm room always feels cold, no matter how many blankets I have.”

“I could get you an electric blanket. I think I might have one in the closet you can take home. I hate thinking about you cold at night.”

“Do you?” she asked, a twinkle in her eyes.

“Do I what, mate?” The word slipped from my mouth so naturally now.

“Do you think about us...at night?”

Gods, were we really broaching this subject in the foyer of my apartment? “I think about both of you all the time. Sometimes it’s hard to get my studying done or even focus in class.” I pushed some of her hair behind her ear, making her shudder.

“Um, are we making pie? I promise not to burn this place down.”

I chuckled and put my hand on the small of her back, leading her to the kitchen. “I won’t let you burn it down. I kind of like this place.”

We had the best time making the pie. I walked her through making a crust from scratch and frying the apples—all of it.

“Hey, you’ve got...” I leaned forward and brushed flour from the tip of her adorable nose.

“Thanks. This was fun. I’m glad we did this.”

I put the pie in the oven and turned to face her. “You miss her.”

She nodded. “It’s not that I don’t enjoy your company. I do. And I’m glad we’ve hit this stride where we can get to know each other and be more comfortable but...”

“There’s a missing piece,” I finished for her. “I get it. I miss her, too.”

She looked so sad, I had to fix it.

“How about once this pie comes out, we take it to her. Screw her excuses. We’re bringing a pie to our mate. How does that sound?”

Raven’s smile lit up my otherwise hollow apartment. “I’d like that.”

An hour later, we were both wearing our coats and walking, pie in hand, toward the Midnight. We turned a corner by the bar when Jo crossed from the other side of the street. “Good evening, you two. Where are you headed with that amazing-smelling pie?”

“We are bringing it to Onyx.”

Josephine’s face fell. “Onyx didn’t come to work today. She called in. Didn’t come to her afternoon shift, either. I had to call in Valentina to cover for her since we were shorthanded.”

“Did she say why?” I asked. Concern laced its way through my consciousness. She didn’t come to our date, and

then she missed two shifts at work. Something was off. I didn't know what, but my wolf was suspicious.

“She didn't. V is behind the bar, but you two can go in before the place gets busy. She might know what's up with her cousin.”

We walked into the Midnight where V was surrounded by her mates.

“Hey, V, did you talk to Onyx?” Raven asked. I put the pie on the counter.

“No. She won't answer texts or calls, but she phoned to let Jo know she couldn't come tonight. I figured she was with you two.”

“No,” I answered, more worried now than even a few minutes ago. “We don't know where she is. Something is up. I can feel it. My wolf can, too.”

“Should we go to her place?” Raven turned and clutched the hem of my jacket.

“Yeah,” I said, wrapping my arm around her waist. She was worried, and a bit of fear tinged her usual sweet scent. She leaned against my chest. “Let's go.”

“Do you want us to go with you? Onyx doesn't live in the best part of town,” Bishop asked.

“Um, no. We'll call you when we find something out.”

“Or if you need us,” Valentina offered.

“Yeah,” Raven said. “We'll call one way or the other. Promise.”

Chapter Nineteen

Raven

We went back to Asher's apartment and got his truck. He had Onyx's address because of the infamous bracelet, and we plugged it into his GPS before heading out.

"This truck is going to stand out like a sore thumb in that part of the city," I said, running my palm against the leather console between us. My hand itched to reach over and touch his, lace his fingers with mine, but we were on a mission.

"Yeah, well, it's better than yours," he said, winking at me.

"I don't...oh yeah. You win."

He chuckled. The sound reverberated through my chest even though he was on the other side of the cab. Without hesitation, he reached over the console and, while turning onto the main street, took my hand in his like it was no big deal.

We were in the beginning stages of this throuple, but I had to get used to this. Being touched. Being around people. Not being alone all the time.

Being not alone was sometimes more unsettling than anything else. Over the years, I'd grown to like the time with myself. But now that I didn't have to, well, it was a learning curve for sure.

"It was a gift from my parents," he said, taking another turn. The engine was louder than the Midnight on any given night, with a huge crowd.

“For graduation?”

He nodded. “From high school. Blaze got one, too, but he wrecked it in the first week.”

“Tell me more about him.”

On the way to Onyx’s place, he told me all about his twin and how he ended up at the Urban Rehabilitation Academy. His brother had jokingly named it the Urban Rejects Academy and it stuck with the general population.

“GPS says it’s there,” Asher said, throwing the truck into park. He pointed to an apartment complex that had seen better days and a better paint job. People were hanging around outside, stepping in and out of the deep shadows, whispering, exchanging things. We both stared. We could see things that human police couldn’t. Things with wings. Things with fangs. All kinds of things that went bump in the night.

Things you didn’t want loitering outside of your apartment—or house—or life.

Asher released my hand and scrubbed both of his down his face. “I hate that she lives here—alone—far away from all of us.”

“She can take care of herself, Asher. She was a trained assassin and she has powers—powers she doesn’t even show us.”

He shrugged. “I still don’t like it. Her father could sneak right up that sidewalk, and she wouldn’t have time to get away.”

I nodded. “I know what you mean. Asher, are we going in or what?”

“We need to get intel.”

I rolled my eyes. Men, I swore. They were always turning everything into a pseudo *John Wick* movie. “What are you proposing?”

He pointed. “There are some bushes right outside her apartment windows. We see if she’s in there and then, if she is, we can knock on the door.”

I snorted. He couldn’t be serious. “Why don’t we just knock on the door in the first place and see?”

“Because what if her father is in there or some criminal or a vampire. You don’t know, Raven. I’m not going to put you in danger as well.”

Before I could respond that this was a bad idea, he reached for the handle and let himself out. He came around to my side and lifted me from the truck, his hands on my hips, much like he had put me into it. His parents must not have thought he would have a shorter mate or mates.

“Come on.” He took me by the hand and practically dragged me across the street and into the bushes at the side of Onyx’s apartment. I could see movement inside.

“That’s her. There’s no one else. Let’s go knock on the door,” I whisper-screamed into his ear.

“Wait. She might not be alone.”

We crouched there in the bushes. Closer physically than we’d been all night. Sharing breaths. As much as the position would be romantic under any other circumstances, standing in these bushes wasn’t the place.

“We’re infringing on her privacy, Asher. She’s our mate. We trust her. We can’t do this,” I said, fisting his shirt in my hands, hoping the added connection would make him change his mind.

“You’re right. Of course, you’re right. Let’s go. I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” he said with a smile.

I slapped his chest as we left. “We can try her tomorrow. Maybe she’s not feeling well. Maybe something is going on with her.”

We got back in the truck, and he breathed out a long sigh and leaned his face against the steering wheel. “I wish she would let us in.”

“We didn’t even knock,” I replied.

“Not into her apartment, Rave. Into her life. Into her heart. It’s killing my wolf. Isn’t it killing your wolf?”

I nodded as a tear flowed down my face. “Yeah.”

“Let’s go. If she wants to tell us where she was tonight, she will tell us. I can’t beg anymore. I just can’t.”

Chapter Twenty

Asher

We were stuck waiting for a while, but it was anything but dull in Onyx's neighborhood. The most colorful characters strode the sidewalks, lounged under streetlights, and met up with other creepy types to do whatever they did.

Some were human, many were not, but it wasn't something that just anyone could tell. Shifter eyes were amazing that way, and some of the most innocent-looking people, the guy in the white button-down and khakis looking like he was going home from work, just late, was actually a gnome in quite the guise. The ones I knew didn't even have those abilities, but this guy did. And he spotted me, too, and had the nerve to wink as he passed. Amused, I watched him go up to the door of a ground-floor unit and knock. The woman who answered was gorgeous and 100 percent human. He bellowed, "Honey, I'm home," and she giggled and hugged him.

Did she know he was a gnome? And if so, did she care? Mixed matings were all around us no matter what some of the old order tried to claim.

The next one to catch my attention was a sex worker, bent over in one of those positions like you see in men's magazines, guaranteed to grab any male's attention by thrusting her curvaceous buttocks out in a *come-and-get-me* kinda way. Nice bottom, too. If I didn't have my mate right here beside me and one inside that building, I might have—

“Asher!” Raven shook me. “Where did you go?”

I turned to face my mate. “I’ve been right here.”

“Admiring the scenery, I see.”

I looked again and saw a woman in at least her late fifties adjusting her stocking. The lines and creases on her face showed a life hard lived. And the curvy butt sagged down to her knees. “That was a spell.”

“I wondered why you were so enthralled with someone like that. Focus.”

I nodded. “I’m sorry. I guess you never saw the pinup model before she changed back?”

“No, I—” Raven put her small hand on my arm. “Look. She’s coming out.”

Onyx looked both ways before crossing the street and hopping into a compact car. She wore a pair of jeans and a hoodie with the hood up, as though she didn’t want to be recognized, but even in a trash bag, I would recognize those curves.

“Should we follow her?” I asked. Ten minutes ago, I wouldn’t have hesitated, but now, since we had been snooping right outside Onyx’s window, I felt like a horrible mate. A nose-itching one. A pushy one.

“Normally, I would say no. But there’s something about the way she was walking. I don’t like it. She doesn’t know we’re here, so why would she be sneaking around dressed like that.”

“Here we go,” I said and put the truck into drive.

“I hope we’re doing the right thing.” Raven held my hand tight after I put it on the console. My truck made a lot of noise, so I tried to stay back a bit.

“Where in the hell is she going?” Raven asked, mimicking the question I had in my own head. She had gotten onto the highway and was driving faster than any other car, weaving through traffic like she had a death wish.

“I don’t know. I’m just trying to keep up with her. Does she always drive like this?”

“Hell, I don’t know. I’ve never ridden with her. As far as I knew, she didn’t even have a car. She always walks to the Midnight. I’m realizing now that I know very little about our mate.”

“I wish she would let us in. Whatever this is...we could help her.”

Raven scoffed. “She does everything on her own. She thinks that just because she once did, that she has to now. I hope she’s not in trouble. I don’t trust her father as far as I can throw him.”

We didn’t drive that far, but far enough to pass the truck stop and on into the country. There was a car between us for quite a while.

A tear slipped down Raven’s face. “I hate her father. I don’t say that about many people—actually I’ve never said that about anyone. Not even Angela.”

“The gossip queen? You know her?”

My little mate huffed out a laugh. “I know of her. I try to stay out of her crosshairs. I hate him for how he raised Onyx. I

hate how he turned her into an assassin without her permission. I hate how she was just someone who was born to do his bidding. She's not a person to him. She's someone he uses for his own gain."

The words sat in my chest like lead. Raven was right, of course. Her father was poison and more than anything, I wish we'd killed him the last time we had a chance. But he'd run like a coward. "Raven, if something happens, I want you to get in my truck and get the fuck out of here. I don't know where we're headed or what's waiting there, but my wolf doesn't like it—not one bit."

"Let's not plan for anything." I squeezed her hand.

"I know, Asher. I know. Let's hope this is nothing."

The only thing I could really see in front of me were Onyx's lights and those of a few other cars. I carefully kept one other car between us, trying to hide my very distinctive truck. I was amazed she hadn't—or at least wasn't—acting as if she had.

"This whole thing has an ominous feel," she mumbled.

"You're right, babe. We're going to be with her no matter what happens, okay?"

"Babe?" Raven said, turning in her seat to face me.

The pet name had slipped out. I'd never used that word in my life.

"Is that okay?" I asked, winking at her. Her heartbeat sped up. I could hear it clear as day in the cab of the truck.

“I never liked mates calling each other that, but now...I might see the appeal.”

“Is that right?” I asked, tugging on her hand playfully.

“Yeah. That’s right.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Onyx

If my father liked anything, it was drama, and that meant he scheduled his meetups in the strangest places. Not at a restaurant or somewhere normal like that, no, not my sperm donor. When he said I knew where, he meant the very worst of his hangouts, the place he made people come when they were not in his good graces. Or for major minion meetings. Or when he never planned for his “guests” to return to where they came from.

He was living in the city, but the old bastard wanted me to drive fifteen miles outside the city—to start. I wished I’d had more archery lessons so I could have brought a bow out with me and put an arrow through his blackened heart. It wouldn’t have killed him, or at least I didn’t think so, but anyone who threatened my mates deserved to die.

Driving the highway, I made and rejected plan after plan. Told myself I was a fool for making the trip. Twice, I almost turned around and went back. But his threats still rang in my ears, despite the futility of this trip. Or the likelihood I wouldn’t be alive tomorrow morning.

Best-case scenario, he’d agree not to kill anyone I loved and we’d part forever. He was determined to end the female line of our family, and that meant not only Valentina but her sister possibly if he could get to her and definitely also me. When he’d sent me to the city to kill her, I’d been so brainwashed, it was a miracle I hadn’t done it.

As if I'd have allowed it.

That voice in my head again. But however I'd made it happen, it helped me before. So I'd play along.

How could I—you have stopped it?

Traffic along the highway was so light at this time of night, I was almost alone except for a couple of vehicles that were in front of and behind me, close behind me in one case, making a little caravan through the darkness. I could almost convince myself that they were there to help, to follow me into battle as our friends had V not so long ago. But they were of course just strangers who had places of their own to go. Probably places a whole lot more pleasant.

You cannot harm another of mine.

But how can I keep us all from being harmed?

And how could a part of my own mind have answers the rest of me didn't?

You can't, but you can.

If I was going to be cryptic to myself, how could I solve anything?

I can't protect us but I can?

No, you can.

I slowed the car, watching for the dirt road. It led both to the cabin my father kept out here as well as a few other houses, but there was no sign or other marking to show where to exit. The sedan that had been way too close to my bumper darted out into the opposing traffic lanes and passed, but the

others stayed behind me until I turned off onto the bumpy road.

The memory of the other time I was here swamped my thoughts as I clung to the steering wheel. It was when he assigned me to kill Valentina, for the “good of the family.” I’d had something of a rough upbringing, but I’d never thought of harming anyone until then. And I could still hear the conversation in my mind.

“It’s time you picked up your share of the family duties.”

I wasn’t actually aware there were family duties, per se, beyond cleaning up after Father and my filthy brothers. As in servant to them all. They’d tried to make me cook for them, but one good bout of food poisoning ended that idea.

Unlike tonight’s debacle...that might have been on purpose. And maybe it was why I’d made sure never to learn the skill. Cooking for those who treated me as badly as they did held no appeal whatsoever. Unlike the idea of preparing yummy food for my mates. I discovered, as I climbed out of my car and started down the narrow trail upslope toward the “cabin”—which should really have been called a shack—that images of beautiful meals were flooding my brain. Also with the desire to make them for my mates.

There was just enough wind to rattle the aspen leaves, but I could still hear the sounds of nocturnal animals going about their lives. I spent enough time in nature to know that if I didn’t bother them, they wouldn’t bother me, for the most part. And if one should try, I had the powers to stop them. Knowing as much as I did now, I’d hold back and try not to hurt any that I saw. They could easily be shifters.

I returned to contemplating cooking for my mates. I'd start watching YouTube and TikTok and actually try out the recipes. But in order to do that, I'd have to survive tonight and ensure they did, too. I might not be a wolf, but I was beginning to suspect that the mating instinct, the deep-seated desire to be with Asher and Raven all the time, had a spot inside me as well. I didn't have a wolf to speak to me, but I had an inner voice, or something. It would be too daring to assume that voice came from anyone else. Who but shifters had another person inside them?

The moon went behind some trees, and the path darkened in front of me, slowing my steps. I had allowed a little extra time, not a lot, but if I fell and broke my leg, it would really make me late. Shifters, like my mates who were never far from my thoughts, could heal a lot of things just by changing to their animal and back. Broken legs? Not sure, but it would be a handy skill.

A rock slid out from under my foot, and I did a cute little dance trying to stay upright before landing on my knees with an "Oof!"

"That's going to leave a mark," I grumbled, pushing myself back to my feet and continuing on. And one more thing—albeit minor—my father would have to pay for. The moon reappeared, the clouds sliding away like a theater curtain opening to reveal the show. So appropriate as the light revealed the shack in not fifty yards ahead, perched on the top of this particular rise of the hills.

The bleached boards of its walls and dilapidated interior disguised the true value of the place. It overlooked the entire

landscape on all sides, a 365-degree view. He could and did hold meetings there, and while I was fairly confident he didn't demean himself by walking in, I didn't know how he did arrive. This path held no marks from ATVs or anything and was extremely narrow and really steep and had some major scree-covered parts. As well as streams I had to ford, and the route branched several times. Anyone who didn't know where they were going was highly unlikely to get there.

For the first time, I wondered if there was an easier way in...

But the door was opening, and I had no more time to consider anything but dealing with the man who not only helped bring me into this life but now wanted to take me out of it. Most humans were all about honoring their parents, and so were most shifters. Maybe the descendants of gods and goddesses didn't need to be. Let's hope not because this man deserved zero honor or respect from me or anyone.

"Daughter, you're right on time." He smiled, revealing a few more teeth than most humans had. Or than I had. What in our lineage gave him those?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Raven

The highway, even as lightly traveled as it was, made it possible to follow our mate as she drove out of town and into the countryside. We passed the truck stop where we'd had such a great meal and run afterward, but she never slowed.

"I'd kind of hoped she was coming here..." But I hadn't really thought she would. "Where is she going?"

"It's hard to admit," Asher said, "but we don't know her very well yet. She could be going just about anywhere, to a friend's or a mentor's or even a lover."

I smacked his arm. "Don't even think it. We haven't gotten to know one another well, but we are mates and once we met, it would be impossible to be with anyone else."

"She's not a shifter, Raven." His voice was low and filled with hurt. "She's of a goddess line and in the mythology, all those gods and goddesses were notoriously loose. They rarely seemed to form strong bonds and at least the males were leaving offspring all over the ancient world."

Was Circe like that? If only Onyx and I had found time to get to the library and do that research, I might know something about it. But even on our shortish acquaintance, my wolf and I knew her on a deeper level than mere actions or words could convey.

"She's our mate. And she cares about us. I've never seen her hitting on anyone in the bar, and you have seen how she

reacts when someone makes a move on her.”

“Yes.” He chuckled. “I have witnessed this. And only the fact that she shuts them down before they can get close enough to lay a finger on her has kept me at my table or on my stool. So, we can safely eliminate a lover, but other than that, we do not know who she knows. Who her old friends are or maybe a teacher from her past, someone she might consult for advice.”

“She’s turning.” No signal or anything, but we were far enough back that at least we weren’t in danger of slamming into her.

“I see that.” He slowed. “Try to see where though. I don’t see a sign or a street...”

Rolling down the window, I scanned the side of the road. Lights were disappearing into the distance through a break in the trees. “Must be a dirt track or something. Stop here!”

Now, he did slam on his brakes. And it was extra fortunate that the car behind us was able to swerve around, although they did give us a less than friendly gesture in passing. Asher waved apologetically, but judging from the angry sounds we got for about a second, we were not forgiven.

We’d overshot the turnoff, so Asher pulled onto the shoulder, clicked on his four-ways, and backed up.

“Can the truck drive on that?” I asked.

“If her car can make it, my 4-wheel drive sure can.” He patted the steering wheel. “She was born to off-road.”

“Sorry, I don’t know ‘her’ as well as you. So what are we waiting for?”

“Deciding if we should follow in the truck or try another way.”

I considered. “You’re afraid she might come back and catch us?”

“And I’d rather we get to see where she’s going before she has a chance to come up with an explanation. I thought of someone else she might be meeting.”

Not a friend or teacher or something like that? “Who?”

“Daddy Dearest.”

“No.” I hadn’t even considered that possibility. “He wants to kill her. Why would she go without us?”

“Because he suggested he might want to murder us even more?”

My stomach rolled. “Please don’t say you think she is sacrificing herself for us.”

“Onyx? Does she strike you as the type who would do that unless it was the last resort? Or believe Dean if he said her sacrifice would save us?”

“No. But I do believe she’d go there to fight him all on her own to save us from harm.” Because that was what our mate was like. Prickly and hard to get to, but loyal and fierce and beautiful.

“Then we’re agreed?”

Puzzled, I turned to face him in the seat. “On what exactly?”

“On shifting and following her tracks.” He drove forward again and found a spot on the shoulder about a quarter mile

ahead where trees could conceal us from casual observation.
“This should be good.”

I climbed out and stripped down, my voice muffled from behind the sweater over my head. “Thanks for sharing the plan.”

He came around and joined me in undressing. Even in this moment where I was terrified for our mate, and my wolf was raging to get to her, we both had to admire Asher’s naked form before he shifted into that beautiful black wolf. I bent and hugged him around the neck. “We’ll save her, I promise.”

And then I put the clothes in the cab and locked the door, hiding the key under a nearby rock then took my fur, the feeling as natural as breathing, although it hadn’t been the first few times. Now, I was no longer particularly aware of the bones bending, although the snout growing always tickled.

We trotted alongside the highway, ducking behind trees when cars passed. Wolves always got people wound up, and there weren’t many nearby, so silly humans would probably stop to take pictures. Once someone tried to pet me.

A wolf! That woman tried to pet a wolf. She was darned lucky it was me. I only pretended I wanted to rip her arm off, snarling and snapping before running away. Once we left the paved road, I didn’t anticipate running into anyone. It was pretty well disguised as a turnoff with bushes closing in on either side. She would have had to scrape the sides of her car going through it, broken branches testifying to the fact, but not enough to indicate people came through often.

Not bothering to hide, we broke into a run, following her tire tracks until we came to her car, parked where the road

dead ended.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Asher

It took only a quick sniff before we found the path she'd moved onto next. She'd had maybe a ten-minute head start on us, and our speed along the road likely matched what her car could do on the bumpy surface. And once she left the car, she was on two legs. Judging by her pace when we all went out together, she wasn't a runner by nature. Or if she was, she'd not done any of it that night. So we should have no problem catching up with her. Or so I thought.

Maybe she'd gone a lot faster on the road than she should have, or maybe she was just a better climber than we were with four legs. Or maybe it was the fact that we lost the trail a couple of times when small streams washed across it and we made bad decisions and had to backtrack. Like the area behind the rest stop, lots of pathways crisscrossed or branched off and once, I thought we'd lost her entirely.

Onyx had never indicated an interest in hiking, although...who knew? She'd enjoyed our woodland stroll and I never asked if she liked to hike or rock climb or scree scramble. She was always there behind the bar, serving drinks and dealing with the customers. The only people she was really friendly with besides us were Jo and Valentina. And her mates, I supposed. Most bartenders were much warmer and ready to lend a listening ear. Which made her utter lack of any of those qualities surprising when you considered her overflowing tip jar. Sure, some of that was V, who everyone wanted to talk to, but a lot of it was from those Onyx served.

That makeup she wore was extraordinary, as well. It looked as if she spent tons of time applying it, and I'd believed that until Raven told me it was magic. V shared that information with her.

The path steepened, but we'd picked up her trail again, and I didn't care how long it took to get to her—as long as we did before she came to any harm. This time, I was going to rip Dean apart, limb from limb, after I skinned him and before throwing his useless remains into a cesspool where he could decay along with all the other shit.

Those pleasant thoughts kept out those more troubling. Clouds covered the moon and then retreated, but we weren't using light to find our way. Raven's nose was to the ground, her furred form stiff with tension as we climbed. I hadn't realized there were any hills this high so near to town, but I hadn't really paid attention to the landscape in this area. Other than our new find behind the rest stop, most of the places I liked to shift were on the other side of the city, where rolling fields and small forested areas provided a great place to run.

Raven stopped and lifted her muzzle, dark eyes turning toward me. She looked so lost, although I knew we were heading where we needed to. But every minute was one more when our mate could be harmed or killed by a father who had more interest in destroying his family than anyone I'd ever heard of. He was so sure he could tap their power source once Onyx and Valentina were out of the picture. Why did he think so? It was something to pursue later, though, because a flash of moonlight had revealed something in the distance.

I bumped Raven with my snout and she turned her head and leapt forward. The clouds were back, but we knew, or were at least fairly sure, where we were headed. Sure enough, the next beams of light shone down on what would appear to most people to be an abandoned hovel sitting on top of the hill. Heavy drapes covered all the windows, of which there were many. My nose caught the faintest scent of wood smoke, as if someone had a fire but had doused it some days ago. Not days, hours. And as we dropped to our bellies and crept closer, I caught a thin line of light between two dilapidated boards.

Someone was in there. And our mate's scent, along with that of a male related to her, told us who.

We padded around the building, hunting for access or an open curtain, something to give us more information. Not a sound came out, which could mean that the place was better insulated than it appeared, but what about that light between the boards?

Either this was truly what it seemed, an abandoned place that Dean was just making use of to meet with Onyx, or...or what? Something disguised? Frustration rolled over me as I could not find a place to see, and punching a hole in the wall would be loud.

Finally, we came around again to where we started, where light leaked out, and while I still could not hear anything, her scent became stronger. Tinged with strong emotions like anger. Other scents, too, but hers was so overwhelming, I couldn't tell if they were from right now or maybe earlier today. Bumping muzzles with Raven, I led her back from the house and down the trail until a curve hid the house from view.

Then I shifted. “Take your skin, mate. We need to call for backup.”

Her beautiful human form appeared in seconds. “How are we going to do that?”

I waved my phone at her. “On this?”

Her jaw dropped. “And where did you get that?”

“It was on this short thong around my neck. While you were locking the truck, I slipped my head through it.”

She smacked my arm...again. I hoped this wasn't going to become a habit because it stung. “And why the big secret?”

“It wasn't one. I just didn't think to tell you. I am sorry.” I watched her hands anxiously. Probably deserved another whack on the arm.

But she just shook her head. “I'm not thrilled that I didn't know, but glad you thought to do that. I never...yeesh, it's so smart.”

“That's why you keep me around.” I was already dialing Bishop's number. “Let's get Valentina's mates up here. Without more information, we don't know if we're facing one enemy or several.”

The phone rang a nerve-racking six times before he picked up. Background noise, laughter, and clinking glasses told me he was at the Midnight.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Valentina

I was wiping down the bar for the hundredth time that night—at least—and cursing sloppy trolls who spilled everything when Bishop caught my eye from across the room. “Jo, would you mind if I stepped away for a minute?”

“No, of course not. You haven’t had a break all night.” She gave me a nudge. “Go sit on one of your mates’ laps for a few and recharge.”

“That sounds so good.” And not only because I loved sitting on their laps and cuddling. “My feet are about to pack up and leave for a kinder, gentler owner.”

“I get that.” She took the rag from me, and I lifted the bar flap and stepped out onto the floor. We were still very busy after midnight, which made sense considering how many of our customers only came out at night. Maybe the reason Jo had named the place the Midnight? Hmm. I’d have to ask her. But first, my mates.

I walked into Bishop’s open arms and plopped down on his thick, muscular thigh. “Missing me, were you?”

“Anytime you’re not touching me.” He kissed my cheek and smiled but it didn’t reach his eyes.

Wariness stirred within me, and I glanced at Fox and Storm who sat at the table with him. They looked as serious as death. Wariness escalated to fear. “What’s wrong? Are you all okay?”

“We’re fine,” Storm assured me.

“Then who... Onyx? Did something happen to her?” Who else could it be? She never missed a shift, never even caught a cold or anything, to do so.

“No. That is, we’re not sure.” Bishop held up his phone. “Read this.”

I took it from him. “A text from Asher?”

He nodded. “He called but then he wanted to give all the info in text to avoid making more noise maybe.”

You can track my phone. You’ll want to come in shifted, as we did, for speed.

It went on, and every word I read sent more icy chills down my spine. Onyx was inside some old shack with her father and possibly other evil types, they did not know if she was all right but she was definitely upset, and they asked if my mates could come and fight with them. Asher had thrown himself into the battle I fought, as had Raven and Onyx. We could do no less for them in return.

Bishop set me on my feet and stood himself before taking his phone back. “So, maybe stay in the apartment here until we get back? It will probably be pretty late.”

“You’re joking, right?” Who did they think they were talking to? Some wilting flower who would send her mates out to fight a battle that concerned her and her dearest friends while she stayed behind and sipped wine coolers?

“No, V.” Storm also stood, followed by Fox. “We have to go.”

“We.” I stomped my foot as the word tumbled from my lips. “We have to go.”

“Oh no.” Their chorus of protests ran over each other as they tried to convince me that I needed to stay behind.

“While the menfolk fight the bad guys? I guess I could do my nails...”

“That’s the spirit.” Fox patted my shoulder. “We’ll be back as soon as possible.”

There was no addressing such sexism. I really thought they were smarter. It wasn’t even our first battle. “Jo, I have to go help rescue Onyx. Can you handle things here?”

She waved the bar rag at me. “Take Jeremy. He’s good in these situations.”

“Thanks!” Of course, since everyone heard me, a few others wanted to join in then a few more, and by the time we were on the highway, we were at the head of a long caravan of at least fifteen cars, most packed to the headliners. Unlike Raven and Asher, we did not park on the highway. Not everyone in our little group was a wolf or shifter, and we wanted to make the trip on foot as short as possible. When we got to Onyx’s car at the dead end, we piled out and started up the dirt track. Those who did not shift carried clothes for those who did, and a few extra things for our friends who were already up there. It seemed to take forever, but we finally came upon Raven and Asher waiting for us.

“It’s right up there.” Asher pointed, naked but waving away clothes. “Around that bend. I was going to say we need

to be quiet, but I don't think that's a possibility with this big a crowd. When I called for backup, I was expecting three."

I took my skin and pulled a long T-shirt someone tossed me over my head. I had no idea whose it was, nor did I care. "And there was your first mistake."

Asher took a step back, but Raven, also wearing a shirt at least five sizes too big, smirked. "I told you she'd come."

"Right." Asher shrugged. "And you were right. You didn't tell me she'd bring all her friends. Hi, Jeremy, everyone. Thanks for coming to help. I have a plan in mind but am willing to entertain better ones."

"We're listening," Jeremy said. He had not chosen to dress, and his body was all big muscles without an ounce of fat, enough to scare anyone. He was built for his job. Me, I liked a little less bulk, but lots of females tried to get his attention every night, and they hadn't even seen his...ummm, other muscle. "Hurry and get to the part where I get to punch the lights out of Dean. He upsets me by breathing." He bared his teeth in a mean smile I would never want directed at me. Lucky we were friends.

"Not yet." Asher started drawing in the dirt, the moonlight illuminating his work. Essentially, we were going to surround the cabin and then move in from all sides at once. If necessary, we'd demolish the place board by board. Sounded good to me. But Jeremy was going to have to stand in line if he wanted to punch Dean.

When everyone indicated they knew their part, mostly where to stand because we were all acting as one, we marched up the trail. Some people stayed shifted, including my mates,

but I chose to keep my skin. I thought my voice might be needed at some point. We slipped into place, a motley crew of animals and human forms ready to help our friend and favorite bartender. I'd overheard a couple of people say they wouldn't ever get a truly dry martini if they didn't save her.

Whatever it took.

We moved closer, bit by bit, and suddenly I heard voices raised in anger or distress. But before anyone could act, the roof shattered, rough wooden shingles showering us. I dropped to the ground and covered my head, waiting for the rain of splinters and shards to stop.

A cry had me leaping up. "It's a dragon!"

Rising above the open-topped shack flapped the wide wings of a huge dragon.

"It's the one from the archery field," gasped Raven.

"Or its twin," Asher put in.

But that wasn't the most startling fact. Or terrifying. While we all stood there in the dragon's thrall, the rest of him emerged. His claws gripped a woman, wings taking her higher and higher.

"Onyx, no!" Raven screamed. "Why didn't she turn him into something else? She can do that?"

But I knew why... the form hanging from the dragon winging away across the fields hung limp. She was either unconscious or... No, the "or" would be unthinkable. But Raven threw herself into Asher's arms and sobbed. Not anything I'd ever expected my former suitemate to do.

Exactly what I would do in her place.

Epilogue

Asher

I didn't realize I could lose a piece of myself without being physically altered. As Raven crashed against me and I held her to my chest, I looked at the ground, wondering why there wasn't a pool of blood beneath us when clearly I'd been amputated somehow.

"Why isn't she fighting?" I asked, my words catching in my throat. Raven sobbed in my arms while I tipped my head back, silently begging Onyx to look at me. Show a sign of life.

A kick.

A flinch.

A wink.

Anything would do.

I wanted to call out for her. Cry out her name. But that was dangerous, not only for me, Raven, and the others, but for Onyx. I didn't know this dragon or what his intentions were with my mate, but the fact that he was hanging out on a hilltop in a shack with Onyx's father and taking my mate somewhere when she was incapacitated was a clue that if I called out, he would either come down here and slaughter us all or drop Onyx and end her life.

Neither was an option for me.

"What the hell do we do?" Jeremy breached the silence, though he spoke in only a whisper.

I couldn't take my eyes off Onyx as she and the dragon became smaller and smaller in the sky as he flew off. "We have to get her back somehow. We won't stop until we've found her."

Valentina came over and pulled Raven from me. Onyx was Valentina's friend as well as her cousin. She spoke through her pain. "I'm gonna kill him for this. I wanted to kill him before, but for this...my uncle is going to die—at my bare hands if possible."

"What do we do?" Raven asked, barely controlling her sobs.

I stared at the night sky as the dragon and my mate became nothing more than a dark spot in the sky and then nothing, even for my shifter eyes. Looking down at my mate, my wolf kicked into protective mode.

"I have to get Raven out of here. When all of us are safe, we need to make a plan. I won't sleep until my mate is found."

"Our mate," Raven murmured.

"Yes, our mate," I replied with a nod.

Jeremy stepped forward. "We'll help you, Asher. You're not alone in this. We won't stop until we get Onyx back."

I nodded and stood before scooping up Raven in my embrace. She wrapped her arms around my neck and held me tight. "Let's shift and get out of here. But we know where he is now. Next time we come out to this desert, there will be two objectives. Get our mate back..."

My eyes involuntarily went up to the sky, hoping she might be there, but there was nothing but stars and the moon

gave me no solace. Even the clouds from earlier were gone far away somewhere.

“And the other?” Bishop asked. His wolf was close to bursting out of him.

“Kill the motherfucker who dared to do this to my mate. Him and that dragon.”

Thank you for reading Urban Academy Semester 7. If you'd like to see what Valentina and Raven and all their friends and mates are up to next, one-click [Semester 8](#) today!

A Peek at [Urban Academy: Semester 8](#)



Asher

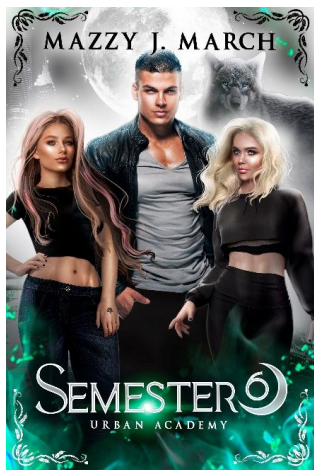
I swore I wouldn't sleep until we got Onyx back, but even a shifter can only stay awake for so long. I finally passed out after a few days and woke loathing myself. Raven was at my side, telling me it would be all right, that we'd find her, bring her home, and then kill her father as many times as I'd like. But we didn't know where she was or if she was even all right.

Raven

Last time we saw our mate, she was being carried off by a dragon, hanging from its claws, limp and doing nothing to fight back. But I'd know if she was dead. I had to believe that. And I had to keep Asher from killing himself in the process of saving her. And finalize our matings. It was past time we let down the last of our barriers and welcomed in the gift of Fate. The minute we got Onyx back, I'd make sure that happened.

Urban Academy Semester 8 is the eighth story in the Urban Academy series by bestselling author Mazzy J. March. The first books follow the story of Valentina's new life in the city at The Academy where she learns that the world is much broader and more varied than she ever dreamed and sometimes a human girl's fate may twine with that of another kind of being. Or three. In book 8, we complete the mating of Valentina's friend Raven and cousin Onyx and the male wolf, Asher that fought at their sides as well as the final battle with Uncle Dean and his vampires and dragons and other creatures of the darkness.

An Excerpt from Urban Academy: Semester 6



Chapter One

Onyx

“Valentina! You’re tanned. You were at the beach and then all the ocean sex. I get it.”

The entire bar fell silent, and my cousin and bar-mate Valentina stared at me with wide eyes, biting her lip. Her mates, Storm, Bishop, and Fox were sitting at a table along the outer wall and, at my words, they all fist-bumped. *Boys, I swear.*

A staring battle ensued between us. I knew which one was going to crack first. It was definitely her.

Finally, she burst into laughter, and I joined her, along with the others in the bar. Her face was redder than the chest of a fire dragon. “All the ocean sex? Gods, that was a good one.”

The first time I saw her back from vacation, she had a sunglasses tan. She gave me a tank top that said, *I’d rather be in the South Pacific.*

I envied her. She found her mates and went on an amazing vacation. She actually had a relationship with her sister where my brothers were; well, they ran like cowards after the run-in with my father.

Run-in was a nice way to put it. If he had his way, Valentina would be dead, and I would’ve been next in line.

The threat of him coming back always hung over our heads, but we were determined to live, in the meantime.

Valentina was living, at least. Me, on the other hand, I was still bartending, going home, eating, showering, finding time to read...and that was it. Not really living, but at least I was no longer an assassin for my father on a mission to kill my cousin. And Jo hadn't fired me when she learned about the mess I'd been entangled in.

Always an upside.

Still, if I heard one more thing from Valentina about sun, sand, beaches, oceans, waves, mai tais, coconut water, or even towels, I was going to reach over and strangle my height-challenged friend and kind-of-only family I had left.

"Tell me about something not vacation. What's going on with school? Did you find a place to live?" I made a swamp water for one of the shifters who winked at me and put a hundred-dollar bill into the tip jar.

Valentina and I were weirdly popular in the city now. I had been for some time already. Don't know why. Josephine told me there was mystery around me, and I didn't show romantic interest in anyone, which made me more of a riddle. Stupid logic. I was just a bartender. Yeah, I had a smart mouth. I didn't take shit from any of these people, regardless of the danger that lurked beneath their surfaces. I wasn't a center stage act, more like a sideshow.

V was cute, I had to admit. She could do her own makeup now and, honestly, I missed being able to do that for her. She still had a lot to learn, but she was well on her way to being a powerful force to reckon with.

We really didn't have a choice in that matter. We had to be strong to protect the ones we loved from my father.

Not that I loved anyone.

There was someone, but things with them were... complicated. That was putting it nicely.

“Onyx?” V said, snapping me out of my head.

“What?”

“Are you not listening to me?” She lined up a row of shot glasses when a regular group of vampires came in. They always ordered thirteen Crimson Peaks. It was an alcoholic drink with a bit of magic and a percentage of blood. I didn’t ask where Josephine got the blood from, and I didn’t want to know.

“I’m listening. Urban Academy...something about a meeting.”

She rolled her eyes while filling the glasses. Vamps were annoying, but these were docile for the most part, and they tipped a ton—always. “I had a meeting with the headmistress this morning. She said I’d better be on my toes this semester. She’s giving me one more shot.”

“What about the living arrangements? Please tell me you and your mates aren’t going to try to squash yourselves into that tiny apartment.”

“No. We rented a place by Fox’s old apartment. Four bedrooms. That’s why we need more tips.”

I elbowed her in the ribs, or tried to; it ended up hitting her in the shoulder. “I thought your boys were from money.”

She scoffed and paused to make a leopard shifter calm the fuck down. He had come in all rough-and-tumble, pheromones

oozing from every pore. An aggressive one for sure. If he caught Josephine's attention, he'd be out. "They are, but I'm not one to be taken care of, you know? I make my own way."

Our conversation quieted as an influx of customers came in. They always came in waves on the weekends—groups of them. We had a new waitress named Myra. Josephine wanted her to wait on the tables and stop the lines and crowding at the bar. It was working. She beelined between tables and behind the bar, doing a great job.

"Two Cauldrons, please."

Cauldrons were strong, a high percentage of alcohol. Burgundy-colored drinks with a spell that made them appear to have smoke on the top. There was only one person I knew who ordered that drink. Didn't take the drink order to make me aware that she was in the room though. My skin prickled as soon as she walked in.

Raven.

But who did the other drink go to? Raven only ever ordered one. I watched as Myra delivered one to Raven and then walked across the room to deliver the other to Asher. I knew his name. He was a wolf shifter. During our battle with my father, he had saved Raven from some trolls or vamps, couldn't remember which. What I did remember was his huge black wolf rescuing her when I couldn't.

His eyes met mine across the bar. My skin filled with goose bumps and I shuddered. He had the most gorgeous dark-brown eyes. He was as tall as me but built like a linebacker, all muscle and brawn. Huge shoulders that I wanted to hang onto while...shit. No.

I had to focus on training and staying to myself. People around me got hurt.

And that was the last thing I wanted to happen to him—or Raven.

It was better for both of them if they stayed away from me.

“It’s midnight, V. Time for you to go home.”

And time for her to stop looking between me and Raven and me and Asher. Gods, she was too intuitive for her own good.

Chapter Two

Valentina

“Not until you tell me what the hell is going on,” I said, kicking at Onyx’s shin behind the bar.

“Kick me again, and I’ll turn your leg into a snake.”

Honestly, I believed she would, so I backed up a little, physically, not with the questions. “That’s the guy from the battle, right? He’s from Urban Academy. Big black wolf.”

She said nothing in reply, so I pushed another button that might flare her up. “Hey, doesn’t he know Raven? I’ll just go ask her.”

Her hand gripped my shoulder. “Go over there and you... there will be trouble.”

Aha, struck a nerve. “You’ve got a thing for Raven. Tell the truth.” I whispered since this bar was made of ears that heard everything and mouths that didn’t stay shut.

She splayed her hands on the bar and leaned forward. “Gods, I should’ve killed her when I had the chance. This is my penance for not following orders.” Onyx looked at me and smiled, her red lips curving. Tonight, her makeup was less intense than usual. It was all magic, of course. Once the bar closed for the night, it would disappear.

“Shut up. You love me.”

“Not right now.”

I bit down on my lip. “Nothing from your dear old dad?”

She shook her head. My gaze darted to Raven and Asher, both of whom were watching Onyx's every move and each other. These three—something was up. The tension could be cut with a knife.

“You'll let me know, won't you?”

She rolled her eyes and turned to me. “I kind of have to. He's after us both now. If he gets me, he gets you, too, babe. Now, go. Your mates are getting restless. They might start grunting and beating their chests if you don't move along.”

I looked toward Bishop, Storm, and Fox. All three were standing, leaned against the wall, arms crossed over their chest. Bishop was brooding, checking his watch. Fox had one leg up as though he would wait for me forever. Storm nailed me with a smile, making my core pulse. Yeah, I needed to go.

“I'm leaving. I'm leaving. I've got my eyes on you, Cousin.”

Onyx waved me away, and I began toward my mates, taking off my magical makeup in the process. “Onyx said you three were going to go nuts if I didn't leave. Now, that's not true, is it?”

Bishop rolled his eyes. “No. Not until the stroke of midnight. Are we getting out of here, or shall I throw you over my shoulder?”

Bishop, ever the brute. “I think I can...oooh!” Before I could answer, Bishop bent and tucked his shoulder into my abdomen and lifted me off the floor. There were several grunts and growls from the shifters in the bar. They were cheering him on. Bunch of animals.

When we got outside, Fox convinced Bishop to put me down, and he held my hips so my landing wouldn't be too rough. "I got you, mate."

When we came back from our extended vacation, we had no idea what would happen but we knew that we couldn't live apart anymore. We had been through too much. Our bond was too thick. Proximity wasn't just wanted; it was needed.

"Thanks, Fox." While we walked back to the apartment, I held Fox's hand while Bishop and Storm walked behind us. It had become a nightly ritual to stop at the donut shop and get a late-night snack before heading home. My mates' appetites never ceased to amaze me.

When we got back to the apartment, I ran to take a shower. I smelled like swamp water and sweat and bodies packed into a hot bar. As soon as I came out, Storm met me with my pajamas and a killer smile. "What's that smile for?" I asked.

"Just a guy wanting some time with his mate. That's all. The others headed to bed."

"Some time? That's all you want from me?" I asked, dropping the towel in front of him. We were in my bedroom and he had already shut the door behind him.

"Well, the donuts did give me a bit of extra energy..."

About Mazzy J. March

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

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