

A MYSTICS & MAYHEM
HOLIDAY



A PACK CHRISTMAS



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
HEATHER RENEE

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A MYSTICS AND MAYHEM HOLIDAY STORY

HEATHER RENEE

A Pack Christmas: A Mystics and Mayhem Holiday Story

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Mystics and Mayhem](#)

[Fractured Mates Preview](#)

[Stay In Touch](#)

[Also by Heather Renee](#)

[About the Author](#)

CHAPTER I

CAIT

The perfect Christmas. I'm not sure if such a thing exists, but it's been a goal of mine for years now. Especially since it seems the people I consider family have been growing apart for some time. Well, outside of Roman and Dawsyn. It isn't that I think those closest to us don't care. I know how life can be, but I haven't seen my best friends all together in... holy hell.

Three years.

Three unacceptable years.

I'm going to fix that, even if it pisses off my mate.

This is my and Roman's last Christmas as the pack alphas. In the coming months, the torch will pass to Dawsyn. She's ready, but I don't know if I am.

Not that I don't believe in her. It's just that I want to go out with a bang. I want all the memories before I'm made to feel like an old hag who has been retired from her post.

Seriously, did I really just think that? Am I going to be an *old hag*?

Growing up really freaking sucks.

Still, the perfect Christmas. It's going to happen.

Cait, Roman's voice sounds in my head, and I duck behind the boxes of decorations I've been poking through in the basement as if he's standing next to me. *Where is my mate?*

The grumble in his voice doesn't bode well for me. He knows damned well where I am and he's not going to like it, but I don't care. I'm asking for forgiveness instead of permission—the cardinal rule of all happy and thriving mateships.

The door to the basement opens calmly, but this time my name is said out

loud.

“Cait.” Roman’s footsteps get closer. “What do you think you’re doing?”

My head peeks up from behind some of the boxes I’ve been pushing together. “Nothing much.”

His blue eyes narrow at me. “Lies. I thought we said we weren’t going all out for Christmas this year. That we would just have a quiet one with our daughter to remember as our last year in the pack house.”

I scrape my teeth over my lip as my pouty eyes come out. “I mean... that’s what *you* said. I might have seemed like I agreed, but...”

He sighs heavily. “But what my mate wants, she gets.”

There’s a smile playing on Roman’s lips as he stalks closer to me, grabs me around the waist, and lifts me from the ground.

Even more than three decades later, I still can’t get enough of this man, and my heart still races from his touch. I wrap my legs around his waist, and a rumble echoes softly from my chest. “Are you here to stop me, my alpha?”

His lips press against my neck, moving up to my ear where he nips at my skin. “I should be.”

The grin on my face grows, but I hold back my joy. “It will just be a small gathering of our friends that are more family than anything else,” I say, kissing his face lightly between my words. “Plus, Dawsyn needs a reminder of her support system. She won’t be alone in running this pack, just like we weren’t.”

Roman might have technically been the alpha of East Texas for the last thirty-plus years, but I’ve been his alpha female for nearly that entire time and showed the world early on that I wasn’t to be messed with.

We aren’t to be messed with, Adira, my wolf, corrects with pure confidence.

I wasn’t born with her like most wolf shifters. I was human for the first twenty-one years of my life, but after so much time with Adira, I can’t remember anything before her with clarity.

She’s my person. Though, we don’t tell Roman that.

I’m also the only shifter I know who calls her inner wolf by name. We’re special like that.

Roman’s tightening grip around my hips has my attention moving fully back to him as he says, “Our friends don’t equal a small gathering unless you’re only inviting one of the families.”

“Oh, don’t be such an old man.” My fingers brush through his brown

hair, revealing the silver strands he wishes he could hide. “Just because you’re greying doesn’t mean you need to get all cranky.”

“I thought you liked my grey hairs,” he mutters. “Called me your silver... wolf.”

Well, originally I’d said “fox”, but he and his wolf had taken offense. Quite comically.

“You are,” I purr, trying to soften him up. “A sexy, strong, dominating silver wolf that I love with all my heart and then some. The man who would do anything to make me happy including hosting a Christmas weekend with our best friends and their kids.”

“You realize none of them are kids anymore?” he grumbles, mouth turning down. “Hell, some of us are even grandparents.”

“And you’ve been the best Papa to your two grandchildren,” I say with a widening smile. “Your grandchildren who miss their extended family and should have the chance to know them like Dawsyn did.”

It’s not as if we haven’t seen our friends in the last few years. Just not all of them at the same time, and that is an experience I miss. Having Embry, Andie, Lucinda, and Amersyn all together... We’ve gotten into some of the best kinds of trouble together over the years.

Which is probably why Roman is apprehensive, but it’s Christmas. We’ll be on our best behavior. Mostly.

I nip at my mate’s neck and give him my best doe-eyed look. “It’s just one weekend. Don’t fight this. Please.”

He shakes his head, fighting a grin. “You’ve already invited them all, haven’t you?”

I shrug and wink. “Just the women, and I asked them not to tell their men until I finally told you.”

“Christmas is in three days,” he points out. “When were you planning on telling me?”

My head nods at all the boxes around us. “Once I had everything I needed to decorate together and asked for your help getting things out of the basement.”

“You’re insufferable, you know that, right?” he asks, but his voice is light, and I know I have his approval.

I knew I’d get it eventually, but I expected more arguing, even some compromising in the form of sexual favors. This is a bit disappointing, but I don’t tell him that.

I'm going to have all my best friends in the same place for my favorite time of year.

"But you love me anyway," I tell him as I wiggle out of his arms to stand on my own again. "Now, how about you start taking these up, and I'll double check that I haven't missed any of the decorations."

"Yes, ma'am," he says before stepping away from me, but not quick enough to be out of reach.

I smack his shoulder and growl. "I'm not a *ma'am*."

"But you are a grammy," he teases as if that makes *me* old.

"You're just jealous that I've only just gotten my first few strands of grey and you've been there for years now."

His eyes narrow. "Do you want to bring these boxes upstairs by yourself?"

"Love you, dear!" I call out as I start to move through the shelves that hold the rest of the items. I've been through them twice now, but I don't want to come back down here once I start turning the pack house into a winter wonderland. I've only done it twice before: Dawsyn's first Christmas, which she doesn't even remember but was totally worth it, and the first Christmas Dawsyn wasn't here for.

My heart had been broken, missing her, and I'd basically gotten to do whatever I wanted that year. It was sad and amazing all at the same time.

Once I've triple-checked that there isn't anything else to take up, I make sure all the boxes Roman needs to move are close together, then reach for my phone.

It's time to call my girls.

CHAPTER 2

LUCINDA

Back in Fae Islands...

Have friends, they said... It will be fun, they said...
They all lied. Friends. Mates. Kids. It's not just fun, it's mayhem.
Secretly, I might enjoy some of the crazy, but when my best friend springs a Christmas gathering on me with only a few days' notice, I kind of want to murder her.

My kids are missing. Okay, maybe that's a bit dramatic. It's not as if I've lost them. They're adults by fae standards now, but they're not answering my calls and I have no clue if I'll find them before we need to leave.

We don't really do holidays around here, so Christmas wasn't on our radar until my human-born wolf shifter of a best friend Cait decided to make a big to-do out of this one.

"Finnigan!" I yell across the house. "Have you found your demon spawn?"

He teleports in front of me, earning himself a punch to the stomach, which he unsurprisingly avoids. He's used to my aggressive ways. I think it's become a game for him over the years.

"*Our* beautiful children, you mean?" he says with a grin, causing thin lines to form around his silver eyes. "Dominic and Raven are somewhere in Europe with their favorite uncle."

Of course Victor DuPont would have kidnapped them. Though, what he's done for my son is more appreciated than I typically express. Well, at least

when it's not an inconvenience to have him helping.

"We're going to East Texas for a Christmas celebration," I tell Finn, then tangle one hand in his dark blond hair and run the other one over his chest. "Is there any way you can get a hold of them and get them home?"

My mate frowns and tries to pull away, but I tighten my grip on his blue shirt. "Victor told my sister that he'd be offline, even for her, until Sunday."

Son of a bitch. If my sister-in-law can't even get a hold of her mate, there's no way I'm getting to my kids.

"So, you're telling me that we have to join our closest friends for a holiday they practically worship without proof of our accomplishments in hand?"

The others will all undoubtedly brag about their children. Theirs, who have mostly stuck close to home and been good little offspring. Unlike mine who disappear as often as possible.

Yes, I'm sour about having created, grown, birthed, and wiped the asses of my precious demon spawn only to be abandoned by them. But I get that right as their mother. Even if I know Dominic needs his freedom to figure out who he is.

With his unique wings, I know the struggles he faces. I had them myself. I just wish I was the person he went to. Instead, his Uncle Victor has been the go-to guy while I remain here at Fae Islands being all responsible and shit.

How is this my life?

Sometimes Raven stays behind, but I know she prefers to be with her brother, making sure he's safe. It's a bond I can't be jealous of—one I wish I'd had growing up.

Finn's hands squeeze my shoulders as he smiles at me. "I'm sure Cait and Roman will be glad to have us there, even if we can't bring our grown kids for physical proof that we've done something with our lives besides make sure this entire realm hasn't gone to hell again."

I roll my eyes, because being diplomatic is my least favorite thing in this world.

"We need to leave tomorrow," I tell him. "Do you think that's going to be an issue?"

He reaches for the tablet on the dresser next to us and starts poking around the screen, making weird faces as he types. I don't know how he keeps track of all that he does, but these islands would have crashed and burned without him long ago.

He finally sets the tablet down and grins. "It's all set. We can even leave today if you want."

"I guess if we're not waiting on the kids..." There's warmer weather in East Texas this time of year, and it's been a couple months since I've seen Cait.

Finn kisses the pout off my face. "Pack a bag, Lucy. Forget about your worries. Dom and Raven are safe with Victor. Let's go have some fun with our friends. It's been too long."

He's right, but my worries are about my children. Forgetting about them? Well, that's impossible.

"Do you really think Dom is safe?" I ask. It's a conversation we don't often discuss, but one that is never far from my mind.

Our son has white feathered wings. Wings that had never been seen before his birth. At least that we've found over the years. He still hasn't shown an affinity for a certain power, yet he can do all the normal fae things like flying, teleporting, and conjuring our own kind of magic.

One would think that not having an affinity appear like the rest of us feathered fae would be good, but I sense something within him. Buried deep, as if Dom is keeping it trapped, afraid of what will happen once it's unleashed.

"He's going to be fine," Finn promises me for the millionth time. "Maybe we're all stressing for no reason. Maybe the lack of color in his wings is a good thing."

My optimistic mate. I want to believe him, but that isn't happening. Not right now.

"Let's go before I change my mind and we end up in Europe tracking down our kids instead," I say, then turn for the closet to grab a bag. Before I start packing clothes, I swivel back toward Finn, and a wicked grin rises on my face. "I'm bringing the reindeer thong. I hope you'll...rise to the occasion."

My laughter follows me into the closet as his groans fill the bedroom.

Cait will be pleased to know her gag gift to him has brought me so much joy over the years.

CHAPTER 3

ANDIE

Back in Los Angeles...

I didn't think I could love Cait more, but I'm pretty sure this is the best news ever. "Foster!" I call out for my mate from the kitchen, hoping he's still on the first floor of the pack house. "We're needed in East Texas."

Before I can put down my phone, He's in my face, his stormy blue eyes blinking rapidly. "What's wrong? Did something happen to Dawsyn? If it's that dragon mate—"

"Easy there, Uncle Killer," I tease him. "Your niece is fine. Cait's throwing a Christmas party and we're going."

"Christmas?" he groans. "I thought we agreed to stop doing that until we had grandkids."

Foster grabs a handful of pretzels from the bowl on the counter and heads back toward the living room where he's set up his puzzle. Yes, my big bad alpha has taken a liking to puzzling. I don't know why, and I don't ask. The challenge seems to calm him, and I'm completely okay with that since the pack tends to drive him crazy most days.

"We did, but that doesn't mean everyone else did," I say, brushing my pink hair behind my shoulders. "You have today to finish your latest masterpiece. We're leaving by end of day, as long as our daughter doesn't have anything going on."

Aspen seems to have a busier social life than I do, even as the alpha female. Though, I don't complain too often. She's stuck around and that's what I care about most.

Foster mutters words under his breath, but I only catch the last bit. "...

without much notice.”

“Quit being a grinch,” I tell him as I sit on the edge of the couch next to him. My arm slides over his shoulders, and I kiss his cheek. “You know you’ll have fun hanging out with Roman and the other guys. You men have a bromance, even if you try to hide it.”

He shrugs my arm off. “Don’t ever use that word again.”

“*Broooo-mance?*” I tease. “Is my strong, scary alpha too manly to be associated with such a lowly term?”

“Yes,” he grunts out, making me laugh.

“Well, that’s just too bad.” I stand up and take in his puzzle. It’s a nighttime landscape with lots of stars and trees surrounding a shimmering lake at the center. Not too many distinguishing parts, making the challenge even more prominent for him.

“I’m impressed that you’re already done with the lake,” I tell him sincerely. “It’s looking really good.”

His frown deepens as he points to a spot toward the bottom. “Except I’m missing a piece. I’m pretty sure Mack stole it. In fact, I think he does this with every single puzzle, because I magically find the missing one somewhere that it absolutely shouldn’t be just when I’m about to finish.”

Yes, that’s something his beta would do, but little does my mate know... I’m the one who steals from him.

It’s only slightly cruel, and yet, I can’t help myself because ruffling my alpha is something I’ll never tire of.

“I’m sure it will turn up somewhere,” I tell him with a smile. “I’ll pack for you so you can finish here.”

He nods, but I’m not sure he hears me as he puts another piece where it belongs.

Men. Odd creatures they are.



THE UNIVERSE HATES ME TODAY. I DON’T KNOW WHAT I DID WRONG LATELY, but all I want to do is leave for three days with my mate and our daughter, so we can spend time with our closest friends. Yet, it seems everything is going wrong. Stupidly wrong.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” Aspen says breathily through the phone. “I’m not

leaving my house for at least two days.”

I look around to make sure her father is nowhere near me. “Are you alone? Do you need me to...find anyone?”

My poor daughter. We didn’t know until she hit puberty if she was a hybrid, wolf, or witch. Beatrix still calls her a hybrid, but I think that’s only because the elder witch wishes for another one of her.

When she was eleven, Aspen shifted into a stunning caramel-colored wolf, and while the wolf has a glow to it, she’s never been able to do a spell. Meaning she gets to experience heats. Something I know nothing about firsthand. Though, Cait’s told me about suffering from intense...oh, hell. I don’t want to think about this in relation to my daughter. Even if she is grown.

“I’ve got things taken care of,” she says quickly. “I just called to let you know...” There’s pure silence as if she’s muted me.

“Aspie?”

Her breathy voice cuts back in. “I gotta go, Mom. Tell Auntie Cait I’m sorry to miss the fun.”

The call ends, and I glare at the screen as if it’s to blame. “Well, this sucks.”

“You’re telling me,” Foster says as he storms into the bedroom, slamming the door behind him. “I need a few more hours at least.”

I thought he was referring to his daughter at first and I almost die. Not that he isn’t fully aware that Aspen has heat cycles. Foster just prefers not to know. Picturing his daughter in that way... Yeah, I don’t blame him. I don’t like it, either.

“What happened?” I ask, since we’re supposed to be teleporting out of the pack and to Cait’s right now.

“One of the pups thought it would be a good idea to toss a filled gas can on his dad’s burn pile,” Foster snarls. “Something about pretty flames. Thanks to that, their house caught on fire, and I need to go see how bad the damage is and possibly find them a temporary home until repairs are sorted.”

I go to my mate and grab his arm as he throws open drawers, likely searching for more appropriate work clothes.

“Foster,” I say sternly. “Look at me.”

Begrudgingly, or so it seems, he pauses and turns toward me. “What?”

“Nobody was hurt, right?” I ask, and he nods. “Then, everything is okay.”

He glowers, running a hand through his shoulder-length russet hair. “But

you were so excited to leave.”

“And I still am,” I say with a smile. “But today isn’t Christmas. If we don’t get to East Texas until tonight, then we don’t. This is our family here, too. Let’s go take care of them and do it with compassion. Not as an inconvenience.”

He grabs my face with both hands. “I couldn’t do this without you.”

“I know.” My grin grows wider as I push up onto my toes. “And you’ll never have to.”

At least this will distract him from realizing that our daughter isn’t around and not going to be. Now, it’s time to put on my alpha female hat and go help one of our families.

Cait will understand.

CHAPTER 4

CAIT

Back in East Texas...

I will not cry. I will not cry. I will not cry.

But I will whine because absolutely nothing is going to plan.

And maybe shed a tear when no one is looking.

“What do you mean the lights aren’t working?” I ask as calmly as I’m capable of with three young teen shifters staring back at me like lost puppies.

Jake, the one holding a tangled mess of lights, says, “Well, before we started to hang them, we plugged them into four different outlets to make sure everything is working and nothing. Not a single bulb lit up.”

A rumble grows within my chest and has each of them backing up a step as I close my eyes and rub my hands over my face.

“At least one of you can drive, yes?” I ask, glancing at the three friends. Each of them nods. “Good. Go to the garage, take one of the pack vehicles and go buy all the fu—lovely Christmas lights you can find please.”

They might be rowdy boys, but that doesn’t mean I need to cuss in front of them. At least not when I can catch myself.

Before I’ve even turned back to the mess that is the ornaments, they’ve scurried off. I don’t know what I was thinking planning a Christmas party with only a few days’ notice. Yet, I’m determined for this to not be a failure.

I’ve already sent the invitations, told Roman, and put things into motion. The last major holiday I spend as alpha female will not be a total mess.

Maybe you should just quit trying to turn the house into a winter wonderland, Adira points out.

My hazel eyes narrow, even though she can’t see my glare. *I’m making it*

festive. That's the point of a Christmas party.

Right...

Pain in my ass wolf. She doesn't know what she's talking about.

At least my lights inside are still working. I go back to my ladder in the living room where I've already moved furniture around to account for the extra people. Grabbing a string of white twinkle lights, I climb up and begin putting holes in the wall that Roman will want to kill me for later, but again, getting forgiveness is almost easier than permission with these kinds of things.

I'm making good progress in this room. As long as I can ignore the ornament nightmare I unveiled in the boxes, I might be able to call this morning a success. Well, if Roman and Sam return with a proper tree.

I'm halfway up the ladder again and ready to finish the last section of wall when teeth sink into my ass. Literally.

"Gahh!" I scream and lose my grip, trying to swat at my unknown attacker, and before I know what's happening, I'm falling backward.

"Shit, Cait!" My mate is behind me. I have no clue how I didn't sense him entering the room, but either way, we're both going down.

He manages to break my fall, but as I try to get off him, he's attempting to roll the other way, so the strand of lights I was holding just moments ago are now tangled around the two of us.

His scowl is adorable, but it's the halo around his head that has me smiling. "Did you find my tree?" I ask with the sweetest tone I can muster.

"You just fell on me and all you can ask about is the tree?" he mutters, trying to get the lights off us, but only manages to make them constrict more.

"You're the one that tried to take a chunk out of my ass," I snap back, losing any humor I felt seconds ago as the wires begin to dig into my skin.

I'm just about to sacrifice the lights when a wave of energy enters the room and I look up to find one of my best friends standing there with her arms crossed.

"Seriously?" Lucinda huffs. "I get abandoned by my children and you get to be tied up in some kinky Christmas shit? How is this fair?" She turns to Finn next to her and shoves him lightly. "Why don't you tie me up anymore?"

Roman covers his ears. "I'm not hearing this right now. Please make it stop."

"Keep your kink in the bedroom and I wouldn't have to complain in front

of you,” Lucinda points out, then glances around. “Why does it look like those little gremlins that build the toys threw up all over your living room and didn’t stay to clean up?”

Sam, Roman’s cousin and our pack beta, bursts into the living room, her blonde hair wet, likely from being outside. “How long am I expect—this is not what I thought I would see in here.”

“Right?” Lucinda says. “It’s as if they have no respect for anyone else.”

Finn saves the day before I can completely lose my shit. “Or maybe there was an accident and our friends just need a bit of help.”

Roman rips the lights to shreds, and Finn grabs onto my shoulders, helping me up. I haven’t seen them in months, and this was not the greeting I foresaw when I invited them to visit. Still, I throw my arms around Finn and squeeze hard. “Thank you for being rational and once again dealing with her crazy.”

“I can hear you,” Lucinda grumbles, making everyone else laugh.

I go to her next and pull her into a hug that she hardly returns. “And yet you still love me,” I tell her.

“At least enough to help with this nightmare.” Lucinda turns around, her blue-and-purple iridescent hair swinging into my face as she does. “Are you really trying to do this without the help of magic?”

Before I can stop her, my fae best friend picks up her phone. “Beatrix?”

“Don’t you dare,” I hiss, but my words go unheard.

“Yeah, Cait is in dire need of help, and I can only do so much.” She pauses and nods. “I know, but we love her.” Another pause. “Well, I didn’t say that.”

My frown deepens as I do my best not to hear the other side of that conversation. I don’t need a grouchy witch and pain in the ass fae ruining my weekend festivities.

“But you’ll come,” Lucinda adds. “Oh, stop being crotchety. Just get here.”

She ends the call, then grins at me, sticking her phone back into the pocket of her black leather pants. Her smile is wide, making her blue eyes shine. “There. Now you can quit panicking.”

“I hate you.”

“And that’s our cue to leave,” Roman says, then nods at Sam. “What did you do with the tree?”

She sighs. “After it tried to piss on me for the fifth time thanks to how

wet everything is out there... Well, I threw it across the yard.”

“It took us two hours to find the perfect one and you *threw it across the yard?*” His seething tone makes me feel mildly better.

My mate might have been against this party to begin with, but Roman loves me more than he needs his next breath.

The front door is shoved open again, and in walks Embry, a pinched expression on her face and white dots covering her rose-gold hair. “Um, guys? It’s snowing.”

My eyes go wide because snow in Texas isn’t something that happens. Not so unexpectedly. I don’t know whether I’m pleased with the revelation, because a white Christmas sounds kind of perfect, but at the same time, it might also make things more chaotic, and I can’t handle any more crazy.

CHAPTER 5

DAWSYN

My mother has officially lost her mind. I love the thought behind what she's trying to do, but this party has brought all the crazy out. Normally, I get a kick out of these things, but this time, I'm a bit worried.

"Should I do something?" I ask Cillian. "I know I'm not officially alpha yet, but I should do something, right?"

He pulls me close and kisses my forehead. "No. Let your mom do this. Just try to keep any pack issues away from your parents, because I think your dad has been hit with the Christmas frenzies as well. I'm pretty sure I heard him humming *Jingle Bells* earlier..."

Oh, hell. What am I going to do with these people?

On the plus side, a lot of my favorite people are going to be here soon, including my best friend River who I haven't seen in months, thanks to his hectic work schedule. I'm proud of the job he's done as a protector, making a difference in our world, but I miss him.

A knock sounds at the door just before it opens. Lykem walks in with a hand over his eyes. "Are all clothes where they should be and body parts concealed?"

"You don't have to ask that every time you enter my office," I tell him with a shake of my head and heavy sigh.

He peeks out from between his fingers. "I still have trouble running after the beating your mate gave me for seeing your..." A warning rumble from Cillian resonates through the room. "I will *always* ask."

Poor Lykem. Well, not really. He shouldn't be entering private spaces without waiting to be invited in if the door is closed.

Still, even if it's cracked open like it just was, he now asks if I'm naked in some way. Every. Time.

My phone rings, and I see River's name on the screen. Excitement soars through me, making my heart beat faster. "Are you here?" I ask when I answer.

"No." His frustrated voice takes all my breath away. "I'm going to be late."

My jaw tightens. "I'm going to call Uncle Maciah and tell him this is beyond ridiculous and he needs to find someone else for whatever is going on."

"I'm nearly there," River says. "Only a couple hours away and I'm the closest to the problem."

"What exactly is this *problem*?" I demand, wondering if there's anything I can do since I'm not supposed to stop the chaos around here.

"A female wolf is lost in the mountains," he says. "I need to track her movements and find her before she freezes to death. Apparently, it's snowing in the South."

I guess I shouldn't have been so excited about that earlier. It's biting me in the ass now.

"I'll do it," Lykem says. "Probably wouldn't be anything for me. I'll just fly over and find her. Where is she?"

"I can't ask you to do that, man," River says. "You're already there with everyone."

Lykem laughs. "I'm *always* here. You aren't. Get your ass here before Dawsyn gets naked and do me a favor by sending over the coordinates for the she-wolf."

My best friend gags. "Do I want to know about Dawsyn getting naked?"

Cillian responds with a resounding "No" as Lykem's laughter deepens.

"Alright, well, if you're sure," River continues, "I'll get you the location, Lykem. And Dawsyn, I'll be there within the hour."

We end the call, and I turn to my mate's best friend. "You have no idea how much that means to me."

He winks. "I think I might have a slight idea. Make sure to save me a turkey leg if I'm not back in time for dinner."

"Dinner's not until tomorrow," I say with a frown, then look at Cillian, who wraps an arm around my waist. Maybe this is a bad idea.

"He'll be back tonight," my mate assures me.

Before I can tell Lykem to be safe, he's out of my office and heading out to be a savior. He's never officially joined the protector team like River, but that dragon sure does love going on random missions. Though, most of them these days happen in Drago. All of which have included searching for more clans and making sure they're all living peacefully.

Even all these years later, after having opened up their realm to Earth, we're still finding dragon shifters who have no clue. Most are content to stay right where they are, but some have joined us, finding a home in the wolf packs instead of the communities as a steppingstone.

Excluding Cillian and Lykem, we have five dragons here in East Texas. One family of three and two singles. They've acclimated well, and that's made my heart happy because I know what a hard choice it was for Cillian to leave his land behind and join me here so I could run my pack.

He pulls me snug against his chest and I look up at him, the flutter in my stomach still present even after all this time. "Should we get naked now that he's gone?"

His lips flatten, clearly not finding me as funny as I do. "Only if we're headed home."

"Hmm, home sure sounds nice," I say, "but I think Aunt Lucy will kill me if I don't get my ass out there and spend time with her."

His grimace intensifies, and his grey eyes darken. Lucinda isn't his favorite person in my family, but then again, she isn't most people's. "I guess it's a holiday. What did you call it again? Chris-something?"

I shake my head and grin. "Christmas. It's more of a human thing, and we normally don't make a big deal about it, which is why you've yet to experience this chaos, but I guess this year is different."

"I think your mother is having regrets about handing over the reins to you," he says sincerely, and I might have thought that, too, but I know her better than that.

"She's big on memories," I tell him. "She grew up human. These things are important to her, even if we haven't embraced them all these years. Well, at least not since I was little and believed in Santa."

His head tilts to the side. "Who the hell is Santa?"

"Long story." My palm covers his chest. "I'll tell you later. I'm going to go make sure Mom doesn't completely lose her shit. Are you sticking around or headed home?"

He glances toward the door. "I don't sense your dad, and if he's run, then

I'm out of here."

"Probably the smarter choice." He leans in and kisses me, but I cut it short. As much as I cherish our alone time, someone is bound to come looking for me soon.

"See you tonight?" I ask, pulling away.

He nods. "How long does all this last?"

"Tomorrow is Christmas, so it will be mostly over after that, but some might stay longer," I say, so he'll know our kids aren't the only people he's going to have to share me with.

Cillian never had a big family, but he's spent the last decade adjusting to mine. Even if they're not all blood, I love them all the same.

My crazy aunts, my overbearing uncles, all my cousins, and of course, my GiGi. She's getting older, and I refuse to think of a world without her, but when she gets here, I won't miss a single second with her. Every moment matters as the years pass.

Cillian follows me toward the living room but slips out the door before he's noticed. Aunt Lucy and Mom are arguing over where to put the tree. Aunt Sam is standing there holding said tree with pure disdain on her face while Aunt Embry sits on the couch eating popcorn.

My family. I wouldn't trade them for the world.

Most days.

CHAPTER 6

AMERSYN

Meanwhile, back in Portland, Oregon...

“**W**hat do you mean *snow*?” I ask Maciah because the second biggest draw to spending the weekend in East Texas is the warmth I’m supposed to find there. Not more of the sticky white shit I see all too often here.

He shrugs. “That’s just what Roman said. He called to let me know they’re getting some freak snowstorm in case we were planning on flying. The runway is iced over already.”

Which we were. Now, I’ll need to bother Andie and ask her to come get us first. Not that it takes her very long to teleport from one place to the other, but I like being able to travel on my own. To come and go as I please instead of relying on others.

With a heavy sigh, I get up from the couch in search of my phone. It’s not often that I get to enjoy a quiet afternoon at home. Normally, the compound is buzzing with other vampires or we have calls to deal with from complaints about supernaturals not behaving within the rather loose rules we’ve been charged to enforce.

Not that I don’t enjoy my job, but I’d love a day without problems for once.

I grab my phone and scroll until I find Andie’s number. Shit. Has it really been five weeks since I’ve called her? The more time that passes, the harder it seems to be to keep up with everyone. That makes me sadder than anything

else.

Considering I used to hate everyone and prefer to work alone, I've grown quite fond of the bonds I've formed over the years. I never could have predicted that my best friend circle would be made up of a vampire, witch, wolf shifter, and fae, but I'm not complaining now.

The phone rings several times, and I almost hang up to try Foster, but Andie finally answers. "Yeah?"

She's out of breath, and I hear screeching in the background. "Where the hell are you?" I ask her.

"Oh, Amersyn," she says with more relief than I expect. "Can I come get you? We could use your...expertise here."

"Um, sure, but what's wrong?" I ask, but the line is already dead.

Maciah is at my side in a second. "What happened?"

"I don't know, but Andie is—"

"Where are you in this ridiculous mansion?" Andie's voice booms through the house. "I don't have time for a tracking spell. Get down here!"

Maciah and I share a look, then shrug. "Good thing we're already packed," he says, reaching for our bags.

I speed through the house, nearly invisible, and don't stop until I find Andie at our front door. There is blood, not ketchup, in her pink hair and something I don't want to identify on her shirt.

"Should I ask?"

She grimaces. "No. Come on."

I step away before she can grasp my hand. "We need Maciah."

Her mouth opens to yell, but he's at my side before she can. "Perfect," she says, then latches on to our wrists.

The world feels as if it falls out from beneath our feet, and within seconds, we're down in Los Angeles at the wolf pack Andie and Foster run.

Two women are fighting, and there's a man with his leg in his hands as he sits on the ground, watching the women with a bit of amusement in his eyes.

"He called you a limp noodle," a blonde yells into the brunette's face.

"Well, he said you were as dry as the Sahara Desert!"

Wow. Okay, then.

I turn to Andie. "What do you want us to do?"

"Restrain them while I try to reattach this idiot's leg," she says, then looks around. "Damn it. Where did Foster go?"

Since I don't know, I figure it's safer not to answer, but when I notice a black plume of smoke coming from across the pack, I can't keep quiet.

"I think someone's house is on fire," I tell her before stepping between the battling women.

Her shoulders drop sharply. "Yeah, it's been a day. People are already there working on it. I was one of them before we got a call about missing limbs. That's where Foster disappeared back to."

And here I thought snow was a shitty problem to have. At least our vamps are minding their business.

Maciah and I move in, each grabbing one of the women by their wrists and pulling them away from each other.

The brunette I'm restraining screams, "That whore slept with my mate!"

"I wouldn't have had to if you'd been woman enough to satisfy him."

Holy shit. We've stepped into one of those human drama shows.

Maciah places a hand over the blonde's mouth, and I do the same to the brunette as he says rather menacingly, "If either of you yell one more word, I'm going to put both of you in the same underground cell and not return until you're both dead. Do I make myself clear?"

The women's eyes go wide as they both nod, and I point to the wolf shifter Andie is working on. "Who tore his leg off?"

They both point at each other. Great. Super helpful.

"Don't say a word or my mate will lock you up," I warn the brunette before addressing Andie. "Is this a situation we actually need to *handle*?"

The witch's hands are glowing over the detached limb, but she manages to multi-task and answer me. "No. He's just an idiot that wasn't paying attention to what he was doing. Just get them away from here and meet me at the fire. I need to finish helping to put it out once he's mostly healed."

Andie doesn't have to tell us twice.

"We're going to let you speak, and the only words you're going to say are the ones needed for us to escort you back to your houses," I tell both women. "Once you're there, you're not going to leave until Andie or Foster come back in two days to sort the rest of this out." Their faces pale at the mention of house arrest, but that's the least of my concerns. "Do you both understand?"

Thankfully, they nod, and I turn the brunette away from the blonde before I ask her for directions to her house.

Maciah and the blonde head in the opposite direction, and it's not long

before I'm led to a small cabin amongst a grouping of others.

Before I let her into the house, I at least try to sympathize and help Andie, in hopes this conversation might prevent further mayhem from happening.

"You said that guy is your mate?" I ask her.

Tears well in her brown eyes as she nods.

"Fated or chosen?"

She stutters. "Chosen when we were eighteen."

Oh, hell. She's maybe in her mid-twenties. They had puppy love and... Sometimes I don't understand the world. Okay, most of the time.

I grab her shoulders and give her a solid shake. "Listen, Wolf. He's a man. The boy you fell in love with isn't the one you want to be tied to for the rest of your life. Have Andie break the chosen mate bond when she's home, forget about him, and hope you're lucky enough to find your fated mate. No one is worth making a fool of yourself by fighting with another female in public over someone who seems to have openly and literally fucked you both."

She starts to sob, but at least nods as I give her a mostly gentle shove toward her door. "Don't forget. Two days of house arrest. You're not to leave until your alpha says you can."

Her cries get louder, but I'm not the person to sooth her. I get the hell out of there and decide snow in Texas has never sounded more perfect.

CHAPTER 7

CAIT

Back in East Texas...

The tree is finally up and thanks to my daughter, the ornaments all have hooks on them and have been untangled from the previous mess I found them in. Now, we just need to finish decorating.

If I can get everyone back in the living room.

Not having any clue where they disappeared to, I follow my connection to Dawsyn and realize they're in the kitchen.

Oh, no. The oven.

I race through the pack house and start to smell smoke. I didn't burn the turkey. It's not possible. I need to make four of them to feed all these supernaturals. I had to start early. I don't have extras. I can't lose a single one of them.

As I enter the kitchen, Lucinda is opening the back door and Dawsyn coughs from the rising smoke while pulling out the nearly black turkey.

"Um, Mom?"

My face falls when she sets the crisp bird on the counter. "I swore I set a timer."

Lucinda points at the clock on the stove. "You did, and there are still forty minutes left."

I check the settings and want to scream when I realize I accidentally set the heat too high this morning. It was early, but damn it! I shouldn't have screwed this up.

"When did this pack house turn into Satan's kitchen?" a familiar voice sounds from the back door.

“GiGi!” Dawsyn says with an excitement I can’t seem to muster for our favorite matriarch.

Beatrix hugs her granddaughter and glares at Lucinda then me. “You asked for magical help and then didn’t wait for it to arrive?”

The fae points at me. “She wants to do things...normally.”

Beatrix’s face scrunches, forming deep wrinkles around her green eyes. “Are you having a midlife crisis? Isn’t it a little early for that? I didn’t have mine until I was like eighty. Gods, that was an orgy I—”

“Don’t you finish that sentence in front of my daughter,” I practically snarl.

She rolls her eyes and flattens her lips, making the lines around her mouth more prominent. “She’s mated. To a dragon no less. She’s getting better sex than all of us.”

“GiGi, seriously?” Dawsyn’s face is ten shades of red. “Please don’t talk about my sex life. Not today, not ever.”

The witch flicks her long silver braid behind her back and waltzes past the rest of us. “A bunch of prudes. All of you. I thought with a few decades of being mated, you’d have wiggled the sticks out of your asses, but clearly, I was wrong. Such a rare occasion.”

Her words grow fainter as I assume she heads toward the living room, then I turn to Dawsyn. “Do you think you can figure out how to get the next turkey in the oven and set the temperature better than I did?”

“Sure thing. River will be here any minute, so I’ll be late decorating the tree,” she tells me, and I try not to let my disappointment show.

“Tell him to join us,” I suggest, but she’s already working on the turkey and rushing along, not listening to me.

Lucinda loops her arm through mine and pulls me away. “Don’t worry. My kids are barely half her age and they already don’t like to spend time with me. Be grateful you get as much of her attention as you do.”

“Dom and Raven love you,” I tell my best friend, and not for the first time. Fae grow up faster than most other supernaturals. Dom was leaving their realm without his parents when he was only twelve and has no problem reminding his mother that she did much worse at his age.

I’ve felt for her, but I also know everyone, including the kids, is just trying to figure out if there’s anything we need to be worried about with the boy’s white wings.

While it would be nice to believe that no news after all this time and

effort is good news, something tells me that's not the case.

Our kids are strong, though. They'll have each other's backs just like we always have for one another.

"Don't look, Cait," Lucinda warns me. "Just turn around and go back to the kitchen."

We're almost at the living room, and I do exactly what she's told me not to.

"Beatrix Jacobs, what have you done to my house?" I screech, my voice echoing through the house.

The old and ridiculously obnoxious witch turns around and grins. "You asked for help, and you got it. Don't complain just because it's not what you wanted. The decorating is done."

"I didn't ask for the help." There's no hiding the rumble in my chest as I take in the...chaos.

"Well, she did." She points at Lucinda then me. "Maybe you should keep a tighter leash on your guests."

"Hey, I'm not a dog!" Lucinda snaps back, but I stop listening as my eyes focus on what's been done in just a few minutes.

There is what I assume and hope to be fake snow covering the couches and chairs I've brought in. The ornaments have all been placed on the tree—something I was looking forward to doing by hand. Tinsel hangs from the ceiling, and the only things I had finished myself are nowhere to be seen.

My twinkle lights are now gaudy red, blue, green, and orange lights straight out of the nineties and should really be on the outside of the house. The elves and Santa that I'd set up above the fireplace have been replaced by a train set that seems to be floating on air... Okay, this part I actually like.

The caboose is making chugging noises, and there are small puffs of smoke that rise from the top while soft music plays in the background.

Giving the room another look around, I realize the lights aren't *that* big and the snow accents kind of twinkle in a pretty way, maybe even better than the lights had.

Damn it. This is all actually pretty amazing.

Beatrix stands in front of me and pulls her hand out from her back, handing me a silver star. "Why don't you finish?"

Oh, this witch. Just when I want to strangle her, she makes me love her even more.

My arms wrap around her, and she actually returns the gesture. "Thank

you,” I whisper.

“You’re welcome as long as I’m allowed to stay,” she says. “My ogre of a soulmate decided to take a trip to the woods, and it’s boring back home. Apparently, his magic is out of sync and he needs nature to realign himself. I don’t know what happened to the scary version of him. I miss that.”

Lucinda snorts. “He lost that long before he met you and chose to wear socks with sandals.”

“You’re never going to let that go, are you?” I shake my head but laugh.

Maybe things don’t have to be as stressful as I originally thought they might be.

CHAPTER 8

LYKEM

Leaving the pack that's become my second home, I head northeast toward the coordinates River gave me. It's been a couple months since I took a mission, so this should be fun.

Normally, I'm teamed up with River, but it's just a lost wolf. Plus, River isn't cool. He would have made this take too long not being able to fly. With the roads looking as icy as they do, driving would be dumb.

My deep red wings stretch out alongside me as I soar through the snowstorm. It's not severe enough that I can't see where I'm going, but the darkening clouds up ahead give me some concern.

Thanks to Andie's shielding spell she embedded in me, I fly over the highway, unseen by the humans below. Cars honk and traffic is backed up, and I'm again grateful for my dragon.

I continue flying north for another twenty minutes before I start to cut east. I mapped the location out on my phone before leaving. There should be a mountain ridge just around... Yep, there it is.

As long as the she-wolf hasn't decided to be a pain in my ass by moving around, she should be at the base of the second crest.

My wings flap harder, and I notice icicles growing off the tips. Great. It's getting colder out. I've never flown in a deep freeze. Now, *that* might be a problem.

Knowing there's nothing I can do now because it's too late to turn back, I increase my speed and get to the ground as quickly as possible.

Folding my wings in when I land is painful thanks to the layer of ice on them, but I manage and shift back to my human form. It's cold enough to make my balls feel like they're frozen, but that doesn't stop me from trekking

through these woods.

I pull my phone out and check that I wasn't wrong about the mountain. The dot on the GPS is only about five hundred yards ahead.

For the second time, I try the phone number to the wolf shifter that we were given, but it goes straight to an automated message.

According to River's intel that he forwarded, she called into the tip line set up for supernaturals to let the protectors know when they suspect something needs to be investigated, stating she was out hiking and got lost.

That alone is confusing coming from a wolf shifter, but the fact that she didn't reach out to her alpha is even more concerning. I'm surprised River didn't question this more. Then again, he's been in a hurry to get to East Texas for days now.

I'm tempted to call him and ask if there's anything I should be prepared for in case she's another runaway, but before I can, I see smoke, distracting my thoughts.

Moving further into the denser trees, I go a little slower, mindful that this isn't pack territory. I could be on a human's land, and I'd rather not be mistaken as a creeper and get shot today.

Another thirty feet forward and I spot a cabin with smoke coming from the stone chimney. The place is small and maybe even a little brittle if the faded wood siding is as bad as it looks. Taking a deep inhale, I scent the area and there isn't anyone human around, but there is something sweet...almost divine to my senses. A hint of warm vanilla, enticing me closer.

Listening, I hear the sound of crying and don't stop to think why it might be a bad idea to rush forward. I just know I need to get inside that cabin right now.

Standing in front of the rickety door, my chest heaves, and puffs of visible air escape from my mouth. I press my palm over the splintered wood and take another deep breath.

Shit. It's stronger now. The call to go to whatever is inside this cabin.

If I hadn't been through as much shit as I have, I might rush in, but I take a moment to clear my head and then knock softly.

The crying stops, followed by a short gasp, then nothing, as if whoever is behind this door is frozen in place.

I glance at my phone, checking the details of the mission again. There's no name mentioned. I don't know how to identify myself or what to call her.

Hell, I don't even know if this is the wolf inside. I can't smell anything

beyond the desire to be enveloped by the sweet scent wafting toward me in heavy waves.

“Who’s there?” a quiet, soft voice finally says.

“I’m Lykem,” I reply gruffly, fighting to keep control of my movements. “There was a call from a lost woman. Have you seen her?”

I keep my words generic in case I’ve completely lost my mind and whoever is in the cabin doesn’t need to know wolf shifters exist.

Light footfalls sound from inside, and my whole body tenses as the aroma calling to me gets stronger.

She’s so close.

The door begins to creak open, and my lungs no longer work. I can’t move an inch from the anticipation. Everything in me wants to shove the door to the side so this woman can be revealed, but beneath the tempting vanilla scent, there’s a layer of fear I can’t miss.

White-blond hair falls forward as delicate fingers wrap around the edge of the door. Her crystal blue eyes show themselves next, and it’s as if my heart is going to explode.

The beating in my chest grows stronger, and an energy pulses around me...no, between *us*.

My knees give out, and I drop to the ground, uncaring that there’s icy snow seeping into my jeans. I’ve found *her*. I wasn’t even searching, but here she is and...

She looks fucking terrified.

“I’m...” I start to say something, anything really, but I don’t know what to do. Is she afraid of me?

Her stare moves around, and she stays tense behind the door that’s now a little further closed. “Who are you?”

Considering I already told her my name, I don’t think that’s the information she’s looking for. It almost seems as if she doesn’t recognize *what* I am.

Taking in the details of her face, I notice slight lines around her eyes while the rest of her creamy skin remains smooth, telling me she isn’t too young. Maybe in her thirties.

She should know dragons exist by now.

“I’m a dragon shifter,” I tell her slowly and nearly crumple to the ground when she slams the door in my face.

“Go away!” she yells, sounding further away from the door.

Yeah, that's not happening.

The storm is getting worse. I couldn't fly out of here now even if I wanted to, and I'm certainly not leaving *my mate* alone in this cabin, scared for her life.

No, I'm going in there. She's just going to have to deal.

I stand up and twist the handle to the door. When it's only open a few inches, a metal poker from the fireplace goes flying across the small space. The tip embeds into the wood wall, only half a foot from my face.

Well, this is going to be fun.

CHAPTER 9

ROMAN

Back in East Texas...

Another hour and I was going to call this whole thing off. Cait's stress has been leaking through our bond for too long now. I thought agreeing to this Christmas party would relieve that, but it's only become worse. At least until about five minutes ago.

I can finally sense her calm and I'm tempted to brave going back into the house, but before I can, I feel new arrivals on my pack lands.

Stepping outside of my cabin where I not-so-secretly hide several times a month, I see Foster and Maciah grinning and walking toward me.

"Why should he be the only one with a man cave?" Foster says, making the normally gruff vampire laugh.

"Don't you mean sex cave?" Maciah asks with a sly grin.

"I can hear you," I tell them with a shake of my head. "And you're just jealous I get to retire while the two of you still bust your asses."

Foster barks out a deep chuckle. "I can't be jealous of that. You're getting old. I'm still capable of running my pack for plenty of years to come."

Yeah, and so am I, but my reasons for retiring as alpha aren't as simple as one might think.

My father wasn't much older than I am when he died. He gave his whole life to our pack, and I knew he didn't regret that, but I don't want to one day.

But mostly, this is a selfish reason.

Dawsyn could easily run Drago with Cillian. They could turn that realm into something grand, but the distance would not only break her mother's heart, but mine, too.

Our daughter is an alpha through and through. She isn't going to be happy here unless she's running things. Thankfully, she's been patient and eagerly learned what I've had to teach her over the last ten years, so I'm not just handing her the pack when she isn't ready.

On top of that, I'm not too proud to admit that I'm ready to be selfish for a little while. Vaughn might be to blame for that, considering he recently made that same choice—to quit his job as beta and spend more time with his mate.

Cait and I have spent our lives dedicated to not only our pack, but others in need. We have risked our lives more times than I care to count, and I'm ready to sit on a beach somewhere, merely enjoying the love of my life.

Soon, my love, Cait whispers in my mind through our bond, and I'm surprised she picked up on my thoughts.

After more than thirty years together, we know one another almost better than we know ourselves.

Not soon enough, I think.

My two friends enter the cabin, and just as I'm about to shut the door, a familiar voice calls out. "I heard this is where the smart men hang out."

The door is thrown back open, and I'm greeted with a wide smile from my oldest friend.

"I thought you couldn't make it," I say to Vaughn as he hugs me, fist pounding on my back.

He nods behind him where I see a nervous River. "Well, our son told us that he'd already made a promise to your daughter that he'd be spending the holiday with her. Considering we never get to see him anymore, I decided sharing River was better than not seeing him at all."

"You mean that's what Kelly told you and made you drag yourself away from the fish." My hand clasps his shoulder as I grin.

"Something like that." Vaughn moves past me and heads inside the cabin, which is going to get rather small with this many men.

I give my attention to River. "Why do you look like you're afraid for your life, boy?"

He's hardly a boy these days, but I can't help myself. I still remember him and Dawsyn running around in diapers.

"Your daughter," he says looking around. "If she finds out I came here first..."

He doesn't need to say anymore. "I assume your father ambushed you

and told you to come hang with the men?" River nods, and I continue, "Go to the pack house. Save Dawsyn. She doesn't want to be stuck decorating any more than the rest of us do."

"No, I don't assume she does." He finally grins, and I see so much of his father. He has the same wide smile and that red hair, only darker, is just like Vaughn's.

"You'll tell my father..."

"I'll tell him I sent you to get food."

His green eyes go bright with mischief. "He'll be good with that, but only for so long. Maybe I'll send Mom out here."

I lean closer to whisper. "He'll make you pay for that, you know."

"Hey, he asked to retire," River says quietly yet with a trace of wickedness. "It's not my fault he's already going stir crazy with only one person to keep him company as he spends his days fishing."

The boy isn't wrong, but my best friend won't be alone for long.

"Go on," I tell River. "I'll cover for you."

He offers me another thanks and then steps away to shift. His wolf races toward the pack house, kicking up snow as he does, and I can't help watching with an immense amount of gratitude.

While the supernatural communities have done a lot of good since they were created and things are less chaotic than they had been years ago, knowing that Dawsyn has so many people in her life who would die for her makes me proud.

I won't lie, I was slightly disappointed when we found out she was a girl. I didn't know how I could possibly relate to her, but life showed me how wrong I was, and it's been one hell of a ride since then.

Vaughn comes storming out. "Where the hell is my son?"

His frown makes me grin and I shove him back inside the cabin. "I sent him on an errand. He'll be back."

"He's supposed to be spending time with family." Vaughn pouts like a child.

"And he is," I say, because Dawsyn is family and everyone damned well knows it. We'd even hoped those two would be bonded, but life seems to be working out even better than we could have imagined.

We walk into the cabin to find Foster raiding my cabinets. "This isn't a man cave. There's nothing to eat here."

I nod toward the river outside the window. "I catch what I eat out here."

Vaughn is already shaking his head. “I’ve eaten enough fish these last few months to last me a lifetime. If I don’t get a steak in me next, I’m going to murder someone.”

“Do you want a steak badly enough to chance being put to work?” Maciah says, seeming perfectly content to stay in the recliner he’s lounging in.

I sensed Beatrix arrive and then Cait’s calm, so there might not be anything left to do, which I tell them.

“What the fuck are we still doing out here then?” Foster grumbles. “I’m going back for the cookies I was promised.”

“See you dogs there when you arrive,” Maciah says, somehow managing to be the first out of the cabin.

Damn vampire speed.

The rest of us are out the door and shifting without another word.

Don’t let them beat us, I tell my wolf, knowing that if we’re last, the jokes about my “retirement” will only get worse.

Not a chance in hell, he replies, digging his claws deeper into the earth and propelling us forward. Snow falls all around us, and our paws sting from running over the frozen ground, but we don’t slow.

Knowing the territory best, we cut through the trees and forego the path, but Vaughn catches on and is right on our tail.

We push harder, and it’s less than a minute later that we arrive at the pack house, Vaughn right by our side.

Foster comes through the tree line a couple seconds later, his wolf shaking and growling as a mound of snow falls from his ebony coat. When he shifts, there’s a glare on his face. “Try that at my pack, without snow, and see who wins.”

Maciah opens the front door of the pack house, a snickerdoodle cookie in hand as he leans casually against the doorframe. “Where have you guys been?”

I shake my head. “I see your chest heaving. You can’t hide the strain from us. You’re practically older than dirt.”

“And yet, I still beat you.” He turns around and kicks the door closed behind him.

Foster, Vaughn, and I look at each other incredulously.

“Did a vampire just slam *your* door in *your* face?” Foster asks, then whistles with a sly grin. “Someone doesn’t have much power around here any

longer.”

The hell I don't.

That bloodsucker is about to pay.

CHAPTER 10

CAIT

I'm refilling my second glass of wine and finally not stressing as the smell of unburnt turkey begins to fill the house after the last disaster. This is going to be an incredible weekend.

My favorite people, even those I thought weren't coming, are right here in my pack.

I couldn't ask for a better Christmas.

At least until there's a loud bang from the living room and my gaze snaps in that direction. "What the hell was that?"

Amersyn smirks. "Boys being boys."

"Not in my damn house," I snarl, standing from the stool and forgetting about my wine.

"Go remind them who wears the pants in this pack house," Lucinda titters, but I dismiss her as soon as I hear glass breaking.

I'm going to kill whoever is standing in my living room. A slow and painful death.

Not if someone else beats you to it, Adira says with amusement.

Arriving at the living room, I find a completely different scene than I'm expecting.

Maciah is pinned to the wall by an invisible force. Roman is lying face down on the carpet with Beatrix's foot digging into his spine. I can sense Foster and Vaughn, but I don't see them.

Well, at least not until I look up.

"I might be old, but I'm not weak and I won't put up with you children ruining my hard work," Beatrix tells them as I cover my mouth, my body vibrating with laughter as my eyes stay glued to the ceiling.

Foster and Vaughn are pinned there, gazes wide and bodies trembling.

Beatrix's rant continues, "If you think I'm going to waste my energy on cleaning up your mess, then you're sorely mistaken. The four of you will put everything back exactly the way you found it or you're going to find yourself with permanent tails between your ass cheeks."

"We didn't even do anything," Foster says from the ceiling.

"Exactly," the elder witch grumbles. "You're supposed to be grown ass men. Don't act like puppies who can't control themselves."

She releases everyone—Foster and Vaughn thankfully landing on their feet—then the elder witch storms toward me. When the guys can no longer see her, she winks and continues back toward the kitchen.

"I'm not a damn dog," Maciah mutters as he wipes his palms over his now wrinkled suit.

His body stiffens and briefly glows. "You're whatever I say you are," Beatrix's voice booms from the hallway.

"She might be old, but she's not deaf," I warn them, then point to the crooked Christmas tree, spilled cookies, and broken elf decoration. "Fix this. Now."

Roman is on his feet, and I'm tempted to ask him if he's okay, but I won't ruin Beatrix's shaming. It's too entertaining.

I turn away and follow her to the kitchen.

When I'm halfway back, Roman's voice finally mutters through my mind. *I'm sorry.*

He's really the best mate ever.

As long as my Christmas isn't ruined, all is forgiven.

It's going to be perfect, he promises, but in the next second...everything goes dark.

"What the hell?" I demand, stepping into the kitchen.

"Um, I'm pretty sure your power just went out," Amersyn says. "Do you need to turn on your generator?"

"We don't have one of those. Never had a need," I say, annoyed that my white Christmas might just ruin everything I had planned.

"I can—" Beatrix starts to say, but Andie cuts her off.

"Show me your power box," the younger witch says. "I'll fix this."

Beatrix glares at her. "I just showed those boys who's boss. I can handle a power boost. I'm not dead yet."

"Yes, you've made that clear on several occasions." Andie sighs as she

gets up and follows me toward the back door.

Just as I go to step outside, there's a crash and the sound of glass shattering.

"I didn't do it!" Roman's voice echoes through the house and I cover my face with my hands.

This is what I get for just thinking that everything was finally working out.

Beatrix gets up from her chair. "You two go fix the power. I'll put leashes on the men."

I chuckle, because I think she really means that.

"I'll help Beatrix," Amersyn says, getting up and going after the witch.

Once Andie and I are outside, headed toward the main breaker box beneath the old pack house, she wraps an arm around me and lets out a happy sigh. "I'm really glad you did this."

"Seriously?" I reply with a shiver, thanks to the freak snowstorm. Though, looking out at our land and seeing it covered in a blanket of white... is rather magical. At least until I remember how it's ruining my day. "It's been chaotic, and you left a pack that had problems to be dealt with. This seems like the worst idea ever."

She shrugs, still smiling. "But we're together."

Those three words release all the tension I've been holding onto since going into planning mode. My best friend is right. Being together is the most important part of all this.

I always have Embry around, but the other women in my life are all too often missed. This is what I wanted. Us together. Maybe I just need to stop caring so much about how everything looks and goes and just be present in this moment.

"Thank you," I tell her sincerely, leaning my head against her shoulder. "I wanted everything to be perfect, but it already is just by you all being here."

We get to the door that leads to the basement and I open it, going inside first, then almost tripping over a box. "Son of a bitch," I mutter, bending down to rub my shin.

Andie's hand begins to glow, and a smirk appears on her face. "Want a little help?"

"From you? Always."

We get to the breaker box, and I let Andie do her thing. Briefly, the purple glow from her hand fades until she presses her palms over the main

power source to the pack house. She closes her eyes and mutters words I don't understand.

With very little patience, I watch and cross my fingers that this works. The pack house is old. The wiring and plumbing are almost all original to when it was built. Maybe I should do something about that...

Then, I grin. Nope. Dawsyn gets to handle that soon.

I hear a cheer from upstairs just as Andie pulls her hands back. "Power should be on. I'll need to come down and check on it every few hours, but the spell should hold."

"Pays to have a witch for a best friend," I tell her with a laugh.

"We make quite the collection of traits within our little group," she adds. "Who would have thought wolf shifters, witches, vampires, fae, and dragons could cohabitate?"

Then, we look at each other and roll our eyes as we both say, "Beatrix."

Getting back outside, I tense from the frigid air. Even my wolf shifter genes can't keep me warm in this weather.

Fresh snow is still falling, and now that I'm not in a hurry to get the power back on...it's time to take my own advice and stop caring about the details. We need some fun.

"How do you feel about getting wet?" I ask her with a heavy dose of glee in my voice.

Her lips push together, and I can see the humor in her eyes before she even speaks. "Not something I normally do with anyone other than Foster, but I'm listening."

That isn't at all what I meant, especially with people around, but... No, focusing on fun with family. Not my mate.

"How about a snowball fight with no magic or super speeds allowed?" I ask her, then reach for a handful of snow. "And the two of us get a head start."

"Now, we're talking," she says devilishly. "We can stockpile, then set the rules and dominate everyone."

And this is why we're best friends.

"Women versus men?" I ask. "Or everyone for themselves?"

"Oh, you know it has to be us against them," she agrees. "They'll think they can kick our asses even without powers. Proving them wrong will be the highlight of the weekend."

Why yes, it will be.

We move further into the sparse trees and start to make the snowballs for us and the other women as quickly as we can without being gone too long. Once there are four decent piles for us to start with, Andie and I race back inside, laughing the entire way.

When we get through the back door, our mates are waiting for us.

“What the hell happened to the two of you?” Roman asks, giving me a onceover.

I realize too late that our hair is already soaked from the falling snow and our clothes from walking through are as well.

“I accidentally tripped Cait, which caused her to grab on to my arm, and we both ended up in the snow,” Andie says, saving us with her quick thoughts. “But it did give us an idea...”

The two men share a concerned look.

“And that would be?” Foster asks, glancing between the two of us.

“A snowball fight,” we answer at the same time.

Their smiles begin to match ours, but they haven’t heard the rules yet.

I grab Roman’s hand and guide him toward the living room where I hear the others. “Come on. We’re making everyone participate.”

Now, this is what this weekend should be about.

CHAPTER II

LYKEM

Back in the woods...

Even with the metal poker being thrown at my head, I don't back down. I don't even know her name, but this woman is mine, and she's not getting away so easily. At least not until we talk.

Obviously, I wouldn't force her to be my mate, but isn't that how this is supposed to work? Fate decides, and wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am, you get your happily ever after.

At least that's what I heard one of the wolves back in East Texas say. Not that I understand some of their idiocies, even after this time. Maybe this is another scenario in which I've severely gotten things wrong.

"Listen, I'm not here to hurt you," I tell her, keeping the door cracked a few inches, but closed enough to protect my face from any other projectiles. "You called for help, right?"

"You're not who I called," she snaps back with a fire in her tone.

I grin and am glad she can't see me. "No, you spoke with someone at our headquarters. They sent me since I was closest and could get to you quickest. I'm only here to help."

And be your mate, but we can talk about that later, I think to myself.

She doesn't reply and I can't sense her moving, so I chance opening the door a bit more. When I peek around, she's standing next to the lit fireplace and is holding another metal poker in her hand.

"Would you rather stay put and hope there's enough wood here, preventing you from freezing to death?" I ask her, crossing my fingers behind my back that her answer is no.

Though, I don't get a reply, which I hope is good news.

"I'm letting cold air in," I tell her. "If you promise not to throw anything at me, I'm going to come inside and stand right here, but with the door closed."

Still, she remains silent.

Knowing that I can't give up on my mate, I enter the cabin and close my eyes briefly. If I'm going to die by this incredible woman, I don't really want to see it coming.

When I'm standing against the wall and the snow is no longer coming inside, I finally open my eyes. She hasn't moved from her post across the room, nor has she dropped her weapon, but the fear I'd seen in her eyes earlier seems to be more curious now.

"I'm only here to help," I tell her again, wondering why I can sense the bond and she can't. Or doesn't seem to be at least.

I know with Cillian and Dawsyn it hadn't been easy because he'd had a shield up, but I'm not hiding anything. Not even my feelings. She should be able to sense my pure intentions as a wolf shifter. As long as she's been trained like ones I've known.

"I don't trust you," she says, voice remaining strong. "What are you?"

Again, I'm confused, but I don't want her to think I'm trying to trick her, so I answer honestly. "A dragon shifter."

Her eyes go wide, and she gasps. "A what?"

My head cocks to the side. "Have you not heard of us?"

It's been over ten years since dragons left Drago and came to Earth. While there are not many of us, it's not been a secret for some time now. There's no way her pack doesn't know.

She tenses again, and her knuckles go white from gripping her weapon. "Lies!"

I hold my hands out innocently and call my scales forward. "Look. I don't have witch magic. You'd be able to sense that. These are real dragon scales. Hell, I'll even go outside and shift if that's what you need."

Her head shakes frantically. "How can this be real?"

"We were hidden for a long time," I tell her softly. "It's been about ten years since we left our realm and entered Earth."

She chokes on a loud sob, one of her hands covering her mouth. "How is that po-possible?" She drops the poker and looks at her hands, turning them over, inspecting every inch before she starts to look around. "I don't

even know the year or how old I am or why..." Her eyes finally meet mine, frantic but curious. "Or why my wolf wants to claim you. A dragon we didn't even know existed five minutes ago."

That's a lot of information and while the last part makes my heart soar, I force myself to focus on the first pieces.

"What's your name?" I ask her, stepping just a foot forward.

"Lexi." Her voice is shakier than before, not as confident.

"Lexi, where have you been?"

Her pain and fear permeate the small space. I taste the terror pulsing off her as she stares at the floor, her body trembling.

Without thinking, I go toward her, feeling the need to hold her until she's whole again. Except, the moment my hands brush against her cold skin, she screams and flinches away.

"Don't touch me," she hisses, backing against the wall and giving me her back.

Well, this isn't fucking good.

My phone starts to vibrate in my pocket. I ignore the call, watching Lexi instead, but it starts to ring again.

"What?" I answer without looking at the screen.

"Where the hell are you?" River's voice asks with excitement. "The girls think they can beat us in a snowball fight. We need you."

"I'm not going to make it." The moment I say the words, Lexi looks up at me and watches as I keep speaking. "The storm is worse up here. I can't fly out of these mountains with the amount of ice on my wings I know I'll get. I'll have to try in the morning."

"Shit," he says. "Did you find the woman?"

"I did."

"And?"

"And what?"

There's silence on the other end of the line for several beats before River speaks again. "Do you need to tell me something?"

"Not yet."

"Alright, but you'll call the moment that changes?" he asks, showing me the trust we've built together over the years.

"I will."

"Be safe, Lykem."

The call ends and I expect Lexi to turn away from me again, but she

keeps my stare. “Like-him? What kind of name is that?”

Her slow pronunciation makes me smile. “A strong dragon one.”

Normally this is where I’d tell a beautiful woman it’s also pronounced “Lick-em”, but something tells me that pick-up line won’t work on this wolf shifter.

She lowers her gaze again. “I didn’t mean to freak out when you...”

“You don’t need to apologize,” I tell her. “I’m only here to help.”

“But you’re my...”

I nod. “Mate. Yes, that’s right.”

She turns for the small two-person couch behind us and takes a seat. I look around for somewhere else to sit that won’t make it seem as if I’m crowding her, but there isn’t even a dining table or bed in here. Just the threadbare couch and a small kitchenette.

Deciding it’s better to stay standing, I lean against the wall and watch her. A curtain of white-blonde hair falls around her face as she twists her fingers together, breathing slowly.

“I escaped from somewhere,” she admits. “I ran for five days before I couldn’t run anymore. I stole another shifter’s phone after...” Her cheeks go red, and I decide that’s information I don’t need. More accurately, my dragon doesn’t need to know. “I remembered the protector group from before. I found the number and tossed the phone.”

She escaped, which means she was kept against her will. I move my hands behind my back so she can’t see how tightly they’re clenched.

“Who held you captive?” I ask, knowing I won’t rest until they’re dead.

“A group of humans.”

The words leave her mouth, but it isn’t until they’ve repeated inside my head several times that I begin to comprehend what she’s said.

“Humans? How?”

My words are short and clipped, but that’s all I’m capable of at the moment.

“Drugs. Lots of drugs.” She shudders, looking up at me with tears in her eyes. “There are others. I left them all behind. I... I just ran.”

“Other wolves?”

She nods, her voice cracking with heavy emotions. “And vampires and witches.”

What in the actual fuck?

“I need to call River back,” I tell her. “The guy who was just on the

phone. He's someone we can trust."

A stretch of silence builds between us as she avoids looking at me. Maybe I should have just texted him, but not having her permission to share this information doesn't sit right with me.

I wait for her to respond, every second my body growing more tense.

"I can trust you," she says so quietly I almost think I don't hear her right.

Except when her eyes finally meet mine, they're bright and full of hope. Hope that makes me determined to slay every demon from my mate's past.

I go to her again, this time dropping to my knees and not touching her. "I won't let anyone else hurt you ever again. Whoever did this, they will die a brutal death. I promise you."

She reaches out, her fingers brushing over my chest. Even with my shirt keeping our skin from touching, the heat from her burns through me, branding me for a lifetime as the rest of the world seems to disappear around us.

My heart pounds heavily in my chest, and I stop breathing for those first few seconds as she begins to speak. "My wolf tells me we're safe with you. In fact, she insists on it. But I haven't been safe in... Well, I'm starting to think decades after what you've said. You're going to have to be patient with me."

I lift a hand and lightly place it over hers where it's still resting against my chest and give her my best smile. "Woman, I will wait the rest of my life for you."

And suddenly, being snowed in for the night has never sounded so good.

CHAPTER 12

DAWSYN

Back in East Texas...

“Get down!” Aunt Embry screams in my ear as she tackles me to the snow-covered ground, laughing her ass off. “Your mate nearly took your head off.”

No, not Cillian. He wouldn't do that.

Only when I peek up from behind the fallen tree we're now crouched behind, I see his smirking grin. Not only that, but the shithead waves his fingers at me.

Oh, I'm going to kill him.

Aunt Lucy comes with a basket of already-made snowballs. “Give them hell, kid.”

I'm not a kid any longer, haven't been in years, but I proudly take the offering and turn back to my mate.

Cillian's face pales and he darts behind a tree, but that's not going to save him now.

Mom screeches from a few yards away and Aunt Embry goes to help her, but Aunt Lucy stays with me.

“I could...”

I shake my head as her hand starts to lift. “The rules said no magic. We're not losing this by cheating.”

“It's only cheating if you get caught,” she says with a wicked grin.

Nope. I can win this.

Cillian is still standing by the tree, halfway behind the trunk, keeping himself safe, but little does he know... My mate isn't the target. He's the

distraction once I spot someone else deserving of getting pelted.

My dad is focused on Mom and has his guard completely down.

I aim and chuckle when Cillian pops back behind the tree, then throw the snowball. The compacted ice sails through the air and explodes on the side of Dad's face.

His cheek reddens and eyes go wide with indignation, but I'm not even close to done with him.

I throw three more back-to-back before he's gotten over the shock of having been caught by surprise. One gets his neck, leaving another mark for all to see, the second catches his chest, and the third lands on a shoulder since he's finally turned around, but I'm not the only one targeting the almost-retired alpha.

His beta and my most mischievous aunt is just past Mom, ready to attack.

Aunt Sam winks at me, and then we both begin pelting Dad until he throws his hands in the air. "I surrender."

"Alphas don't give up," Aunt Sam yells. "Fight back or die!"

She might also be a little competitive.

Dad races back toward the opposite tree line for protection, and then my attention goes toward my mate again, but he's not where I last saw him.

Glancing around, I don't sense him. I turn to Aunt Lucy, but she's already moved on. Damn it. I have to get him back, and I need a spotter.

GiGi is a dozen yards back, using the only bit of magic allowed to make sure no one cheats. Maybe she'd help me.

Only when I move to go get her, my nose slams into Cillian's chest. "Ow," I complain, rubbing the sore spot. "You're not supposed to be on this side."

"You ladies drew the line," he says. "Nobody said we couldn't cross it."

We...

I hear a yelp, then another.

Son of a bitch. It's an ambush.

Run, my wolf encourages, but it's too late.

I've barely made it one step away from Cillian before he has his hands around my waist, picking me up from the ground and swinging me back toward him. "Where do you think you're going?"

Snow is beginning to seep through my boots, and I can barely feel my toes, but that doesn't mean I can't fight back.

My knee goes up, and I send a silent apology to Cillian's balls as they get

squished. His mouth opens but no sound comes out until he starts to groan.

“If you’re playing dirty, then so am I,” I whisper sweetly, then kiss his cheek right before I push him over into the snow.

“You’re going to pay for that,” he croaks, but I’m not at all worried as I run toward Mom who is closest.

Dad has her arms pinned behind her back and I leap onto his, grabbing his ears as my legs wrap around his waist. “Let go or I’m going to pull until you bleed.”

“You wouldn’t,” Dad says, yet his body tenses, knowing I damn well would.

I tug hard just once. “Try me.”

He growls, but it’s not a first for me and doesn’t at all scare me. “This isn’t over.”

“Oh, yes it is,” I tell him. “As soon as I get Aunt Lucy, we’re calling this a win.”

“How so?” Dad asks incredulously.

“You abandoned your posts and gave up your hostages,” I tell him. “Cillian lost. You’re losing. The others will fall like dominos.”

Mom chuckles. “Oh, you’re so my daughter.”

“Hey,” Dad complains. “I helped make her, too.”

My fingers pull at his ears again. “No changing the subject. Let go of Mom or lose an ear.”

He rumbles louder but complies. As soon as Mom is several steps away, I pat Dad’s head. “Good boy.”

I’m leaping off his back before he can retaliate, then Mom and I are running as if our lives depend on it, but all while laughing our asses off.

We spot Aunt Lucy’s iridescent hair up ahead, but she of course doesn’t need our help. She has Finn pinned to the ground, her boot digging into his chest. “Who said you could cross to our side?”

“Who said I couldn’t?” he counters with undisguised defiance.

Aunt Lucy raises a hand, but I call out her name and shake my head. “No magic. We won’t lose.”

Her upper lip lifts. “He tried to kidnap me.”

“And you can make him really pay later,” Mom tells her. “We need to get Andie and Amersyn.”

“Already here,” Aunt Amersyn says from behind us, but there’s been no sign of Aunt Andie.

Shit.

Aunt Lucy seems to come to the same conclusion as I do as her feathered wings extend from her back, the tips razor sharp. “They’ll all pay for taking one of ours. Each and every one of them.”

I shake my head and grin. So much for a friendly snowball competition.

Moving to stand in front of my aunt, I grab her shoulders, careful not to touch her wings. “They won’t actually hurt her.”

“But they’ll use her to win,” Mom says from right behind me. “Lucy, if you fly, you break Beatrix’s rule of no magic.”

“Damn right she does, and I’m watching,” GiGi says from the shadows, but I can’t quite tell where she’s at.

The fae’s wings retract. “Freaking old—”

“I’d be careful how you finish that sentence.” GiGi adds with glee in her voice, and I can picture her evil grin without needing to see her.

“We’re getting off track here,” Amersyn says. “We get Andie, Beatrix counts damages, and then—”

“The *turkey!*” Mom shouts loud enough to make me wince with how close she is. “No, no, no.”

Her hands are covering her face when I turn around and ask. “What’s wrong, Mom?”

“The power going out would have reset the stove,” she says with utter defeat. “I was already behind from having burned the first one. The second one hasn’t even been cooking all this time.”

Son of a bitch.

“We’ll finish this and then figure out food,” I promise. “You have the most badass women in the world here. Everything will be fine.”

Aunt Embry throws an arm around Mom. “Your daughter is right, Cait. We’ve got this. Beatrix just needs to declare us winners once we have Andie back.”

I still have no idea how GiGi is going to know who won. Has she been counting snowballs thrown? Will welts be inspected for worst damage? Knowing her, it’s the latter. She does love torture.

Our powerful girl gang moves through the trees together, each of us carrying a few snowballs in our hands in case this fight is further from over than I hope.

A branch breaks from up ahead, sounding high enough from the ground that my gaze moves quicker, and I scent out the area.

Your dad, my wolf says with a growl. She's possibly a little too much into winning this game.

My fingers brush against my mom's hand, and I catch her subtle nod. She knows. Of course she knows. She's Luna Marked.

I turn to warn the others in my own way, but before the words can leave my mouth, we're ambushed. Totally and utterly ambushed.

Snowballs come at us from left and right, and the few we're holding are no match for what the men have brought.

"It's a trap!" Andie's voice shouts from the distance, but it's too late.

A snowball hits me, likely bruising my nose as it explodes around my face. I retreat behind a tree and notice Aunt Embry doing the same, holding her arm and cupping the side of her face.

Mom soon joins me, and Lucinda finds her own tree, brushing white dust off herself in several spots. I'm pretty sure the only one left is Aunt Amersyn.

"We need to—"

"Enough!" GiGi's booming voice cuts through the air around us.

When I peek around the tree, her shimmering form appears out of nowhere, tendrils of energy wafting around her before they float away, making me grin. She always knows how to make one hell of an entrance.

Aunt Andie skids to a stop, ropes still hanging from her wrists where I assume they had her tied up, using her to bait us. When Uncle Foster drops from the branches, she swirls around and points a finger at him. "You're in deep shit."

"But we won." His smirk grows, but it doesn't last long.

"Who slapped a crown on your head and made you queen?" GiGi retorts. "I was appointed game master. I say who wins."

"Oh, come on, Beatrix," Maciah says. "You know we just kicked their asses."

"Says who?" Amersyn replies, running a hand over her body. "This is the skin of a killer. I don't have a mark on me."

Mom and Embry burst into laughter as I groan. Oh, that vampire has no clue what she's just done.

"Beatrix, make her sparkle," Embry begs with her hands pressed together. "Please, please, make her sparkle."

"All of you lose," GiGi announces. "The women because," her eyes sneer at Mom and Aunt Embry, "I expected better of you. The men because if you honestly thought you had a chance in hell of winning something I was

judging after crashing into my decorations earlier, you're stupider than I've always thought."

She teleports out of the snow-covered forest, and the rest of us are left staring at each other.

"You know we won," Dad finally announces.

"The only time you men have ever won anything is when we stupidly decided to be your mates," Aunt Lucy replies, then raises a brow at Uncle Finn. "Go back to the house and put on the reindeer if you expect me to forgive you for this."

He points at himself. "What the hell did I do besides play the game you told me I *had* to play?"

Aunt Lucy's wings extend, and she practically growls. "House. Reindeer. Now."

With those final words, the fae shoves off the ground and flaps her wings, flying through the still-falling snow without a care.

By the time I look back at Uncle Finn, he's already disappeared. Smart man.

Cillian joins me as people begin to disperse, and when he wraps an arm around me, he whispers into my ear, "Can we go home now? I kinda miss our kids."

Me too, but they've been with their great grandma Ramona—also dubbed RaRa—building snowmen and having their own little snowball fight. So, I haven't felt too bad being away all day.

"You're good to go home for the night, but I need to help Mom," I tell him. "The turkey mess seems to be far from over, thanks to the power going out earlier."

"Uhh, guys?" River says, and my chest tightens even before he adds, "We have a thing."

Cillian turns around, shoulders tense. "What?"

He holds up his phone. "Lykem called and said he found the wolf, but they're snowed in on the mountain."

"Is he incapable of finding them shelter until the storm clears?" I ask, a little surprised. The dragon shifter might be a smart-ass, but he's never shown himself to be helpless.

"The wolf? She's, uh, his mate," River replies, and if it was possible, my jaw would be on the ground.

"What?" I snap as Cillian starts to laugh.

I shove my own mate. “Why are you laughing right now?”

“Because this is turning out to be one hell of a weekend.” Cillian looks back at River. “So, what’s the *thing*?”

“She’s on the run from something...or someone,” he answers, and the vice on my heart only gets worse.

“And that means?” I ask because he’s not really telling us what we should be doing about this sort of information.

“Well, that’s why I said it’s ‘a thing,’” my best friend replies. “There’s nothing to be done now, but Lykem has a feeling it’s going to be one and soon. More like, he’s going to make it one because someone clearly hurt his lady.”

Great. Just freaking great.

“Christmas first, war later, okay?” I tell him, then I take Cillian’s hand. “Maybe a hug from the kids before I go back to the pack house wouldn’t be such a bad idea.”

They might drive me crazy every other day, but I love our pups more than the whole damned world and they’re the only beings to calm me like they do. I’ll need their boost before I go face Mom. She doesn’t need anything else to worry about until this weekend is over.

CHAPTER 13

LUCINDA

Losing isn't something I do. Getting pelted in the face and all over the rest of my body with ice balls also isn't something I do. At least not something I let go of easily.

My mate is a good man. The best in all the realms. I know this with every fiber in my body. Yet...

He's going to pay.

I fly back to the pack house. A quick trip, but even still, when I land, there are icicles on my feathered wings and a dusting of snow covering me. With a snarl, I wipe furiously at myself, not wanting to track a bunch of this white shit into Cait's house.

She hasn't done anything wrong and doesn't need more stress in the form of puddles in her hallways.

Going inside, I slam the door behind me and look up toward the second floor. "Finnigan, if you're not naked in our room there's going to be hell to pay."

One might think this means I've forgiven him and he's about to get lucky, but I'm not that kind of woman. Not even close. Well, sort of.

Taking the stairs one at a time, I move with confidence until I arrive at our bedroom door. With a shake of my shoulders, I hold my head up high, then shove the door open.

My mate is standing there in his black boxer briefs, a worry line deepening between his eyes. "It was just a game, Lucy."

I smirk at him. "One that isn't over yet."

He swallows thickly. "I'm sorry for hitting you with the snowballs."

I stalk closer, slowly and purposefully. "If it was just a game, you

shouldn't have anything to apologize for, right?"

He doesn't say anything as I get within touching distance and drag a nail across his chest, then over his shoulder and down his back as I keep moving until I'm standing behind him.

"Aren't you supposed to be wearing something else?" I ask casually.

"Lucinda." He says my name with utter disbelief. "You can't be serious."

I've begged him to wear the reindeer thong for years. Never once have I gotten him to submit, but something tells me today just might be that day.

"Oh, I'm as serious as the snow still embedded in my hair, my dear Finnigan." I grab both sides of his boxers and yank them down, then smack his ass. "Reindeer now."

There's a red mark in the shape of my hand on his backside as he moves with his shoulders slumped toward our bags.

The smirk on my face only grows as he digs through his clothes. I know it's in there because I made sure before we left. He won't be getting out of this. He might have if he'd been a good boy during this weekend, but that didn't happen.

He turns toward me, the holiday-themed thong hanging from his fingers. "Please don't make me do this."

"You don't have to, but know the consequences will only get worse." I flutter my lashes at him, and he groans.

"This is torture, but I know if I don't do this at least once, you're never going to stop," he says as he bends to put the reindeer exactly where I've been dying to see it since Cait gave him the gag gift.

He keeps his back to me, but it's almost as entertaining as I know the front will be. I watch as he slides the thong up his muscled thighs and over his hips, the string of material disappearing between his ass cheeks that flex from what I assume is a very awkward sensation for him.

I have to cover my mouth with one hand to hold back my laugh. This is supposed to be a punishment, which means I have to remain in control at all times.

But as soon as he turns around and I see the "nose" of the reindeer starting to...rise, I lose all restraint.

Laughter bursts from me until I snort and have to hold my stomach.

"You're the cruelest person on Earth," Finn mutters, standing there like someone just stole his puppy, but also...like he's enjoying this if the way he's filling out the reindeer sleeve is anything to be believed.

I reach for my phone and before he can move or cover himself, I've snapped two pictures. This is a moment I can't depend on my memory to accurately remember for the rest of our lives.

"Lucinda Morrow," he growls, eyes narrowing and a rumble in his chest. "Delete those now."

This time he stalks toward me, but I shake my head, still chuckling. "Not a chance in hell."

"I mean it." His voice is deep and one hell of a turn-on as he approaches and towers over me.

My eyes flick up toward him as I tuck my phone away. "What are you going to do if I don't, huh?"

"It's not what I will do," he says confidently. "It's what I won't do, and that's showing you what this reindeer is fully capable of."

His hard cock brushes against my stomach, heating my skin as the rest of him stays just far enough away from me to drive me crazy.

And just like that, I've lost control of the situation.

"How about I keep the pictures, but I swear on our children that the image is for my eyes only so that when we're old and grey, we can look back on this night, maybe even recreating it as a new holiday tradition."

"Do I get to pin you to the bed and do whatever I want in this new tradition you're wanting to create?" he asks, voice husky as his eyes peer down at me.

Damn it. He knows I can't resist him when he gets all dominant with me.

"Anything and *everything*." My breathing gets heavier, and I reach for the now fully erect reindeer, but he takes a step back out of my reach.

"You swear?" he asks, locking me into my words.

"I swear on my favorite sword," I say, since the thought of swearing on my children for this kind of thing actually seems utterly screwed up.

His grin finally snaps into place, and he has his hands cupping my face in the next second. "Then, we have a deal."

Merry fucking Christmas to me.



THE NEXT MORNING, I DON'T THINK THERE'S ANYTHING THAT WILL GET ME out of bed. My body is wasted from being bent into positions I didn't think it

was capable of, even after all these years with my mate. Though, Finn seems to be on cloud nine.

His smile stretches from ear-to-ear as he dresses. “Merry Christmas, my Lucy.”

I roll over and throw the comforter back over my head. “We had Christmas last night. Five times.”

His chuckle sends shivers down my spine. “But I have one more present for you.”

That has me tensing. He could just be luring me out of bed, but something tells me that my perfect mate is better than that. Even if we don’t normally do the Christmas thing, he would have gotten me something the moment he knew we were coming here.

“Actually, more than one,” he says, then something hard lands on the bed. “Though, this second one isn’t from me. Look at your phone.”

This has me sitting up and searching for the device that I assume Finn just threw at me. My fingers wrap around the cool surface, and I look at the screen.

It’s a text from Raven with a picture attached.

My Favorite Daughter: We love you, Mom. Thank you for being the best parent we could ever ask for. We miss you, and we’ll be home soon with good news.

Tears prick at my eyes—an action that very rarely happens—and I click on the attached picture. It’s Raven and Dom standing on top of a pyramid. The sun is shining bright behind them, but their smiles are even more radiant. They each have their wings out, and on second glance... Holy fucking shit.

“Dominic glows,” I mutter to myself, but Finn is listening and at my side in the next second.

“What?” he leans in closer.

I point to his white wings. “They’re glowing, and it’s not just the sun behind them. Look at the feathers, the way they’re glistening in the picture. They’re not just white... They’re *translucent*. It’s been right there in front of us this whole time.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” Finn says, almost sounding nervous even though I couldn’t be happier.

“He’s purity.” I blink and more tears fall. “Our son. He’s purity. The epitome of goodness. We created that.”

My chest tightens, and I want to sob with mixed emotions. For so long

I've worried about the unknown, and while this doesn't mean we're out of the woods with concern for Dominic's safety, it does tell me he won't have to fear who he could become.

"He's been making us all better by just being present in our lives," Finn says with an awe that is absolutely deserved. "He could stop wars. He could..."

"Don't get ahead of yourself," I warn my mate. "While this is fantastic news, it needs to stay between us for now. Just because our son is full of goodness doesn't mean someone with ill-intentions wouldn't try to manipulate him for their own gain."

My mind has already conjured three different scenarios where Dom is forced to make people believe they're safe and happy when they're in fact the complete opposite.

"But what matters now is that we know and he's happy," I add, not wanting to diminish how great of news this is. "We will celebrate the day with this part of our family and then see our children tomorrow."

At least I hope they'll be home then.

Finn wraps his arms around me and holds me tight against his chest. "Everything is going to be fine."

Yes, it would be. One way or another, I will make sure of it.

CHAPTER 14

CAIT

After a lot of grumbling and growling, I was forced to my room for the night with promises from Roman, Embry, and Beatrix that the morning would look brighter.

Except when I open my eyes first thing, the day already seems bleak.

Roman's side of the bed is cold, and the room is pitch black. Searching for my phone, I check the time and my eyes bulge. It's after eight in the morning. What in the actual fuck? How have I slept this long? Christmas morning breakfast is supposed to be done by now. I have my friends here that I want to be with.

And it's freaking dark outside for some reason.

I throw the comforter off me and as soon as my feet touch the floor, light begins to shine through the windows as if it's been there the whole time, not hiding and making me sleep longer.

There's magic moving through my room as the spell breaks, and I glower. Beatrix did something. I know it. Andie wouldn't have done this to me.

I throw on jeans and a sweatshirt, not even bothering to brush my hair before I jerk open my bedroom door. As soon as I do, I find a box at my feet.

It's small, wrapped in shiny green paper, and topped with a sparkly silver bow. My name is scrawled on the folded paper attached to the gift, and the writing is Roman's.

Revealing the note, I begin to read, not even trying to keep the tears at bay.

My Dearest Cait,

You've worked so hard on this Christmas, and I know it seems as if nothing has gone as planned, but you've brought us all together. That's the most important part.

We've let you sleep and taken care of everything else. Don't be mad. You haven't slept for more than a couple hours each night since you started planning. It was my time to step in and take care of my mate like you always do for me.

For everyone.

Take your time getting ready. Breakfast will be waiting for you downstairs, so will everyone else.

Nobody is in a rush.

Once you're done, open your present and come join us.

I love you more than the moon and stars.

Yours forever and always,
Roman

That damn mate of mine. I slump against the wall and wipe the happy tears from my cheeks. Okay, maybe this morning isn't bleak. Not even close.

They've given me rest and peace. Two things I don't often get as the alpha female of a flourishing pack like ours. I can even smell the food. Bacon and turkey. Hopefully not cooked together, just at the same time.

Reaching down, I grab the gift. There's no way I'm waiting until I'm ready to open it. My fingers pull at the bow, then rip the paper, not being at all careful.

Inside the box is another black velvet one. I haven't even fully opened it yet, and my heart is already racing with excitement.

Grabbing the soft material, I pinch the sides and lift the lid of the rectangular box, then gasp. Inside is a stunning necklace. It's white gold for the chain and pendant, and there's a wolf's claw made from white and black diamonds.

My fingers brush over the glittering stones, and I smile. It's perfect, and it will be the first thing I put on after my shower.

I know he told me to take my time, but now, I'm much too excited to be up here alone. Rushing to the bathroom, I turn the water on, then strip down.

I'm washed up and dried off in record time. Within ten minutes total, I've also dressed and blow-dried my hair enough that it's not dripping down my back.

One last look in the mirror, I grin at the gift shining back at me from my neck. There are fine lines around my blue eyes and even a couple grey hairs starting to pop out amongst my brunette hair, but aging doesn't scare me.

I've spent decades with the love of my life, saving lives, creating a safe haven for shifters, and being with family. Even better, as long as Fate doesn't deem otherwise, I know I have even more decades of happiness waiting for me.

Roman was right to take over for me. I needed the sleep and clarity. Now, bounding down the stairs, I have a true smile on my face and there's not an ounce of stress left in me. Nothing will ruin this day as long as we're all together.

Getting to the living room first, I see Ramona with my grandkids and Beatrix next to her, wiggling her glowing fingertips and laughing at the goofy faces they make.

With them are Andie and Foster, snuggled together on the couch, talking quietly while smiling up at each other. Then, Lucinda and Finn are standing next to the Christmas tree, beaming as if they couldn't be happier. While Lucy has calmed down over the years, this kind of unfiltered joy on her is rare and makes me wonder what's happened, but first I need to find my mate and daughter.

I head to the kitchen, and sure enough that's where Roman is, along with Dawsyn, Cillian, and Embry. The moment I enter the room, Roman turns around, his eyes going to my neck, then back to my face.

"Good morning, beautiful," he says with a wide grin on his face that also has spots of flour on it, along with some on his black shirt even though he's wearing...my apron.

I chuckle at the sight of the flowery material covering him, but that doesn't stop me from going into his open arms. I push up onto my toes and kiss him, uncaring that we're not alone.

His tongue slips between my lips, and I angle my head as my fingers tangle with his hair.

Thank you for my gifts, I tell him through our bond, referring not only to the necklace, but the rest I was able to get.

He doesn't get to reply before we're sprayed with water from the sink. "I might be an adult, but seeing my parents make out is still gross."

Dawsyn's horror makes both of us laugh as we pull apart. I glance over Roman's shoulder at her. "Sorry, Daughter."

"Just don't do it again."

Roman rolls his eyes. "Look at her already thinking she can tell us what to do, and she isn't even alpha yet."

"Just wait until I am," our daughter muses, making me laugh and her father groan.

Embry tugs on my arm and hugs me next. "Breakfast is about ready. I'm going to go get my mate and be back, but..." She pulls back enough to grin at me. "Merry Christmas, Asstie."

"Merry Christmas, Asstie."

"Love you," Embry calls out as she leaves through the back door. My cheeks begin to ache from all the smiling and I've barely been up twenty minutes.

"Where are Amersyn, Maciah, Vaughn, Kelly, and River?" I ask, realizing they're the only ones not here. "Oh wait, and Sam?"

"You know Sam doesn't do mornings, let alone cheerful celebrations," Roman says as he flips a few of the pancakes on the stove. "The vampires went...somewhere. I didn't ask. Vaughn and his family are on a run together. They should be back soon."

I glance at Cillian. "What about Lykem? He's been gone a lot longer than I was told."

The dragon shifter isn't technically part of my pack, but he's been around long enough that I consider him one of my own. A pseudo-son that came along with my son-in-law and that I haven't had any complaints about. Especially since he loves to make people laugh.

"He's making his way back," Cillian replies, moving platters of food from the counter to the table. "The snowstorm hindered any movement last

night.”

There’s a tension in his voice. “You’re not telling me something,” I say sternly, but Cillian refuses to look at me, confirming my suspicions.

Dawsyn’s hand squeezes my shoulder. “Nothing we need to worry about today, Mom. I promise.”

While “worrying” feels like my number one job, I decide to listen to my daughter. It’s Christmas. I have my family here. As long as nobody is coming to attack, I’m going to enjoy the day to its fullest.

“What can I help with?” I ask, pushing up the sleeves of my red sweater.

“Nothing,” Roman tells me. “Go hang in the living room for a bit. We’ll call everyone in when everything is ready to be served.”

Pushing up onto my toes, I kiss his cheek. “Alright.”

His brow raises. “Really? Just like that, you’re going to relinquish control?”

I nod, smirking. “Old wolves can learn, too.”

I used to believe the control was all I had, and even after all this time, I still find myself needing to be in charge of certain situations, but not today. Today I’m going to trust those I love to have my back.

It’s time to really get into the Christmas spirit.

CHAPTER 15

LEXI

Back at the cabin in the woods...

My head is pounding, and I can't seem to make my heart stop racing. I have so many questions, but I'm not ready to talk. Hell, I'm not ready for *Lykem*.

Yet, here he is. Waiting for me, yet also not rushing me.

Once I accepted he really is my mate and not some trick, I decided to trust him. At least enough to understand why I'm a bit unhinged. Though, realizing that I've been gone for much longer than I thought has driven me back into my mental hole.

I was captive for over fifteen years. With the drugs pumped into us, it felt as if I was only awake for five of them, which is how long I thought I'd been gone.

When *Lykem* told me the year after getting off the phone with his friend for the second time, I told him I was tired and wanted to sleep, but really, I laid on the couch and stared at the ceiling.

Fifteen years.

Where was my family? Did they think I was dead? Had they spent months looking for me? Years?

So many questions and yet, I have no clue where I'm supposed to begin finding answers or figuring out how to get home.

Though, the moment *Lykem* walks back into the cabin, strands of his reddish-blond hair falling over his forehead and his blue eyes bright as they search for me, I don't know if I want to go back.

Maybe it would be easier if I just pretend that I was never kidnapped and

start over. My parents would have surely moved on by now.

But every time I close my eyes, I see the black curls of Quinn and the red eyes of Jameson. They were the two closest to my cage, my only companions for, apparently, the last fifteen years.

I can't forget them or pretend they're not still trapped.

I only escaped because my IV ended up breaking, but my masked captors never noticed. I kept it hidden, pretending to sleep for days at a time, only stirring when Quinn would since she's also a wolf shifter and what they gave me, they also gave her.

Selfishly, I hadn't even said goodbye to my friends. I regained my strength after a week and broke out while they were still unconscious.

My heart broke with every step I took away from them, but I couldn't help them, knowing that they'd have to be carried out. They'd kept us near starving, and I was so weak. I hadn't even known if I could help myself.

I just knew I needed to run as far and fast from that place as I could possibly manage.

Which is exactly what I'd done. Hell, I'd run so swiftly that I don't even remember where I was, and it didn't seem my wolf did either.

We'll figure it out, she promises. We won't leave our pack behind.

No, we won't.

But first we have to deal with our...mate and what the hell it means that he's a dragon and not a wolf.

Unexpected, but he might be just what we need to save the others, assuming he's as strong as I sense.

He was sent as a protector, so hopefully, I reply. Yet, it had been the strength I sensed in him that had scared me the most last night.

Lykem is my mate, but I also know nothing about him or his kind. Are they kind? Or are they power hungry and I've just traded one captor for another?

My wolf insists we can trust him, and I'm doing my best to do so because I'm so tired. Having this be something good... Well, I want to cling to that more than I want to run from it after all these years.

He wipes snow from his jacket and smiles softly at me. "The storm has stopped, and I scouted the area. We should be good to get out of here now."

"And where will you take me?" I ask him again. He mentioned something about another pack last night, but I need to be certain the plan hasn't changed.

“Like I said before, my friend River, he’s also part of the protectors,” Lykem replies, speaking with patience and care. “He’s with my other friends, who are all good people and have saved the world more times than I can count. I don’t know if you’ve heard of Roman and Cait from East Texas, but that’s where he is.”

Heard of them? I try not to gape at the dragon, but those two shifters are a legend back at my pack. They reunited the wolves in ways I’m not sure they’ll ever understand. Or maybe after all this time, they do. Either way, my parents used to talk about how they were responsible for stopping the previous leaders of the supernatural communities from continuing to abuse their power. By doing so, they allowed the rest of us to come together without fear.

Since I don’t want to sound too crazy like I used to think my parents did, I merely nod. “Yeah, I’ve heard of them. How are we getting there?”

Holy shit. I want to smack myself. Am I really just going to trust that he’s telling the truth? How can I so easily place my life in this man’s hands after what I’ve been through?

It’s the mate bond, my wolf says. Though, it’s not just that. You’re scared and rightly so, but pay attention to our senses. Deep down, you know his intentions are true. He hasn’t tried to touch you since you flinched away. He watched over us all night instead of sleeping. We might not understand what he is, but it doesn’t take much to figure out who he is.

She’s not wrong, and I’ve noticed the same things she just pointed out. Yet, it feels too easy. Too...good.

Life hasn’t been kind, but I’m supposed to believe that Fate has finally stepped in and led me to happiness after fifteen years of hell?

Do you think it was a coincidence that your line was the one to break? my wolf asks.

Looking at Lykem, I find him staring at me with confusion in his eyes, but he’s not the only one feeling that way. Still, I’m starting to believe that maybe my wolf is right and this is exactly where I was supposed to end up.

“What?” I ask him, feeling as if I missed something in my mini freak-out since he’s still staring.

“Did you hear what I said about how we’re getting there?” he replies, and I forgot I even asked the question.

“Um, no. I must not be quite awake yet.”

His responding smile makes my stomach flutter as he says, “That’s okay.

We'll get you a real bed to sleep in soon."

My muscles relax even thinking of a soft, non-lumpy surface to rest my body on.

"As I told you last night," he starts to say, and I make sure to give him my full attention this time, "I'm a dragon shifter, meaning I can fly."

He pauses, seeming to watch my face for a reaction, but I've spent years hiding my true feelings from my captor, so it's easy to mask my next freak-out as Lykem continues speaking.

"I'll shift once we're away from the cabin, and you'll need to hop on my back," he explains. "I have magic that shields my dragon from the humans, so we can fly straight to the pack as long as we don't run into any more weather."

I swallow thickly. He wants me to...ride him?

It's not like you'll be naked, my wolf says. Pretend he's a horse.

I've never ridden one of those either.

Yeah, this is going to be interesting.

Lykem reaches for the blanket on the couch. "You'll want to bring this with you. It's still cold as hell out there. Keeping your face covered will make things...easier."

Not likely by much, but I take his word for it.

"And we're leaving now?" I ask, then curse myself when my voice comes out with a tremble in it.

He raises a brow and grins. "Are you afraid of heights?"

My head shakes. "Nope."

"Liar." He chuckles and the sound makes my nerve endings feel as if they've been shocked in the best way possible.

I'm not at all prepared for being mated. I was only seventeen when I was taken... Holy shit. My brain quickly does the math, and I don't like the conclusion. I'm in my thirties now.

I'm old.

My wolf laughs at my new inner turmoil, but I don't get to dwell long. Lykem opens the door to the cabin. "Shall we then?"

"Why not?"

I'm pretty sure I've officially gone crazy, but trusting my wolf and my instincts is what's gotten me through the years. Why stop now?

I follow Lykem out the door, but stop before closing it to double check the fire is out in the fireplace and we haven't left any of the oil lamps lit.

When everything seems as it should be, I shut the door behind me.

Alright, I can do this.

Lykem stops once he has about a twenty-foot radius of space. The ground is covered in eight-to-ten inches of snow and the wind is still blowing, making the chill feel even colder.

He gives me a onceover, keeping a distance between us. “Make sure to stay there while I shift. When I’m done, it will be easier for you to come to the front side of my wing and use my leg to help you climb up. Once you’re on, don’t forget to use the blanket to cover your face.”

“Got it,” I say, not at all feeling like I have this.

His grin makes my heart flutter again, but he doesn’t keep his gaze on me for long. A shimmer appears around him, and then dark red scales begin to appear on his skin as his body grows taller and wider right before it seems to burst...transforming into a beast.

On instinct, I step back even further, but his wings and spiked tail don’t come close to me.

Holy shit. He’s a freaking dragon.

I already knew that, but knowing and seeing are two completely different things.

My hands tremble as I take a step closer. His massive animal turns toward me, and I see his newly familiar eyes staring back at me.

Taking a deep breath, I remind myself that I can do this. I’ve been through worse. This shifter is my mate. He’s here to keep me safe. I have absolutely nothing to be afraid of.

Except falling off his back when we’re thousands of feet in the air, my wolf teases.

Not helping, I snap back as I approach his dragon.

My fingers reach out, the tips running over his smooth scales. They’re cool to the touch, but that just might be because of the weather. Either way, I’m surprised by how soft they are.

I look back at his head to find he’s still watching me. I thought that would make me more nervous, but instead, his steady stare seems to calm my nerves.

Holding tightly to the blanket with one hand, I reach up for his outstretched wing and lift my foot until it finds a spot on his leg as he suggested. With one heave, I’m off the ground and crawling up his back.

Holy shit, I’m sitting on top of a dragon right now and not just any

dragon. My mate.

I don't know how I went from thinking I was going to die in a cage to this in a matter of a week or so, but for the first time in too long, I smile. A real and genuinely happy one that stretches across my face.

I just might be okay after all.

Lykem's wings begin to move, and I scramble to wrap the blanket over my head. Once that's done, I reach for the spikes on his neck for something to hold on to and am grateful for my long legs that allow the tips of my toes to rest on top of his wings.

My knees press inward against his body, and I lean forward, tempted to close my eyes, but the moment he pushes off the ground, an excitement fills me.

This is something straight out of a dream. There's no way I'm missing this.

We soar above the trees, then higher, but stay beneath the clouds. There's a city toward my left and more trees to my right, which is the direction Lykem goes.

Most of the land is flat and covered in snow, except for the roads that seem to have been cleared. Though, I don't get to watch for long periods of time. The wind gets stronger, and it feels as if we're flying right into it.

Using the blanket, I cover the rest of my face and lean closer to his back. My cheek rests against his scales, and I keep my eyes closed, soaking in the moment.

I'm flying on my dragon mate to one of the most well-known packs in our supernatural community to meet a rare Luna Marked wolf and her mate, the alpha.

This could only be better if my parents were also going to be there waiting for me.

But maybe that will come next. Maybe I don't have to leave the past behind in order to move forward. Not now.

CHAPTER 16

DAWSYN

Back in East Texas...

Lykem texted Cillian to tell him he was on his way back with Lexi. My stomach is churning with nerves. She might be his mate, but we know nothing about her or if her story is true. I don't want to doubt Lykem's mate, but something tells me her showing up is going to change more than a few things.

So far, the morning has been perfect. Mom hasn't once freaked out. Everyone else is together, laughing and smiling and enjoying the company of our extended family finally all being together again.

Except I've just left my pups who are distracted with their new toys, and now I'm waiting for Lykem with Cillian and River.

"Did he say where she's from?" Cillian asks River.

"Nope, just that she'd been kidnapped," my best friend replies. "Apparently, she's a bit skittish."

While I'm suspicious of this whole scenario, I don't blame the she-wolf for not trusting the dragon, even if he is her mate.

Finding your mate doesn't always mean a happily-ever-after. I learned that long ago when we took in another wolf. She was only sixteen at the time and had just murdered her mate. It was self-defense and she had every right, but I saw firsthand the damage it did to her.

Finally, I spot Lykem's red dragon in the sky. He's coming down fast. Almost too fast.

"Something's wrong," I say, backing up to give him more room to land, but he ends up sailing past us.

The three of us run to the dragon, and when we get next to him, we find a body wrapped in a blanket, practically frozen to his back.

“Shit,” I mutter before leaping onto Lykem’s wing and reaching for her. She doesn’t move when I grab her arm. “My name is Dawsyn. I’m going to help you down.”

Still no response.

River and Cillian are waiting for me, but this isn’t going to be easy. “She’s literally stuck to him.”

“Go get a bucket of warm water,” Cillian tells River, but Lykem seems to have other plans.

His head turns back toward me and his mate, then he opens his mouth.

“If you burn Dawsyn, I will break every bone in your body,” Cillian warns the dragon, but Lykem ignores him.

The dragon starts to breathe heavily, heat escaping from him through the bit of smoke he’s also producing. This might be a little awkward, but the warm air from his fiery mouth starts to melt the ice off her.

“It’s working,” I say, pointing to her knees. “Now, the other side.”

“So c-c-cold,” she mumbles, and I rub a hand over her back.

“It’s okay. We’re going to get you inside just as soon as we can,” I promise.

She doesn’t reply, but soon, I can finally move her and transition the blonde from my arms to Cillian’s. Before my feet are even on the ground, Lykem is shifting back to his human form. He pushes me out of the way and takes the woman from Cillian.

“I’ve got her,” he says, brushing the blanket out of her face.

“Alexis?” River’s voice asks with awe, but I don’t see her face move in recognition before I turn back to him.

“Do you know her?” I ask with a head tilt.

His eyes are wide, and he’s staring hard, which has Lykem growling. “I went to her funeral. Fourteen years ago.”

“Explain. Now,” Lykem snarls.

“She’s older, but I’m almost positive this is Alexis DeBree from my pack,” River says. “She went missing, and after a year of looking for her, her parents finally assumed she was dead. Witches couldn’t find her existence. Not even Beatrix. I was friends with her. She lived next door to me for years.”

Well, this just got more interesting.

She begins to stir in Lykem's arms, and he turns her away from us. "We're not doing this right now."

Having been around enough newly mated men, I don't argue with Lykem. Instead, I place a hand on his shoulder and smile. "Let's get her inside, then."

He thankfully agrees, and we let him go ahead. He heads for the back door to the kitchen, which is probably best since the others are crammed into the living room being entertained by my children.

"Can you get her some new clothes and a few more blankets?" Lykem asks once we're inside. "I'm going to take her to one of the spare rooms."

He doesn't wait for any of us to respond, and once he's out of sight, I look at Cillian. "This could be really bad."

His frown deepens. "She's his mate. We're going to make it as good as it can be."

River seems to nod in agreement. "Alexis was a good girl. Whatever happened, something tells me she didn't have a choice. I believe the information Lykem already passed along. She was taken."

"But by who?" I ask, because that's my biggest worry here. Lykem won't rest until he's made this right. Not if he has the option of avenging her.

He might be all fun and games the majority of the time, but I've known him for over ten years now. The dragon in him is fierce and unyielding when he wants to be.

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, there's nothing we can do now. The woman deserves a moment of peace, and this is Christmas. We'll sort out the rest later.



THE LOOK I GIVE MY GIGI ISN'T AT ALL FRIENDLY. "YOU DID WHAT NOW?"

"Oh, come on, Dawsyn," she says with a sigh. "It's not that big of a deal."

I point to the tangle of supernaturals that is my family trying to play some game called Twister that my mom had stashed away. "They're intoxicated and falling on top of each other. We're supposed to be eating dinner in an hour. I'm not even sure they'll be alive that long."

"They're just a little drunk," she says with an evil smirk. "Not dying. At least I made sure the kids didn't have any of the punch."

“If you think that makes you GiGi of the Year, you’re sorely mistaken.”

I shouldn’t be surprised that she spiked the punch, but somehow, I am. We weren’t even gone thirty minutes dealing with Lykem and Lexi. I don’t know how this happened so quickly, but I don’t waste time making sure nothing else goes wrong.

“I’m going to go check on the food,” I tell her, not hiding my disappointment.

She grabs my wrist. “Calm down, child. I already took care of everything. I just wanted a bit of entertainment, and no offense, but this is way better than watching your son and daughter open presents. Now, tell me what your dragon friend brought home. I sense drama.”

Once I stop trying to leave the living room, she wraps an arm around me and rests her head on my shoulder, laughing lightly at the mayhem before us.

Aunt Lucy is now standing on the pile of them and throws her hands into the air. “I’m the queen of you all.”

I grab my phone and snap a few pictures, because this really is too good not to capture.

With Aunt Lucy’s weight on top, one-by-one, the others start to drop to the ground. I expect someone to get angry, but instead, they all start giggling like schoolgirls. None of them attempt to untangle themselves, and I look back over at GiGi.

“Are you proud of yourself?” I ask her with a grin.

“Very,” she answers, still staring at the mound that is our family. “Now, this she-wolf. What’s her story?”

“Not today, GiGi,” I say softly. “It’s Christmas.”

She looks up at me and seems to inspect my face with deep scrutiny. “Don’t tell the others, but I think you’re my favorite.”

I bark out a laugh. “Your secret is safe with me. Now, can you fix them so we can have dinner?”

Her lips thin, but she finally sighs. “I guess.”

As her hands begin to glow a light silver, I whisper into her ear, “I also won’t tell everyone that you’ve turned soft and are loving this moment with all of us.”

Her mouth twitches at the sides, and I know I’m right.

My GiGi might be gruff and tough, but we’ve all had a hand in softening her over the years. I like to think I’m the favorite merely because I was the first grandchild who reminded Beatrix just how much love she still had inside

her cold heart.

But we've also been through a lot together over the years. She's always been someone I could count on, and for that, I'll forever be thankful.

CHAPTER 17

CAIT

I think I should maybe be annoyed with Beatrix for basically drugging us, but I'm not. It's been too wonderful of a day to care about any other mishaps. Though, I'm pretty sure my daughter is hiding something from me, which I'm not quite okay with.

My eyes watch her every movement from across the room, but Andie pokes me in the ribs. "Leave it alone."

"No." I sound like a toddler, but I don't care.

"If it was something urgent, she'd tell you," Andie reminds me, but that doesn't mean I don't want to know now.

"Seriously, Cait." Embry sighs. "She's not a child anymore. She's almost our alpha. Trust her."

"I do trust her," I say without hesitation. "I just..."

"Don't want to be left out?" Lucinda cuts in. "Welcome to my world. I barely had ten years with my kids before they decided to act like adults."

Amersyn raises a brow. "Isn't that normal for fae?"

"Doesn't mean I have to like it." Lucinda crosses her arms, but grins. "Though, they're still pretty incredible."

She told me earlier about Dominic figuring out his wings, and she hasn't stopped smiling since. It makes my heart want to burst.

"That they are," I tell her.

"What are we going to do about Beatrix?" Amersyn asks, the only one of us not finding the punch incident hilarious.

My eyes meet the vampire's as I say, "Absolutely nothing. She's old. Let her have her fun."

"At our expense?" she asks with a raised brow.

I shrug and look across the room to find the witch in question, sitting on the ground, playing cards with my grandson. “Yep.”

Amersyn shakes her head but doesn’t say anything else. Out of all of us, she’s the least...domesticated, but that doesn’t mean we love her any less. She has the harder path, unable to have kids and in charge of the protectors. A task she chose, but still, we don’t take that lightly. It’s not something I would have wanted to take on myself, and I’m grateful she and Maciah did.

Andie loops an arm around me and then Lucinda, beaming with joy. “Thank you, ladies.”

“For what?” Lucy asks, surprisingly not backing away from the half hug she’s receiving.

“For being here, for accepting me into your little girl gang, for never allowing me to feel alone,” she says, eyes getting glossy. “I spent a lot of time by myself when I was younger, but finding Foster, Charlie, and the coven... Everything changed. I don’t even want to know where I’d be if I hadn’t met all of you.”

And just like that, any of the tension lingering from anyone else is gone.

We’re a lucky group, and sometimes we take that for granted, but not today.

“If someone suggests we all hug right now, I’m going to punch you in your tits,” Lucinda says, but her tone is light.

Oh, how far she’s come.

Everyone else laughs, and I don’t think I could be happier.

“Who’s ready for dinner?” Roman announces from the hallway.

Not only did he take care of breakfast this morning, but he also made me relinquish dinner to him and Beatrix. Though, she didn’t help long.

Roman’s eyes find me in the group of our closest friends, and he winks, making my stomach flutter like we’re still in our twenties.

By shifter standards, we’re not even close to old, but we’ve learned more times than I care to count that life can be shorter than we want. So, as the years pass quicker, I’m conscious of each one, which is why I’m okay with retiring as alpha female.

I want to spend the rest of my years with my mate, sometimes being selfish, sometimes doing exactly what we do now. Just being here for not only our family, but our pack.

Though, with our daughter in charge.

Now *that* makes me feel old, but also incredibly proud. I knew the

moment Dawsyn was born that she was going to be strong, but she's turned out far more incredible than I could have ever predicted.

Roman directs everyone to the dining room. We usually host pack dinners here with some of the higher-ranking shifters, and while I consider them to be family as well, it's nice to see the chairs filled with different faces tonight.

The chair at the head of the table remains empty as everyone finds a seat, but I go to the spot at the right while Dawsyn sits across from me with Cillian at her other side.

Finally, Roman joins us, taking the empty spot as the alpha. Right then, I realize this might be the last time he does so, and my breath gets caught in my throat.

I might be excited for our new future, but that doesn't mean I won't miss these moments.

My mate reaches under the table to squeeze my hand. *You did good, My Love.*

We did good, I correct him. I might have set things into motion, but he made sure I didn't completely lose myself to the chaos.

Glancing around the table, I see all the people I love most in the world right here, under one roof, but then I realize one seat is still empty.

"I thought Lykem returned," I say, my words directed to Dawsyn.

She nods but doesn't look at me. "He did, but he's not able to join us for dinner."

I open my mouth to question why, but Roman's foot nudges mine. *Leave it for later.*

That's what people keep telling me, but it isn't as easy as they make it sound.

"Thank you all for being here," Roman announces, standing back up from his chair, then gesturing to me. "Cait and I couldn't be more grateful to have you all in our lives. Even when you drug us." His pointed stare falls on Beatrix who just shrugs.

"You all but begged for it," she tells us, making us laugh all over again.

"It's been a long time since we've gotten together," Roman continues. "Let's make sure it doesn't take three years next time."

He raises his glass, and so do the rest of us. "Merry Christmas, everyone!" I say, the others echoing their own sentiments right behind mine.

"Now, dig in," Roman says, sitting back down. The room fills with chatter that doesn't stop even as we begin eating.

Stories are shared, memories relived, and friends reminisced over. It's everything I hoped for and more.

CHAPTER 18

RIVER

At one point in my life, I thought I might love Alexis. When she went missing, my heart broke, but looking back now, she was always more of a friend than anything else. Dawsyn has always been my best friend, but Alexis had been there for me when Dawsyn couldn't be, thanks to our packs being so far apart.

Still, seeing Alexis after all this time of believing she was dead...I have mixed emotions. Lykem keeps calling her Lexi, but I know it's the Alexis I used to know.

She has the same bright blonde hair and blue eyes with her nose that turns slightly upward. I didn't get the best look before she was taken away, but it was good enough to feel confident about identifying her.

I've let dinner pass without pressing the issue, but now that the others have moved on to dessert, I can't hold back any longer.

Our entire pack mourned for her. At least, that was how it seemed to me at only seventeen. Shortly after that is when I left for Mystics Academy, but I still remember that time in my life clearly.

"Can we talk for a minute?" I ask my dad quietly.

He looks over at me and appraises my face before nodding. "Just us?"

"Mom, too." She'll want to know this news as much as Dad. Alexis had been like a daughter to her.

We leave the table and head back toward the kitchen to speak. When it's just the three of us, I look around one more time before telling them the news.

"Alexis is alive," I say quietly. "In fact, she's in this house."

Mom's gasp is loud enough that I glance around again. "Little Lexi?"

I smile and nod. How had I forgotten that Mom used to call her that?

“She’s the lost wolf I was supposed to go find, but Lykem went instead,” I tell them. “Turns out she’s his mate.”

Dad’s eyes narrow. “Why don’t you sound happy about this?”

“She didn’t see me,” I admit. “Maybe I’m wrong, but I don’t think I am.”

“What do you mean?” Mom asks, her guard going up.

Maybe I should have started this conversation better...

“I saw her face, but it’s been fifteen years,” I explain. “Lykem hasn’t let anyone else in the room with her, but he does call her Lexi.”

The hope returns to Mom’s longing gaze. “It has to be her.”

Dad wraps an arm around her, holding her tight against his side. “Don’t get too excited, Kel. Let’s put eyes on her first.”

She nods, but I can tell it doesn’t matter. Just like it hadn’t for me.

Wanting her to be alive after all this time is too strong to believe we might be wrong.

“That dragon can’t keep her locked up forever,” Dad says, and I had a feeling that would be his opinion. “Let’s go see her and know for sure.”

That’s something I would have done already if I didn’t consider Lykem a close friend. I don’t know what it’s like to find a fated mate, but I’ve seen how possessive shifters can be. Messing with him right now doesn’t seem like the best idea...

“We can wait,” I tell them. “I just couldn’t keep this news to myself and let you guys go home in the morning.”

Mom glares at me. “I would have grounded you for a month if you had.”

That makes me laugh, and my dad, too. She only wishes she could still do that.

Still, Dad shakes his head. “I don’t think so. Lexi is part of our pack even if she’s been missing all this time. We have every right to check on her.”

He moves past me, likely following the scent of the dragon shifter, and heads down the hallway, passing closed doors until he’s at the right one.

“Lykem is a good man,” I tell my dad. “Don’t take how he acts right now personally.”

He smirks. “I’ve been newly mated. I get it.”

Yeah, and I wish I did.

Dad knocks on the door and heavy feet stomp closer from inside. Lykem is on the other side, but only cracks open the door. “What?”

“We’d like to see Lexi,” Dad says.

“No.” The dragon tries to shut the door, but Dad keeps it open with one

palm.

The two glare at each other, and Dad speaks first. “We think we know who she is and where she’s from.”

This has Lykem tensing. “So?”

“So, she was close to us and we want to see her.”

“Vaughn?” a soft, feminine voice sounds from inside the room. “Vaughn?” Her tone grows louder and more hopeful.

“Oh, Lexi.” Mom shoves past the dragon shifter, uncaring that he might be tempted to literally bite her head off.

The door opens wide, and we all watch as the two embrace, my chest tightening at the scene. Lexi’s eyes are squeezed closed, but when they open and see me, her mouth opens in shock.

“River? How is that *you*?” Her voice cracks this time, and she wipes furiously at her eyes. “How can this be possible?”

“We’re wondering the same thing,” Dad says with kindness.

She looks at Lykem, seeming to understand this might be hard for her mate. “They’re from my pack. I lived next door to them before I was...”

“You don’t need to talk about anything yet,” he tells her, then sends us a warning glare.

“No, you don’t,” I agree. “We just wanted to be sure you were who I thought you were.”

She finally hugs Dad and then me, but I don’t let her linger when I can sense Lykem getting closer. I remember jealous Cillian. I don’t need a second showing from this dragon shifter.

“Are my parents here?” she asks with wide eyes. “I had wished, but never thought it could be possible.”

“No, they’re still at the pack,” Mom tells her. “At least, last we were there. Vaughn here retired as Beta, and we’ve been traveling for a while, but I know they’ll be thrilled to see you.”

Tears fall down Lexi’s cheeks and she covers her face as she sobs all over again.

I have no clue what she’s been through, but I imagine it’s some sort of hell. One I intend to make sure we do something about and soon.

“Will you all be here long?” Lexi finally asks, staring at each of us.

Dad looks at Lykem as he answers, “We’ll be here as long as you need us.”

Yeah, the dragon isn’t going to appreciate that, but he needs to know now

that whatever happened to his mate, he isn't alone in avenging her.

Lexi will have him, my family, and all the protectors on this, but one look at my old friend and I can tell tonight isn't that night.

She needs rest and possibly time to process whatever has happened that led her here. That's something I'm with Lykem on giving her.

"Do you guys want to come out for food?" I ask, looking at Lexi. "I know Dawsyn would love to meet you."

Not only because she's the soon-to-be alpha, but because she'll want to welcome Lexi into her pack, offering her a safe place to stay for as long as she needs it. That's who this pack is and always has been.

"Can you bring food here?" she asks, looking down. "We can hear the laughter in there, and I know there will be questions. I'm just not ready yet."

Mom hugs her again. "And you don't have to be. Do you want me to at least call your parents? We have a witch here who could get them."

Lexi's answer seems to surprise all of us as she says, "I'm remembering more the longer I'm free. I think it's best if they don't know yet. Not until I can put all these jumbled memories together."

"Do you think they're to blame for you going missing?" Dad asks, but it's Lykem who answers.

"She wasn't just *missing*, she was taken by humans." His words are filled with pure venom, and accusatory.

Something Dad doesn't seem to miss, either.

"Alright," he says. "Lexi, take all the time you need. We'll be here when you need us, and no one but the alphas of this pack will know you're here. Okay?"

She nods, and Mom hugs her again. "I'll be back with food, my Little Lexi."

That finally has my old friend smiling. "Thanks, Kelly."

I nod at Lykem, gesturing for him to follow us to the door. He steps with us, closing it behind him. "You shouldn't have done that. She wasn't ready."

"Maybe not, but you need to be writing down anything she remembers," I tell him. "Or give her something to start writing in. Whatever this is, it's big enough to have her not wanting to go home or have home come to her. We need to find out why and quickly."

"And she's not the only one to go missing from the packs in South Carolina," Dad says gruffly. "As far as I know, nobody has ever put a link between them, but maybe there's been one all along."

Lykem finally nods. “Fine. But don’t push her. I won’t be as nice next time.”

He waltzes back into the room and slams the door on us.

The three of us share glances, each filled with heavy emotions.

“Well, that was fun,” Mom says.

Yeah, that’s one word for it.

“Let’s get back to the party and give Lexi her space,” Dad says, then glances at me. “Seems we’re going to get more time together than we thought. Maciah’s not sending you anywhere else now.”

No, I don’t imagine he will.

CHAPTER 19

CAIT

Sitting on our back porch, even in the freezing weather, is still my favorite thing, but it's even better with the snow because I get to watch snowman after snowman being built.

Though, nobody will beat mine.

He's perfectly symmetrical and wearing a black top hat I bought in town the other day. His eyes are made from some stones I knew were down by the river along with his mouth, and I made sure to save a carrot from dinner for his nose.

One of my red scarves adorns his neck, and he has stick arms with three little branches at the end for fingers.

Just perfect.

A steaming cup of hot chocolate sits between my fingers as Lucinda joins me. "You totally cheated," she says with a smirk that says she's proud of me.

"I was merely prepared, and everyone else wasn't," I reply, tipping my cup toward hers.

We clink glass once she's seated and watch not only the kids, but the adults run around looking for supplies. I did at least donate a few more items from the house to make things fair. Though, they have to look hard to find them in the trees beyond the yard.

"This was a great two days," she says with a sigh. "I'd stay longer, but Dom and Raven will be home tomorrow."

"Maybe we can do New Years at your place," I suggest, though she'll probably hate that idea.

"Why the hell not?" she replies. "We have a lot to celebrate."

My head twists to face her more directly. "Never would I have thought

Lucinda Morrow would welcome a horde of people into her home.”

“Meh. You guys have grown on me. Like a fungus I can’t get rid of. Seems easier to give in.” Her tone is dead serious, but I see the love in her eyes.

Grinning at her, I lean back in my chair. “I’m happy to be your fungus for the rest of our lives.”

“As if you have any choice,” she mutters quietly, almost as if she doesn’t intend for me to hear the words.

Soft footsteps sound from behind us on the porch, and I glance back, surprised to find our guest coming out of the house. Alone.

I stand to greet her. “Hello, Lexi.”

Her cheeks blush as she nods. “Cait.” Then, she looks between me and Lucinda. “I hope you don’t mind me interrupting.”

“Not at all,” I tell her, then gesture to a chair. “Have a seat.”

Lucinda eyes me suspiciously, but I ignore her. I’m not welcoming problems into my life. I’m merely being a good alpha female to my guest that I’ve been told hardly anything about.

Lexi sits, but doesn’t get comfortable, staying ramrod straight in the chair. “I came out here because I know I’ve just shown up, on Christmas of all days, and I wanted to personally make sure I had your blessing to be here. If you’d rather I leave—”

I cut her off with a wave of my hand. “Nonsense. Lykem is family, and now you are, too. We’ll find you a cabin tomorrow if you’re not ready to stay with your mate, and when you feel up to it, we can chat about where you’ve been and what we need to do about how you got there.”

The she-wolf stares off at the crowd before speaking. “It’s complicated, and I’m not sure...”

I reach for her arm and give it a gentle squeeze. “You’re safe here, and no matter what you say, no one will judge you. More importantly, we will trust you.”

There’s no way to know exactly what she’s been through, but I can sense her turmoil and fear. She’s scared, and if she’s not talking yet, then it must be bad. After all these years as alpha female, I know the most important thing has been keeping the trust of my pack so that they’ll feel safe coming to me with their problems.

Lexi is going to be no different.

“I appreciate that,” she replies softly, finally looking back at me. “I think

my pack had something to do with...what happened, but I need more time. The drugs they used to keep us down messed with my head. I thought I was only gone three, maybe five years. To learn it's been over fifteen was quite the shock."

"Lexi," Lykem's panicked voice sounds from the house.

She grins. "He's a bit possessive. I didn't think I'd like that, but..." Her shoulders shrug, and she doesn't have to explain further. I understand completely the sense of security that comes with having a mate that would burn the world for you.

"We'll talk again tomorrow," I tell her. "For tonight, you can take the third bedroom on the left on the second floor and feel free to kick Lykem out or tell him to find a blow-up mattress and sleep on the ground."

That has her laughing, and the sound warms my heart. I don't know her, but Vaughn and Kelly did before she was taken. They haven't told me much, but enough that I'm glad to see whatever she's been through hasn't completely broken her.

Maybe the drugs weren't such a bad thing after all.

When she walks away and enters back into the house, I turn to find Lucinda staring at me with a glare on her face.

"What?" I ask, confusion lacing my words.

"Let River handle this," she says sternly. "This isn't your fight, and they're not children anymore. You can give her a home, but you're not going to go looking for the trouble she ran from. Do I make myself clear?"

I fight back a smile. "Perfectly clear, but may I ask why?"

Lucy nods toward our families. "For them. We've done our fighting. Too many times to count. It's time to support our kids, but not to join them. Not unless there's no other choice. You have a lot to do over the coming months to prepare Dawsyn. Don't let the excitement of trouble distract you from the bigger picture."

She's right, about all of it. There's a thrill in helping right injustices. It's a bit why I'm jealous of Amersyn and her role running the protectors, but I do know that I'm not the only person capable of helping Lexi.

Though, I'm one of only two who will need to make sure Dawsyn is prepared for her role as the alpha and that Cillian understands his position as alpha male.

"Fine, but if this gets out of hand," I start to tell her, and she finishes my sentence.

“Then, we’ll show up, swords and tails blazing, to kick some ass.” That has her smirk returning and both of us settling back into our chairs.

I hope every day that my daughter will have the same support I’ve had since the first moment I learned about the supernatural world. There’s not much better in this world than knowing you have a family behind you that will not only be there when you need them, but who also isn’t afraid to remind you when to stand down.

“Oh!” she exclaims with a glee I’m not used to coming from the fae. Then, her voice lowers. “Finn finally wore the reindeer.”

My eyes widen, and I shake my head as I cover my mouth to hold back my laugh. “You’re a cruel woman, Lucinda Morrow. Oh, so very cruel.”

“That’s why you love me.”

It’s only a small part, but definitely one and I hope she never changes. Not even when we’re pushing centuries old.



THAT NIGHT, LYING IN BED WITH ROMAN, I CAN’T STOP GRINNING. MORE importantly, I don’t want to.

“It’s after midnight,” my mate mutters. “I can hear you thinking, but you should be exhausted. Now, go to bed.”

I roll over to face him and poke at his chest. “How can you be tired after such an awesome day?”

“Because I spent three hours helping our grandchildren make snowmen as ‘perfect as Grammy’s’,” he says accusingly. “Now, sleep before I find a spot on the couch.”

My pointer finger presses at his stomach this time. “But seriously, how am I supposed to close my eyes and keep them that way with all this adrenaline?”

His chest rumbles, a sexy sound that encourages me more.

I drag my nail around his belly button, then toward his hips, but he catches my wrist. “Cait.”

“Roman.” I mock his tone but immediately burst into laughter. “Seriously, though, if you want me to sleep, then you need to help me out here.”

He starts to roll over and my mouth drops open. He wouldn’t really deny

me, would he...

As I move to get out of bed and go sleep elsewhere, my mate grabs my hips and grumbles, "Where do you think you're going?"

Before I know what's happening, he's lifted me up and positioned me on top of him. My smile returns, and I rub my hands over his abs, then chest. "Right here."

His fingers lightly move up my ribs, then grab on to my shoulders to pull me forward. "You drive me crazy."

I raise a brow, and he continues, "But I wouldn't want to live a day without you or your big heart."

"Thank yo—"

"I'm not done," he says gruffly, cutting me off. "You are the heart and soul of this pack." He moves to sit up further, then kisses my cheek before continuing. "You are and have always been everything I didn't know I needed in my life. Without you, I undoubtedly know that I wouldn't have known joy. Not the kind I have with you or the family we've built together."

His lips move over my chest as he pushes the straps of my pajamas down my shoulder.

My body hums with energy I don't want to contain, and the tether connecting us is like a live wire, wrapping us together and begging us to let it explode.

His hands cup my neck as his thumbs push my chin up. "I love you more than my own life."

"I don't know where all that came from, but I love you just the same," I whisper against his mouth as I start to pepper him with kisses.

"Because you reminded me today what family is about, and it's not about retiring and running away," he says the words, making me tense in his arms.

"What do you mean?" I ask, because it sounds like he's not going to relinquish his position to Dawsyn, and that's going to be a problem.

"We're not leaving our daughter," he explains, staring longingly into my gaze. "We're not going to spend our days lounging around like Vaughn prefers. Right here, in this pack, where we've created our best life, is where we're going to stay unless you tell me that's the worst idea I've ever had."

Emotions burn through my throat and up to my eyes as I hold him tighter, unable to hold back from wiggling over him. "It's a perfect idea. Just like you are. Not to say I don't want a vacation now and then, but being here in East Texas is the best retirement plan you could have come up with."

“Good,” he says with a deep tone. “Now, how about we take care of that adrenaline you’re having a problem with, huh?”

His hands grip my shirt, then tug the material until the cotton rips apart, falling to my waist.

The hunger in his gaze has my blood pumping with fervor, and I nod eagerly. “Yes, please.”

“Always,” he promises, and right then, I know this has been the best damn Christmas I could have ever asked for.



Want an update on Lexi and Lykem, or better yet, keep going with the Mystics and Mayhem world? Preorder [Fractured Mates](#), a full-length standalone, and start reading on January 4th. Then, check out the recommended reading order on the next page for more details!

Want a sneak peek of Fractured Mates before its release date? Read the first three chapters right after the next page!

MYSTICS AND MAYHEM

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[Vampire Heir](#) — [Vampire Ash](#) — [Vampire Vow](#)

Fated to the Wolf

[Shifted Magic](#) — [Altered Magic](#) — [Forged Magic](#)

The Hidden Realm

[A Dragon's Wolf](#) — [A Dragon's Curse](#) — [A Dragon's Fate](#)

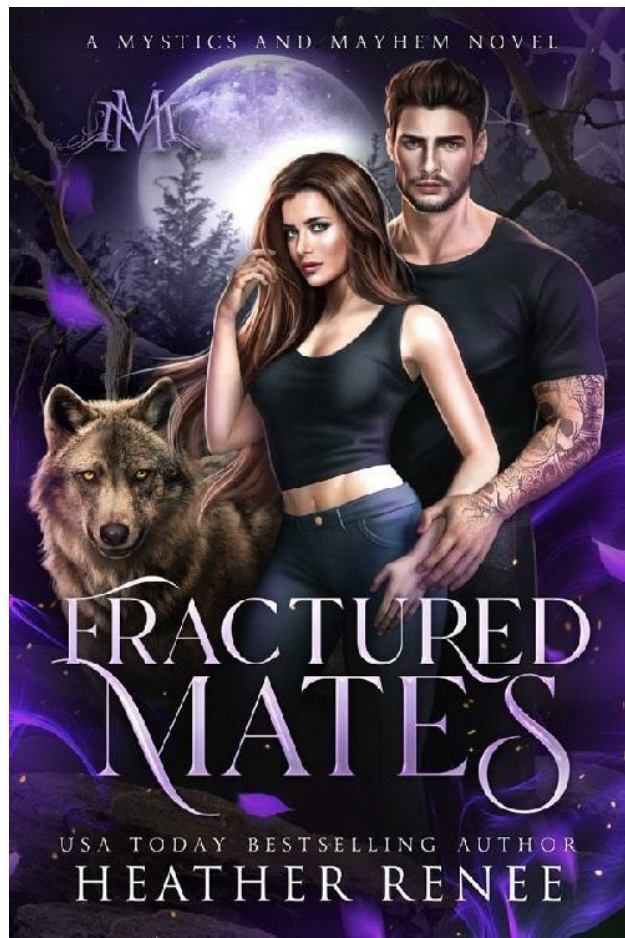
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I hope you enjoy this world as much as I have!

FRACTURED MATES PREVIEW



Enjoy the first three chapters of Fractured Mates, A Mystics and Mayhem Standalone. Please note, these chapters haven't gone through final proofing and may include errors that will be corrected before final release.

CHAPTER ONE
Sophie

I've always thought of that time I murdered my mate as the greatest day of my life, but maybe I've been wrong. As I sit in this old diner, huddled in a corner booth all by my lonesome and relishing in the most savory meal I've ever tasted, I start to question what should hold the title of "Best Day Ever."

Staring at the meaty burger topped with an Anaheim pepper, pepper jack cheese, and bacon, all drizzled in barbeque sauce, I try to convince myself that a kickass foodie day has to be better than anything else. Especially anything to do with the man I wish I'd never met.

Yet the animal in me won't ever agree to that.

Killing Thane changed everything for us and you know it, my wolf says compellingly. He would have caged us and that would have only ended one way.

I know she's right, but as sauce dribbles down my chin and my chest rumbles in satisfaction, I can't find the will to agree. All I can appreciate in this moment is the delicious meal and the Oreo shake it came with.

It's been over ten years since I fled my pack and was relocated to Texas. While the pack there had been everything the protectors who found me had promised, I hadn't stayed long.

The need to be on the go, doing as I please, and watching my own back is too strong for me to stay in one place for long. The alphas, Cait and Roman, have allowed me my freedom, insisting they're still my home, but their words only serve as a safeguard for me.

When I'm asked where I'm from and say East Texas, people don't screw with me as much. Well, as long as I don't stick around long enough for them to get suspicious.

Though from the sounds of it, Cait and Roman are ready to "retire" and the pack will soon be in the hands of Dawsyn and her dragon mate, Cillian. I'm not sure if my wanderer arrangement will continue working out, but I'm going to take advantage as long as I can.

"You look like you need a few more napkins, hon," the waitress says with a knowing smirk as she sits a stack next to my plate. "Can I get you a refill on your shake?"

I nod with my mouth full, then force myself to swallow. "Thanks. This is the best burger I've ever tasted."

She winks at me, a spark of confidence shining in her hazel eyes. “Of course it is.” She glances back toward the kitchen and sighs. “My Henry knows what he’s doing back there.”

The longing in not only her voice, but her gaze sends a twinge of pain through my chest. One I resent with every fiber of my being.

Being human, this woman doesn’t know the connection of a fated mate bond, but I do.

I know how all-encompassing it can feel, how in one moment you can feel so lost, then start to believe that everything in the world is finally right. Yet I also know how wrong those feelings can be. How everything you’ve been told suddenly becomes the biggest lie to ever exist.

A shudder runs through me and I close my eyes until the waitress speaks again. I hadn’t even realized she was still standing next to the table.

“Are you cold?” she asks. “We can move you farther from the vent.

Grabbing one of the napkins, I wipe my face and shake my head as I force a smile to my lips. “I’m good. Thank you.”

She pats the tabletop and returns my grin. “Well, all right, then. You just holler if you need anything at all and I’ll have a refill right up.”

If only all humans could be this nice...

I stare back down at my burger, but my normal, ravenous appetite has faded away. Thinking about Thane typically does that to me.

He’s the only son of bitch who has that kind of power over me and he doesn’t even exist any longer.

I buried him in the ground twelve years ago and he still finds a way to fuck with me. I thought once he was dead that I wouldn’t miss the mate bond. Yet no matter how much I hate him and am glad he’s dead, there’s a part of me that can’t stop caring about him. That alone pisses me off more than anything else, knowing that he still has some sort of hold on me even from the grave.

Taking a deep breath, I calm my rising rage and close my eyes. I picture the river back in East Texas and the rock I used to sleep against when being around the pack became too much.

Their sympathetic looks were a constant reminder of what I’d been forced to do.

And we had every right to kill him, my wolf says, as she always does. He would have raped us, caged us, and eventually killed us one way or another. It was him or us. How do you not see that after all this time?

I do see it, but knowing something and believing it are two different things. I know that shifting and allowing you to rip Thane's heart from his human chest was the right thing to do because he truly was a monster. Yet...I became a murderer and lost my fated mate all in the same moment.

We did that, she corrects. Plus, he was a shitty person and deserved what he got.

And I'm not, I reply. Which means I still have guilt, no matter how happy I am to be on our own.

My wolf becomes quiet and I take that time to pick a bit more at my burger, then thank the waitress for my refill before drinking half the shake in just a couple of gulps.

I stare at the other patrons in the diner. They're smiling and laughing, enjoying their simple life in this backroad, country town in southern Colorado. Nobody here is alone like I am and while I tell myself I prefer it this way, I've been thinking about the past way more than usual and have been heading in the direction of East Texas for weeks now.

There's nothing wrong with having a pack, my wolf says, listening in on my thoughts.

I know she'd be happy about that. As much fun as we have on the road, doing as we please, deep down, pack is life. They're family and safety and home. I've known that since the first time I ran away—right after initially meeting Thane—and felt truly alone.

Thane's parents had moved to our pack in South Carolina and were instant celebrities with their deep pockets and powerful wolves. So much so that even my parents took their side when I told them I wasn't ready to be a mate.

I had no idea why the fates would do that to me at only sixteen, especially since Thane had been twenty-three, but I learned quickly that I was the only person I could count on.

Thane didn't like that I had my own opinions. He wanted me to cower before him, to do whatever he commanded, but that isn't who I've ever been. I wanted to be his mate, but I wasn't ready to let him fuck me or believe he owned me.

Maybe I would have been if he'd shown me even an ounce of respect, but he'd never even called me by name. Merely referred to me as *his* mate in a way that made it clear I would be his *property*. Something I couldn't fathom letting happen.

Though it wasn't just the future with a fated mate that I lost back then. I lost my home and my family, including a little sister who had only been five at the time. I ran from them and nobody objected. To say that left me with a few additional issues would be an understatement.

Since then, I've avoided pretty much everyone I can. Yet as the years tick by, I wonder if I've made a mistake.

Not in killing Thane—that fucker deserved what he got regardless of my lingering guilt—but by running away from my problems and never turning back.

You know what we need to do, my wolf says, voice filled with compassion.

She's not wrong. Neither of us has said the words out loud, but we've both known for weeks now.

It's time to go home. Our first home.

Only before we can go back to South Carolina, we need to see Cait and Roman. They've done more for me than any other would have ever considered—even my own parents. They deserve to know what my plans are and I'm going to give them that respect. Right before I tell them I want to be relinquished from their pack, allowing me to rejoin my old one, should that be an option.

I gave myself twelve years to heal and I've done what I can to move on. The rest will need to be done where it all went wrong. I know the only way to truly get past what happened is to face it head on. At least I know enough about myself to know that's what I need.

Time clearly hasn't done shit for me.

We're stronger than we were back then, my wolf says. *We can handle whatever waits for us there. Remind them that leaving didn't make us weak.*

No, it didn't. Not many wolves could have done what I did, nor could they have survived the soul-deep loneliness that came with not only leaving our home, but with severing ties to our fated mate.

I don't know that I would have survived without my wolf, and she's been the only companion I've needed in my life. At least until now. Though I don't think it's companionship I'm seeking by going home. Closure and a fresh start where I should have always been feels more accurate.

If Thane hadn't shown up, I'm certain I never would have left my pack. Though I wouldn't be the person I am now if he hadn't, so who the hell knows what might have been.

With a sharp shake of my head, I reach into my back pocket and toss a hundred-dollar bill on the table. It's more than quadruple the amount to cover my bill, but well deserved for how damn tasty everything was and the excellent service.

I pluck a few more fries from the plate and give the quarter of leftover burger a longing glance once I stand from the booth.

Food can be my mate, I think to myself and chuckle. I've entered into a very committed relationship with all things food and I have no complaints whatsoever.

Especially fudge brownies and ice cream. That's my kryptonite. I'll eat every crumb, even when I'm certain I'll be sick.

If only the carbs you love could service more than your stomach, my wolf complains with snark.

It's not as if we've been celibate, you little hussy, I retort. *It's only been...*

Eleven weeks and four days, she finishes when I take too long to sort out the timeline in my head.

Yes, I was lucky enough to be paired with a badass wolf, but she also has needs I never anticipated. Not to say that I don't enjoy sex. It's just...not all that great.

Because you're doing it wrong.

I'm halfway out the diner door when her words make me stumble. I'm not sure if I should be entertained or insulted.

Both, she answers for me, all too smugly.

Damn wolf.

That's enough from you, I reply, my irritation back in full force. Though it doesn't last long. *We're going to East Texas and then maybe we'll stop in New Orleans to see Matt.*

She sighs. *I guess he'll do. His wolf is only mildly annoying.*

I chuckle as I get into my car. Strong, horny, and picky. That's my wolf.

Glancing back at the diner, I'm already having regrets about not taking my leftovers, but I don't dwell for long.

I've made up my mind. We're going to show Cait and Roman the respect they deserve and then we're going to make our way back to South Carolina.

I have no clue if I'll be welcomed. Especially after having killed a pack member. While I know it was in self-defense and the protectors promised me that I was safe from retribution, that doesn't mean his family hasn't held a grudge or even my parents for the ramifications I'm sure they dealt with from

my leaving.

I haven't spoken to them in years—really, only my mother—but at the same time, this isn't about them. It's about me and nothing is going to stop me from getting the closure I seek.

Returning to my pack will either give me back the home I've been running from for far too long or it will give me the absolution from the guilt I've held on to.

Either way, I'll get what I need and I'm done waiting.



CHAPTER TWO

Sophie

Driving up the tree-lined road toward the pack house in East Texas, I'm consumed with feelings I don't bother to sort out. I'm here for one reason and one reason only. I might have preferred to be on my own for the most part over the years, but I still respect the hierarchy.

Nobody greets me when I park my car in front of the two-story white house. Then again, nobody is expecting me. I take in the pristine siding and admire the two turrets, only one of which I've been in to speak with Roman.

I spent most of my time here avoiding being in the pack house. I thought that was just because I'm not much of a people person, but staring out the window, I can admit that trying to be part of their pack only served as a reminder of what I'd lost.

Sure, I'm the one who ran away, but thanks to Thane and his pompous family, not once did my parents ask me to come back once they'd learned what I'd done. I can assume all the reasons for that as I've done many times in the past, but I'm doing do that.

Gods, this is possibly the dumbest thing I've ever done or the smartest. Either way, I'm not backing down. I can't live with *what ifs* any longer. I refuse.

No more wondering what might have been if Thane had never shown his smug face in my pack. No more wondering what my life would be like if he hadn't been the world's biggest douchebag.

Just no more.

I catch my reflection in the rearview mirror before I open the car door. My light-green eyes look tired from all the driving we've been doing, but my sleek, chestnut hair shines thanks to the shower in the hotel last night.

A small, white scar at my hairline glints under the sunlight filtering through the window. One of two physical reminders that Thane was ever part of my life. I close my eyes and turn away from the mirror and get out of the car.

If I'm going to move on, I need to get that fucker out of my thoughts and keep him out.

As I step onto the first stair, the front door opens and there stands Dawsyn. I expected Cait, but seeing her daughter is no hardship. She's just as kind as her mother and equally as understanding. Especially when it comes to me wanting to be on my own. At least she had been. Becoming the official alpha might change that.

"Sophie," she says with a friendly grin. "You're the last person I expected to see today."

I shrug and continue up the steps to shake her hand. "I was in the area."

"Bullshit." She chuckles. "Now, get in here and tell me what's going on."

My brows raise at her command and I toss a curious glance her way. "Tell you? Not your parents?"

The way her head rises, strands of dark-brunette hair framing her round face, and her golden eyes briefly glowing, tells me my answer, but it's the pride in her voice that makes me most happy.

"I'm handling all alpha duties for the pack now."

Before she's even finished the sentence, I clasp her shoulder and match the smile on her face. "It's about damn time."

She doesn't boast. Instead, once we're inside the pack house, she leads the way toward the stairs on the right. "How about we chat in my office?"

I nod and follow behind, noticing a tension that starts to increase in her shoulders.

She's nervous, my wolf says.

Yeah, I'm seeing that, too. Though there's no way she could know why I'm here. Suddenly, I'm even more glad I decided to stop at the pack first.

We climb the steep stairwell through the turret and arrive at the small landing that leads only to what used to be Roman's office. Dawsyn pushes open the door and I blink several times.

The walls have gone from a darker tan to light-cream color. The dark

wooden desk I remember from before has been replaced with a sleek, metal one, and the previous hardwood floors are covered in a plush, grey carpet that feels soft even under my boots.

On the wall are colorful abstract paintings, along with a few family photos that I don't linger on long. "I like what you've done with the place."

She sits in the white, leather chair behind her desk and smiles. "Take a seat, Sophie."

When I do, I set my sights on her. "You weren't expecting me today, but you have something to tell me."

Her head shakes lightly and there's a glint of approval in her bright eyes. "Always so insightful."

"What happened?" I ask, wondering if it has anything to do with why she's in the office and I was never notified. Just because I haven't been in the pack doesn't mean I'm not still tied to this place and these people.

In fact, I should have felt the change of power. Yet I still don't have an increased connection to Dawsyn. Not like I felt being around Roman before I left.

"Is your father dead?" My question is cold and direct and has her flinching back.

"No. Why would you think that?" she replies, face paling.

My hand gestures toward her. "You're not my alpha."

Her shoulders drop ever so slightly. "Well, not officially, but I am in charge as I said before. We're waiting on the next new moon before the transfer of power goes from Roman to me."

"Then I think I do need to speak with Cait and Roman," I say. Dawsyn won't be able to release me from the pack. Not yet and I'm not waiting another two weeks.

She folds her hands over her desk and leans forward. "Listen, Sophie—"

I shake my head. "I came here because I respect your family. I didn't come here for permission to do what I want."

"You can't go back to South Carolina," she says pointedly.

"And who says that's where I'm headed?" I counter, not having the slightest interest in revealing the truth.

Her lips thin and she stares intently at me, but I don't break. "Fine. Keep your secrets, but you need to listen to me and know I'm not just saying this because you're here. You were on my list of people to call today."

She slides a piece of paper across her desk toward me. Sure enough, it's a

to-do list and my name is second on the list.

“Why?” is all I ask.

She shifts back in her seat and swallows. “Your old pack. The alpha is missing and the beta has been killed.”

“Your uncle—”

Dawsyn shakes her head. “He moved on just over a year ago. He and Kelly decided to retire on a beach, minimizing their responsibilities.”

“Then, who?” I ask, fingers curling around the navy-blue, suede material of the chair beneath me.

“York Graves took over for him,” she says. “Now, he’s been named interim alpha, but things are tense there. Your pack isn’t the same place you might remember, Sophie. I need you to stay away from there. At least until things have been... Settled.”

She could just be referring to the new alpha placement. With bigger packs, a change in leader can sometimes lead to a death challenge. Something Dawsyn is hopefully prepared for, but I’m more concerned with knowing more about what’s happening in my old pack at the moment.

Yet, the way she said “Settled” makes me believe something else is going on.

“Who was the alpha before he went missing?” I ask next because if it’s Thane’s father, Astor, then the alpha isn’t missing. He’s strategically fucking with my pack.

“A man named Joseph Lane,” she replies coolly. “Do you know him?”

I shake my head, but I knew *of* him. He was friends with my father, but not close enough that he came around the house. I’d just heard the name in passing conversations between my parents.

“So, why would you need to call me about this?” I ask. “My pack has been East Texas for over a decade now.”

There’s no way Dawsyn could have known the decision I made less than twenty-four hours ago, but I want to know what she thinks I have to do with this before I say anything more.

“Because I’ve been specifically told to keep you safe.” Her words are like a bucket of ice being thrown over my head.

I blink twice. “No.”

“No, what?” Her lips purse, as if she’s more than intrigued by my response.

“You’re not keeping me prisoner here, Dawsyn,” I say with a growl. “I

will fight until my death before I allow that to happen.”

She holds her hands up innocently. “Calm down. That isn’t and wasn’t my plan. I was going to call you back here, tell you what I just have, and advise you to stay with the pack, but you’re a grown-ass woman. You’re going to do what you want.”

This feels like some screwed-up reverse psychology and I’m not going to fall for it.

“Good,” I say, then stand from my chair. “I appreciate the information about my old pack, but that isn’t important to me, but I did come here for a reason, and it seems I need your father.”

Dawsyn doesn’t bother to stand as she stares intently at me. “You want to be released from the pack.”

“I do.”

“Why?” she asks. “After all these years, why now? Why still, after what I’ve just told you? And why haven’t you asked me about your family and more about what’s happening there now?”

She’s going to make one hell of an alpha, but she isn’t mine and she can’t force me to answer those questions, but I will tell her something.

“It’s not my problem,” I say. “I don’t care that the alpha is missing or that the beta is dead. Just like none of them cared when I left.”

At least that’s what I’ve assumed all this time after years of silence from them. And what she’s told me has changed my thoughts. I’m not returning to South Carolina to find my home. I thought I could have both that and closure, but that’s only wishful thinking. I only need to see my family and however they greet me will dictate my subsequent actions. Including asking my parents and younger sister to flee whatever fucked-up situation the pack has gotten themselves into.

“Right.” Dawsyn finally rises from her chair and moves around her desk to stand toe-to-toe with me. “My father isn’t here. He and my mother are on a little vacation. They won’t be back for a week. You’re welcome to stay or—”

“I’ll be back, then,” I say. “Maybe I’ll even watch you officially get your new title.”

Not that Dawsyn and I were ever close or even friends, given our age difference. It’s only seven years, and as adults now, it doesn’t feel like such a stretch, but when I was only sixteen and she was twenty-three, it sure did. Even still, she’s always shown me respect.

When I arrived here as a messed-up teenager with a chip on my shoulder,

she never treated me like the child I still was. Instead, she made sure I had access to the resources I needed in order to become an adult who wouldn't completely fuck up her life just because she'd become a murderer at the ripe age of sixteen.

"Astor Crowe has inserted himself as acting beta," Dawsyn adds, and the words have me tensing, something I'm certain she doesn't miss.

"I. Don't. Care." The words are forced from between my gritted teeth.

Her eyes bore into me and her mouth forms into a tight line. "Sophie. Don't do this."

I'm torn between lying to her and telling her I don't give a shit what she says. The truth is that I do care, but more than I respect Dawsyn and her family, I need to do what I've already decided to do.

Neither my wolf nor I will be able to rest until we have this closure. Sure, it's not convenient that the pack is falling apart and the family I despise most is partly in charge, but I'm twenty-eight. Still young in supernatural years, but old enough that I need to move on. I don't know another way to do so besides going back.

Except I don't believe Dawsyn will just let me go if I tell her the truth. As much as I hate lying to her, I don't stop the words as they leave my mouth. Though they're not exactly a lie. Just an omission of what I intend to do afterward.

"I'm going to head to New Orleans," I say, relaxing my shoulders and softening my face. "I have a...special friend there that I need to see."

She glowers at me but can't hold back her smile for long. "*Special*, huh?"

I shrug and return her grin. "I mean, not that special, but my wolf... She's needy and he's, well, easy."

That has her laughing so loudly that sound echoes through the office and has me chuckling as well.

"All right, Sophie," she finally says. "You go have your fun and I expect you back here before the new moon, got it?"

"Yes, Alpha." I wink at her and turn toward the door, thinking I'm making a clean escape, but as soon as my fingers wrap around the metal handle, Dawsyn calls my name, giving me pause.

When I turn my gaze back toward her, I'm pinned in place by golden eyes full of compassion that have my guilt rising even more as she says, "I know you think you want to be relinquished from our pack, but maybe my dad not being here isn't a coincidence. Maybe whatever brought you here isn't either."

Just remember that you're not alone anymore. You have people in this world that care about you right here."

I force a smile to my face and nod once. "Yeah, maybe."

Making a swift exit, I'm out the door and closing it behind me before she can say anything else.

Most wolf shifters are a big believer in fate, and I used to be one of them. Until twelve years ago. So, I don't agree with everything she's just said, but maybe I will once I'm done doing what I know I can no longer avoid.

Going home and facing my demons.



CHAPTER THREE

Kyler

Wind blows all around me and waves crash roughly along the sandy beach just two hundred feet below the balcony I stand on. The sky has transitioned from a bright blue to a dismal grey and as raindrops start to pelt against my skin, I wonder if this is the fates rubbing salt in my still-open wounds.

I shove my hands roughly into my pockets and turn around to head inside the small cottage I've rented for the couple of weeks I have off.

It's been mission after mission lately and while I need this time, I've only just arrived and I'm already regretting my choice to spend the entirety of my vacation here.

Fourteen years have passed since my mate was taken from me. Though "taken" is too nice a word. Cara was ripped from this world, her light snuffed out, never to be seen again.

I let the door slam behind me as I enter the house and see the flowers I've left on the table. Every year during this week, I've come here and mourned all over again. Wallowing in the misery that has become my life, knowing that the best part of my soul will never smile up at me or laugh at my anger over the little things.

My chest is hollow, as if someone has been slowly carving the center out with a spoon over the years. Still, I grab the bouquet and head toward the front door, deciding to stop procrastinating. A new emotion to the grief. Each anniversary is different. Some years, I can't keep my eyes dry for even an

hour; others, I don't shed a single tear. Though there's always a certain level of rage simmering.

Even with the hesitation at visiting Cara's gravesite, I still sense the unwavering fury that has lived within my heart since she was killed. Yet as I walk out the front door, I can't deny it's not as severe as usual. Maybe I'm finally starting to heal.

Climbing into my truck, I set the flowers on the seat next to me and turn the engine over. The rumble of the exhaust mixes with the pinging of raindrops landing on the roof of the truck, but none of it drowns out the ache growing inside me.

My wolf stirs in my mind, not saying anything, but I can tell he isn't in agreement about my thoughts. Except I don't bother to ask him what, exactly, is bothering him or why.

He's barely spoken to me since our mate died. We still work together just fine, but it's a quiet relationship that we've settled into.

As I drive toward the cemetery, I allow my thoughts to drift away and only focus on the pain inside me. My wolf stays present but still silent and I begin to wonder what I might be missing, what he's not saying.

It wasn't until I arrived in Virginia that I realized how off I felt, but for the first time, not in a bad way. The darkness I've been drowning in since losing Cara isn't as bleak as I expect. There's a softness to the grief, almost like it's slipping away. As if I'm letting her go, but the tighter I try to grasp the pain, the further it seems to float away, like it's her pulling away. Not me.

My wolf growls quietly in my mind and I know I've just figured out his displeasure.

It's not as if I want to, I say to him, even though he should already know my true feelings.

Still, he doesn't respond.

We get to the cemetery and I reach for the flowers beside me before getting out. The rain hasn't made it this far inland yet and I take advantage, jogging toward the headstones.

This place is mostly filled with human graves, but Cara's family was a little unique in the fact that they preferred to live amongst the humans and that was how they were laid to rest as well.

Considering I had no idea where I was going to live or what I was going to do when she died, I did what I hoped was the right thing. I had her buried with her parents.

But before I can get to their corner of this depressing place, I make a stop in the middle. It took me years to stop hating this man, but I learned that forgiving him for something he couldn't control was something I needed to do for me.

Arnold Franklin Morsey—he lived for seventy-three years before he had a heart attack while driving a small pickup truck with a few two-by-fours in the back of it.

When he crashed into my Cara...I squeeze my eyes closed, attempting to block out the image of that horrid day.

It shouldn't have been possible. She shouldn't have died like that—not with her wolf shifter genes—but she did and there had been nothing I could do to save her.

When I'd heard her cries through our bond, I had never been so terrified in my life. I felt her pain, but more than that, I felt her fear and that nearly paralyzed me. Even still, the horror of what I might find hadn't stopped me from going to her. Not even as my soul had literally felt as if it were shattering the closer I got to her.

I place a few of the flowers at the base of Arnold's headstone and remove the ones I last left. I've never seen signs of anyone else here and that alone made me turn soft toward the old man.

My hand pats the top of the concrete slab before I stand and nod. The only words I've ever spoken to the man were "I forgive you." He didn't mean to rip my life apart, but it was nice to have someone to blame for a few years.

Making my way toward Cara, I ignore the wind that starts to pick up, just like it had the house. I'm sure the rain won't be far along, but nothing will rush me today.

Once I'm standing in front of her grave, there's a warmth that moves through me. It could all be in my head, but I still smile.

"Hello, Mate," I say softly, then I kneel, replacing the flowers in the metal vase secured next to her marble headstone.

My fingers brush over her name—Cara Samantha Havens. She was only twenty years old when she was taken from this world and she was mine.

A shiver runs down my spine and I close my eyes, remembering her love and kindness and the light that followed her wherever she went.

Even when I'd shown up at the accident site before she took her final breaths, she smiled for me. Told me that everything would be okay and that I wouldn't always feel so alone. She cared more about me in those final

moments than she did for herself.

Tears sting at my eyes and I squeeze them closed, taking a shuddering breath. But without something to focus my gaze on, all I can see is the two-by-four that pierced through the windshield of Cara's car and went right through my mate's stomach.

There was nothing her wolf healing could do. She'd lost too much blood by the time I'd arrived, only seconds before the ambulance. Even if I'd removed the obstruction, we both knew.

I shake my head, demanding the memory to leave my thoughts. Instead, I focus on her blonde hair, light-blue eyes, and olive skin, remembering her wide smile and the dimples on her cheeks that were almost always present.

I recall her laugh and the way it warmed my heart unlike anything else on this Earth ever has. The way her touch branded me until I no longer belonged to myself, but to her.

My wolf makes a rumbling noise that feels a lot like acceptance. He doesn't want us to move on. He wants to live in the memory of Cara.

For a long time, that was all I wanted, too. I never wished to be without her, but it's been fourteen years of being on the run from life. Yes, I've been living, but I haven't truly been alive.

I spend my days and nights protecting others or hunting down those who wish to do harm. I have no home. No pack. No family. Hell, I barely even have a wolf.

While my co-workers have been a decent substitute for a pack, it's not the same and never will be. Speaking of work...

My phone vibrates in my pocket and I groan. The only reason it ever rings is when I'm being summoned for another job, but they know I'm supposed to be off the clock right now. Meaning whatever this is, it's important.

With reluctance, I answer. "Yeah?"

"Kyler, it's Maciah."

Well, shit. He rarely calls himself anymore. This must be more than important.

"What can I do for you, Maciah?" I ask, my eyes focused on my mate's name as I await his answer, surprisingly excited about the prospect of another job.

There's a brief pause before he speaks again. "Listen, I know you're blocked out for personal time right now and I understand how important

these days are to you and I wouldn't call it weren't important."

This is why I've been one of the protectors for as long as I have. Yes, we work long hours and put ourselves at risk every time we go out, but the people behind us care. Maciah isn't my alpha—he's not even a wolf shifter—but he's possibly as close as I'll ever get to one again.

"It's okay," I say. "What do you need?"

"We have a situation with a pack in South Carolina," he replies sharply. "The alpha is missing and the beta has been found murdered. The family trying to take over is one we've had our eye on for a while now and, well, it's complicated to the point I can't fully explain, but we need more help."

"So, you need me and some others to go in and neutralize the situation?" I ask since he isn't really saying, which has my curiosity piqued even more.

"Not exactly." He's quiet again before continuing. "We need you to go in by yourself, extract one particular wolf shifter, get her to safety, and then return with a group of other protectors, depending on what we learn between now and then."

My fingers tap over the back of the phone. I want to ask who this wolf shifter is and why she's so special to be pulled out alone, but I know it's not my job to ask questions. I trust Maciah with my life and I do what he asks, simple as that. Yet I can't help but think I'm missing something crucial.

"What do I need to know about the shifter?" I ask, hoping that's the best way to get him to elaborate without me being intrusive.

"Her name is Sophie," he begins. "She doesn't belong in South Carolina any longer, but it's where she's from. She was warned to stay away, but we have reason to believe she didn't listen and is nearly to the pack now. You're the closest protector we have in the area and we need you to intercept her before she blows everything up."

"How can one girl do that?" I can't help myself. I need to know more.

He chuckles and the sound doesn't bode well for me. "She's not just 'one girl.' Sophie has been fighting for her life since she was sixteen. Don't underestimate her. The family taking over the pack would like to see her dead and Dawsyn from East Texas will start a war if that happens."

"Am I safe to assume Sophie is one of their wolves?" Though if that's the case, I'm not sure why Roman didn't just force her to stay. I know that pack well and they're not to be messed with even on their worst days.

"Technically," he says, then adds, "It's complicated. How soon can you get to the pack down there and stop her from showing her face?"

I glance at Cara's headstone and frown. Normally, I'm here for hours, but oddly enough, I'm ready to go and hate myself for admitting that.

And considering the growl I get from my wolf, so does he.

"I can be there within a few hours," I answer, my decision made. "Send me her information and I'll update you as soon as I find her."

"Thanks, Kyler," he says. "I knew I could trust you with this. I promise not to make a habit out of disrupting your time off in the future."

He hangs up and I stand, pressing my fingers to my lips before resting them on the headstone. "I'll see you, Mate."

It's never been goodbye with us. I know I'll eventually find her again. In the next lifetime or three more after that. Her death didn't mark the end of our story.

But more than that, as I've begun to allow myself to heal instead of living in her memory, I know this isn't the end of mine, either. I wasn't left behind to spend my life grieving and protecting others. Even if that's all I've allowed myself to do for over a decade.

That's something my wolf will need to eventually figure out as well. We can still love Cara and respect her memory while moving forward with our lives. I won't ever forget her, but I don't need to live in the grief to honor her either.

I expect something from my wolf. A rumble or even rising anger, but unsurprisingly, I get nothing from him as I turn away from the grave and head back to my truck.

It's time to pack up my shit and get to work. I'll have to sort out these new thoughts another day.



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Heather Renee is a USA Today Bestselling author who lives in Oregon. She writes Paranormal Romance and Urban Fantasy novels with a mixture of romance, humor, and sass. Her love of reading eventually led to her passion of writing and giving the gift of escapism. When Heather's not writing, she's spending time with her loving husband and beautiful daughter, going on their own adventures. She loves to hear from her fans, so visit her website: www.HeatherReneeAuthor.com and check out the Contact Me page for ways to connect.