



THE WOLF'S
Winter Bride

C.C. WOOD

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A BLOOD & BONE NOVELLA

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*For Nikki C.
Just in case no one told you today, you're awesome.*

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](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by C.C. Wood](#)

CHAPTER
ONE

Candela

I never considered myself a bridezilla. In fact, I wanted a small, simple ceremony when I got married. I knew it would never happen because my parents and their coven wouldn't stand for it.

Also, because the man I was marrying had a ton of friends and extended family as well.

We were doomed to have an enormous wedding. And it wouldn't take place in Houston, where I lived. Nor in Austin, where Blake and I were moving after the ceremony.

No, because his family and mine were based in Dallas, we were having the wedding there.

However, I wasn't sure I was going to make it to Dallas because my freakin' car broke down halfway there.

"Sonuvabitch!" I yelled, kicking the front tire of my car.

Then, I screamed because my toes throbbed from the contact.

Knowing my luck, I just broke my foot and I'd be wearing a damn boot under my wedding gown.

I hopped around, cursing a blue streak. Once the pain faded and I ran out of steam, I snatched my phone out of the car. Thank the goddess I had roadside assistance.

Many, many hours later, I dragged my suitcases out of the rental car at my aunt's house. The porch light was burning, but the rest of the lights were off. Since it was closing in on midnight and nearly fourteen hours since I left my house, I wasn't surprised.

The house was silent except for the ticking of the grandfather clock in the

hall. I finished unloading the car, saving the garment bag that contained my wedding dress for last. Fenella texted me before she went to bed and told me to use the guest suite on the first floor.

I locked the front door and carried everything into the guest room. I didn't bother to unpack, just washed my face using the toiletries in the bathroom. I stripped off my clothes and fell into the bed facedown.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand and I lifted my face from the pillow long enough to glare at it. I picked it up and saw a message from Blake. I'd texted him when I pulled into Aunt Fennie's driveway.

Glad you made it safely. Wish you were in my bed instead of your aunt's house.

I smiled. I wished I was there, too. Unfortunately, his house was all but packed up since we were both moving to Austin. Plus, I didn't want to risk him seeing my wedding dress before the big day.

Wish I was there too. Love you.

His response was immediate.

Love you. Sweet dreams.

I put the phone down, still smiling, and went to sleep.



TO MY UTTER SHOCK, my aunt didn't wake me up first thing in the morning with wedding plans. I ended up sleeping nearly nine hours and felt much better when I opened my eyes.

I knew there was a ton of stuff to do today in terms of wedding prep and now I had my car issues on top of that, but I stretched my arms over my head and wallowed in the bed instead.

The past few weeks had been a blur of finishing up projects at work, packing up my apartment, and spending hours on the phone every day with my mom, my aunt, and my sister as we worked on wedding plans. I was exhausted and there was still five days until the wedding.

Considering I hadn't seen Blake in nearly a month, and we barely got to speak, I wished I'd put my foot down and eloped with my fiancé instead.

I could hear Aunt Fennie in the kitchen, talking to someone, and realized I needed to get my ass in gear.

After I went into the bathroom and took care of business, I washed my

face, brushed my teeth, and dressed in a comfy pair of loose pants and a matching sweater. I needed coffee before I did anything else.

The guest suite was at the back of the house, not far from the kitchen. As I approached, I could hear a low rumbling voice replying to my aunt and my steps quickened.

As I rounded the corner into the kitchen, I heard Aunt Fennie say, “Would you like me to go wake her up?”

My eyes locked on Blake as he smiled and drawled, “She’s already up.”

A few steps later, I was in his arms, my head resting on his chest. A quiet growl sounded beneath my ear, making my eyes water. Goddess, I’d been missing him so much. Now that I was face-to-face with him again, it hit me like a punch in the gut.

A little less than a year ago, I hadn’t even known this male existed and now I wasn’t sure I could live without him. He’d become vital to my happiness, to my very life.

I squeezed him a little tighter. “I missed you,” I whispered.

His lips brushed over the top of my head. “I missed you too, sugar.”

I didn’t want to let him go, but I could sense my aunt’s presence behind me, and I knew I should say hello.

Blake’s hands stayed on my waist as I took a step back and turned to face Fenella.

“Hi, Aunt Fennie,” I said.

Her smile was knowing as she looked at the two of us. It was also a touch smug. Considering she’d conspired with Blake’s aunt, Patricia Mason, for us to meet, I knew why. I also knew that she would never let me forget that her matchmaking attempt had been successful.

Never mind that she’d introduced me to numerous men beforehand and nothing had come of it.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” she said. “Do you want some coffee?”

“Please.”

As she got out a pod and settled it in the machine, she asked, “What time did you get in last night?”

Blake pulled me back against his body, wrapping his arms around my waist and resting his chin on the top of my head. I relaxed into him.

“Nearly midnight.”

Fennie spooned sugar into a mug and stuck it beneath the dispenser. As the coffee brewed, she faced me. “What took so long? It was just before two

in the afternoon when you called me about your car troubles.”

“I had to wait nearly three hours for a tow and the closest town with a mechanic was an hour back toward Houston. Then, it took forever to find a place with an available rental car and have them come pick me up. It was nearly eight in the evening before I got back on the road.”

“Oh, you poor thing. Any ideas what’s wrong with your car?”

I shrugged. “No idea. I haven’t heard from the mechanic yet.”

My car was nearly eight years old, so it could be any number of issues.

Fenella added creamer to my cup and brought the coffee over to me. I mumbled my thanks and took a deep drink of caffeine.

“Well, I have to run and pick up my dress from the shop. They finished the alterations yesterday.” Her smug smile returned. “I’ll be back in about an hour.”

A few minutes later, Blake and I were alone in the house.

“You better this morning?” he asked, releasing my waist so I could face him.

“Yeah, I’m better,” I sighed. “Yesterday was a rough one.”

I drank more coffee and wandered over to the kitchen table. I sat in a chair, curling one leg up beneath me.

Blake joined me at the table. He took my free hand, cradling it in his big, rough palm.

“You sure I can’t persuade you to come home and stay with me?”

I smiled. “It wouldn’t take much persuasion.”

Blake didn’t say anything else. His house was packed up and he was sleeping on an air mattress. I would stay there in a heartbeat, but I knew he wanted me to be comfortable.

“You could stay here, you know,” I said. “Aunt Fennie has plenty of guest rooms.”

Blake shook his head, scowling at me. “If I can’t sleep in your room, I’m not staying here.” He sighed. “I’m tired of sleeping apart.”

While my aunt was no prude, she had definite ideas and superstitions about pre-wedding traditions, such as the bride and groom not seeing each other the night before the wedding.

I covered his hand with mine, leaning closer.

“I am, too,” I agreed. “But after this weekend, we’ll be together. Living together. Working together. And probably fighting more often.”

The scowl returned, which made me laugh. “Why would we fight?”

“Because we’re going from living separately to being on top of each other all the time. We’ll probably get on each other’s nerves at first.”

Blake released my hands and threaded his fingers through the hair at the nape of my neck, tugging me closer until our faces were only a few inches apart.

“You’re my mate, Candy. Nothing about you could get on my nerves.”

His dark blue eyes glowed as his wolf rose to the forefront.

Like always, I couldn’t resist teasing him when he was like this.

“Okay, then you’ll annoy me.”

He growled, his eyes locking on my mouth. “You’re doing this on purpose,” he said.

“Doing what?” My voice was innocent, and I even batted my eyelashes at him.

“Riling me up.” His words were low and coming from deep in his chest.

“I’m not afraid of the Big Bad Wolf,” I retorted.

“Even if he plans to eat you?”

Heat rushed through my body, flooding my cheeks, and settling down between my legs, making my clit pulse. Blake’s pupils expanded.

In a blink, he’d gotten up, scooped me out of my chair, and thrown me over his shoulder. His hand clamped down on the back of my thigh as he strode out of the kitchen and back down the hall toward the guest suite where I was sleeping.

CHAPTER
TWO

Blake

My instincts were screaming at me to take her, to make her submit to me.
To make her mine.

And the little witch knew exactly what she was doing to me. She did it on purpose every chance she got.

Candy loved nothing more than to make me lose control.

I entered the room where she'd slept and locked the door behind me. Her aunt would be gone for a little while longer, but I didn't want to rush.

I meant what I told her in the kitchen. I was tired of being without her. In the year we'd been together, we saw each other almost every weekend. Either I came to her, or she came to me.

But the wolf within me had grown more impatient with each passing month.

After our first night together, he'd known that the witch was our mate. Seeing her for two or three days out of every seven stopped being enough after the first three months. It had taken everything I had to maintain control from the past spring. Proposing to her in early summer had helped but it wasn't enough anymore.

She was mine.

Candy laughed when I tossed her onto the bed, her red hair spreading across the white comforter, the clip that had been holding it up lost somewhere in the hallway. I stopped at the foot of the bed and drank in the sight of her. My wolf and I were the only ones who got to see her like this. That smile on her face, the mischievous sparkle in her eyes. They were ours. Only ours.

She propped herself up on her elbows, looking up at me. Her cheeks were pink.

“Oh, no. Is the Big Bad Wolf going to hurt me?” she teased.

I reached over my head and yanked my shirt off. My shoes were next. Then, as my hands drifted to my belt, Candy bit her lip, her eyes watching my every movement.

“I’m not going to hurt you, sugar.”

She sat up on the bed, moving to all fours as I all but tore the denim from my body. When I was fully naked, she crawled to the end of the bed, beckoning me forward.

I cupped her cheek as she rose on her knees and placed a kiss over my heart. The feral edge cutting through me calmed somewhat.

Until the little witch bit me.

I couldn’t suppress the growl as she nipped my chest again and her hand wrapped around my dick.

“Maybe this time, Little Red Riding Hood will devour the wolf,” she murmured.

Candy shoved back from me, going back to her hands and knees before she tugged me forward by my hip. I hissed as her mouth closed over the head of my cock. She sucked lightly before giving me one long lick.

“I want you to fuck my mouth,” she said, the words vibrating against the head of my cock.

Her tongue flicked me as I gathered her hair in one hand and tugged gently. She opened her mouth, taking me deeper.

I moved my hips, sinking into the warm, wet cavern of her mouth over and over. But it wasn’t enough.

Using my grip on her hair, I held her still as I pulled out of her mouth then urged her to her back on the bed.

Candy smiled up at me, her red curls a riot across the pillows. She was still fully dressed, and I was impatient.

I stripped her pants down her legs and Candy’s hands were already pulling her sweater over her head. A few moments later, her bra and panties were on the floor somewhere and she was naked.

A pink flush spread down her neck and chest. Her nipples were hard, and I wanted to pull them in my mouth. Candy spread her legs and my eyes locked on the spot between them. The bare spot.

“What did you do?” I asked, staring at her glistening pussy.

“We’re going on a beach vacation, so I had a Brazilian wax. Don’t get used to it because it hurt like a sonuvabitch.”

I put a knee on the bed and leaned over her, running my lips and tongue from her knee up her inner thigh. She sucked in a sharp breath when I nudged her pussy with my nose. Her skin was soft and damp. I used my thumbs to spread her apart, revealing her clit. She shivered when I ran the tip of my tongue around it.

“Wow, that’s sensitive,” she said. “Maybe I will do it again.”

I flicked her clit with my tongue again, this time harder. Her thighs tensed and her breathing grew unsteady. Candy’s fingers tangled in my hair, tugging me closer. I knew what she needed.

As I slipped a finger inside her wet heat, I closed my lips around her clit and sucked. She arched her back, pressing her hips into my face as she pulled my hair harder.

“Goddess, Blake,” she breathed. “That feels amazing.”

I added a second finger, thrusting them deeper and crooking them, drawing a long, low moan from her. I rolled her clit with my tongue as I suckled and kept the pressure on that spot inside her.

Her thighs clamped around my head as her pussy rippled around my fingers. She was getting closer.

Candy chanted my name, her muscles growing tighter and tighter until she cried out. Her pussy squeezed my fingers over and over as she came, releasing more wetness on my hand.

I worked her through the orgasm until she whimpered, and her hips jerked. I straightened, wiping my face off with my opposite hand. As I withdrew my fingers from her body, she shivered, watching when I spread the wetness from her body over the tip of my cock.

“That’s sexy as hell,” she rasped.

Instead of replying, I leaned over her, sucking one of her nipples into my mouth. Candy gasped, wrapping her legs around my hips, using the leverage to pull me closer.

“I want you inside me,” she whispered.

I released her nipple. “Patience,” I said.

“No, dick inside me. Now,” she demanded.

The growl rose from my chest at her command. She wasn’t in charge here. I was.

I clamped my mouth over her other nipple and sucked hard, letting her

feel the edge of my teeth.

“Ah!” she yelped, arching her back to relieve the pressure.

I released her again. “Patience.”

Candy tried to shove me over, but I pinned her down with my hips. She wiggled beneath me until the head of my cock nudged her opening.

“Please, Blake,” she asked. “I need you. I’ve been needing you for weeks.”

Fuck. I couldn’t resist the plea. I couldn’t leave my mate in need.

I reached between us, guiding my cock inside her. In one smooth thrust, I was deep inside the wet clasp of her body.

She wrapped her arms and legs around me, gasping, “Blake.”

Her mouth hit the side of my throat, her teeth grazing my skin, and I groaned. She knew exactly what she was doing to me. I’d told her about mating bites and their importance to shifters as soon as I realized what she was to me. I didn’t want her to be afraid.

Unfortunately, it meant that she knew exactly what it did to me when she nibbled at my skin when I was inside her.

“Harder, Blake. I want to feel you for the rest of the day.”

I gave her what she wanted, thrusting harder and deeper inside her. She whimpered against my neck, one of her hands moving between us to her clit.

Her pussy rippled around my cock, wetter and tighter, and I knew she was close. As much as I wanted to draw this out, to wallow in every stroke, it had been too long for both of us.

Her body shuddered beneath me, and Candy cried out as she slid over the edge and came hard.

The urge to sink my teeth into the place where her neck and shoulder met hit me and I felt my canines extend. The wolf inside me wanted to claim his mate right now. The primal call was getting harder and harder to resist. My molars ground together as I clenched my jaw in an effort to control myself.

I tasted blood as my teeth pierced my lip. Candy’s arms wrapped around my back and her legs gripped my hips as I shuddered above her.

Her fingers trailed up my neck to tangle in the hair at the base of my neck. Candy tugged my head down, a sound that was part moan, part sigh, escaping from her mouth.

“I love you,” she murmured.

I forced my jaw apart, the war within me easing. “I love you too, sugar.”

Slipping my hands beneath her body, I rolled to my back, taking her with

me. Candy made another sound as my cock slipped free from her body, and she settled on the bed next to me. Her body draped over my side.

Neither of us spoke for a long moment. Candy's head rested on my chest as she traced idle patterns over my abdomen with her hand.

"What are your plans today?" she asked.

Her voice was lazy. Relaxed. I loved it when she sounded like this. That I was the one who made her so loose and content.

"Helping you with whatever you need to do," I said. "My house is completely packed up except for the clothes I need this week and the air mattress. The pack gave me the week off as a wedding present, so I'm at your disposal."

Candy scoffed. "The week off as a wedding present? Sounds like a cop out so they don't have to spend money."

I couldn't control my smile. My fiery little witch didn't quite understand pack hierarchy or how things worked.

"Since people find their mates all the time, the pack doesn't spend money on anyone. If they did, they'd go bankrupt. Except maybe when the alpha mates because that's a big deal and doesn't happen very often. A week off really is a gift."

She sighed. "I'm going to have to learn all this stuff now that I'll technically be a part of the new pack, aren't I?"

"Yep," I answered, rubbing a hand over her back. I was looking forward to being able to introduce her to the pack in Austin. One of my packmates, Harrison, had moved there last year for grad school and was now working for Candy's cousin, Ava, as the manager of her coffee-slash-magical supply shop. Candy would be working there as well as the assistant manager and healer.

"You realize the same applies to you, right?" she asked, lifting her head to look at me.

Considering we were renting a home from Ava and that Candy would be working for her, I doubted I would have been able to do otherwise.

"I've already gotten a bit of a crash course since we got together. Your mom and your aunt made sure of that."

She chuckled. "I'll just bet they did. Priscilla didn't help?"

"She's been gone a lot," I said.

Candy stilled at my words. "Gone? I thought she was working for the coven."

“She is. She told me she’s some sort of liaison between them and other covens so she’s been doing a lot of travelling.”

“She didn’t mention it. I can’t believe she changed jobs without telling me,” Candy said.

“She probably didn’t bring it up because you’ve been dealing with so much with the wedding and relocating at the same time.”

“You’re probably right,” Candy sighed. “Mom, Fennie, and your aunt Patricia have been doing almost everything in regard to the wedding planning, but moving to a different city while I’m on my honeymoon has been a bitch.”

I knew how much all three women had done, but they still needed input from both of us when it came to decision making. I’d put my foot down on that. I wasn’t about to let them plan our entire wedding and show up to ceremony like a good little puppet.

I heard the garage door open on the other side of the house.

“Your aunt is home.”

Candy stiffened and then scrambled out of my arms. “Shit. I need to shower and get dressed.”

I watched her rush around the room, gathering clothes. She was still naked, her hair was a wild halo around her head, and the marks I’d left on her neck and breasts glowed bright pink. I couldn’t believe I’d found my mate almost a year ago. In a few short days, we would be bound together forever.

And I would finally bite her to leave my mating mark on her.

Waiting this long to do it had been torture. My wolf knew she was ours and had urged me to bite her every time we were together. But I couldn’t. Not while we were still living so far apart.

I would never have been able to stay away from her if she wore my mark. I would need her like oxygen and sustenance.

In four days, my wolf and I would have her. All of her.

Only that thought kept me from pouncing on her to fuck her and bite her right then.

A short burst of magic buzzed against my ass where it pressed to the mattress and I jumped, scowling.

“Quit lying there looking all sexy,” she said. “You need to get dressed and go distract my aunt while I get ready. Otherwise, she’ll know what we were up to while she was gone.”

“I’m pretty sure she already knows,” I said, but I did sit up. I didn’t want

Candy to give me another magical nudge. If she did, we'd end up right back on this bed and I'd spank her ass, Fenella's presence in the house be damned.

"In fact, I think that's exactly why she left us alone," I continued, sliding off the bed and reaching for my pants.

Candy froze in the middle of her frenzied rush. "Never say anything like that to me again if you want to get laid anytime soon after."

I chuckled again at the horrified look on her face. "Understood."

She disappeared into the bathroom and the water came on in the shower. After I dressed, I ran a hand through my hair to smooth it down and left the bedroom.

I knew the perfect way to distract Fenella. I was going to show her a picture of Candy's wedding present—a pair of diamond earrings, the stones arranged in the shape of a flower. Considering Fenella had strongly "suggested" jewelry as Candy's wedding gift, I knew she would be pleased at my choice. And thoroughly distracted.

CHAPTER
THREE

Candela

MY POST-ORGASM GLOW lasted until after Blake took me out to lunch. We returned to Fenella's house, hoping to take the rest of the afternoon to ourselves. I'd missed him so much over the last few weeks. Just being able to spend time with him and touch him whenever I wanted was enough.

We were cuddled up on the couch in the family room, watching a movie, when Fenella came in, a harried look on her face.

"Candela, there's a problem with the florist," she said.

I didn't freak out immediately because my aunt was a bit of a drama queen, so the problem could be anything from the flowers were a shade too white or the centerpieces for the reception weren't the right height.

Blake paused the movie.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Only half the flowers they needed for the wedding showed up. And some of them were damaged."

I sat up. That was definitely a problem. Not a huge one, but still an issue. While I let my mother and Fenella handle quite a bit of the planning, I had been more involved with the flowers, cake, and food because those were things that were important to me.

"What's the plan then?" I asked.

She rubbed her temples. "They'll be able to order a bit more from vendors in the area, but there still won't be enough to do all the arrangements

we planned for the ceremony. They said they would be able to get their hands on lilies, but I told them that wouldn't work."

I suppressed a shudder, glad she hadn't accepted. Lilies were beautiful but I couldn't stand the scent. A room full of them for the ceremony or reception would give me a migraine that would knock me out.

"What's missing?" I asked.

"The hydrangeas."

Shit. Those were a big part of the floral arrangements for the wedding venue itself. I didn't want too many flowers at the reception because I wanted the cake to be the star.

"Do they have anything else available?" I asked.

"Just some forced amaryllis and narcissus paperwhite bulbs they did for Christmas and some poinsettias in various colors. They said we're welcome to come look and maybe pick out alternative pots and vases to suit different arrangements."

I glanced at Blake, who said, "Go. I know this was one of the few things you wanted done a certain way."

I kissed him. "Do you want to come with me?"

Then, I had to laugh at his wince. "Never mind," I said. "I should have known the answer already."

He grabbed my face and kissed me as well. "I've got to go pick up my tux anyway. Call me when you're done, and we can grab dinner."

"I will. Love you."

"Love you, too."

When I got up, my aunt was looking at us with a wistful expression on her face. She shook it off quickly.

"We'll take my car," she said. "And you can call them and tell them we're coming."

I nodded, giving Blake a quick hug as he stood. "See you later."

"Bye, sugar."

As Fenella and I left, I hoped this would be the last problem I faced before the wedding.



IT TOOK two hours of finagling with the florist to come up with alternative

arrangements and plans. There would be a lot less floral décor in the wedding venue, but it was still going to be beautiful.

By the time Fenella and I were done, it was rush hour, so the drive back to her house took forever. Rush hour in the DFW area was guaranteed gridlock.

My aunt was silent on the drive back and so was I. After all the back and forth with the florist, we were both all talked out. Considering how much my aunt liked to talk, that was saying something.

When we pulled into the garage, Fenella turned to me. “Go have a quiet dinner with your wolf, Candela,” she said. “You need it.”

I really didn’t feel like going out to dinner, but I also didn’t want to sit at Fenella’s dinner table with the whole family. That would make the tension in my neck become a full-blown headache.

“Thanks for your help today, Aunt Fennie,” I said, reaching out to take her hand. “I appreciate it.”

She smiled. “Sweetheart, I would do anything for you, just like I would for my own kids.”

I knew that. She was a meddler, but it came from a place of love. Just like my own mother.

“Go call your wolf and tell him you’re ready for a relaxing evening.”

“I will.”

We went into the house, and I dug my phone out of my purse. I fell backward onto the bed in the guest room and called Blake.

“You get it figured out, sugar?” he asked when he picked up the phone.

“Yeah,” I sighed, closing my eyes. This bed was comfy.

“You hungry?”

My stomach chose that moment to growl. “Yeah.”

“You sound tired, baby.”

“I am,” I answered, rolling over onto my stomach. “I want to eat dinner in bed and then cuddle up next to you and sleep for twelve hours, but there’s no way I’ll be able to do that here at my aunt’s.”

Blake was silent for a long moment. Then, he said, “I’ll take care of it. Pack an overnight bag.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Throw what you need for one night in a bag and I’ll be there to get you in a half hour.”

“Blake—”

“I’ve missed you, Candy. I need you to myself for a night, too. Especially since I’ll barely get to see you between now and the wedding with everything that you’re doing to prepare for the ceremony.”

Since I felt the same way, I stopped arguing. “I’ll be ready.”

“Love you, sugar,” he said. “See you in thirty minutes.”

“Love you, too. Bye.”

After we disconnected, I wanted nothing more than to lay my head down, close my eyes, and sleep for a few hours, but the promise of spending a quiet night alone with my fiancé got me moving. It would be worth the effort.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Blake

I hated how tired Candela sounded when she called me.

We'd both been so busy the past few weeks and she was running herself ragged preparing for the wedding, even without the issues that cropped up the past two days.

We hadn't wanted a big ceremony, but our families had insisted. My aunt and Candy's mother and aunt had helped a great deal, but there were still a lot of details that Candy and I had to give our input on. What made it worse was that Fenella and Drusilla didn't take Candy's taste into account in the planning, which meant everything was a fight or wrong when they presented options to her.

Rather than planning the event with excitement and anticipation, I sensed my mate was dreading the big day, especially when her mother and aunt had definite *ideas* about how things should go.

I growled at the thought. We should have just eloped and dealt with the fallout after our honeymoon.

Now, it was too late. An enormous amount of money and time had gone into the event, and I knew my aunt and Candy's mom would never forgive us if we ran off and got married, just the two of us.

There was nothing I could do about that now, but I could do something for my mate tonight. I could help her relax and escape the craziness of the day.

AS SOON AS Candy and I hung up, I gathered up a change of clothes and some toiletries, stuffing them in a backpack I hadn't boxed up since I would need it to carry things during our honeymoon.

Then, I opened up an app on my phone and looked up hotels in the area with room service and high ratings for privacy and quiet. A single night would set me back two or three hundred dollars, but Candy was more than worth it.

I found a nice hotel and booked a room that had a soaking tub and a king-size bed. The food on the room service menu looked excellent as well.

I might not be able to fix Candy's car or find the flowers that didn't arrive at the florist, but I could give her a night of just the two of us and dinner in bed. And maybe a bubble bath for two.

Once I was done with the reservation, I loaded the backpack in the car and headed toward Fenella's house to pick up my mate.



I OPENED the door to our room and followed Candy inside. When I pulled up in front of the hotel, Candy's eyes had widened, and she'd leaned across the console of my truck to kiss me.

She looked around the room as I allowed the door to close behind me and engaged the inner lock that would keep the door from opening.

With a sigh, she walked over to the bed and flopped face down onto the mattress. I set our bags on the floor next to the dresser before I walked over and tugged her shoes off.

When I was done, she rolled over and smiled at me. "You are the best. I should totally marry you this week."

"It's a good thing I bought a tux, then," I replied.

Her only reply was a wider smile and for her to crook a finger at me.

I crawled over her on my hands and knees until our faces were lined up. Candy looked up at me, her eyes soft, and she cupped my cheek.

"Thank you for this, Blake," she said. "I know we'll be on our honeymoon in four days, but—"

I kissed her to quiet her. While her stress and fatigue had inspired me to arrange this, I needed it, too. A night with my mate, no interruptions, socializing, or expectations.

When I released her mouth, Candy sighed again, her eyes closed.

“There’s a soaking tub in the bathroom,” I murmured.

Her eyes popped open, and she nearly threw me off the bed when she scrambled from beneath me. I rolled onto my back and chuckled as she hurried into the bathroom and said, “Oh my goddess, it’s big enough for an orgy!”

That answered my internal question about whether we could fit in the tub together. Candy was small and slim, but I was a lot bigger and broader. Most tubs wouldn’t accommodate me alone, much less both of us.

Candy emerged from the bathroom. “I think we should soak together after dinner. There’s even a bottle of bubble bath in there!”

Candela was the only person in this world that could induce me to take a bubble bath.

“Sounds good,” I replied.

She came over to the bed and pounced on me, her hips slamming into my gut, making me grunt.

“Are you still hungry?” I asked.

She nodded.

I grasped her hips when she rocked against me. “I mean for food.”

“That, too,” she whispered.

Candy squealed when I gave her ass a firm smack.

“Climb off and I’ll find the menu so we can order. Then, I’ll have an appetizer.”

She didn’t move until I gave her another smack, but her eyes heated and she bit her bottom lip before she did what I said.

She hadn’t wanted to admit it at first, but Candela liked it when I took control in the bedroom. But when I explained to her that the wolf within me demanded that his mate submit to him, that he needed her to acquiesce when we were together, she told me that she enjoyed it. Some of that instinct would ease once she wore my mating bite, but I doubted it would ever completely go away.

I never wanted to be the alpha of a pack, but my wolf had alpha instincts when it came to sex.

I rolled to my feet and found the room service menu on one of the nightstands. Candy cuddled up to my side when I sat down and opened it.

Once we made our selections, I called down and placed the order. The harried woman on the phone was apologetic when she explained that it would

likely be an hour before our food arrived.

Since there was also a mini bar in the room, I told her it wasn't a problem.

After I hung up, I turned to Candy. "I'm ready for my appetizer now."

Her eyes widened.

"Strip," I growled, getting to my feet, and unbuttoning my shirt.

An hour was more than enough time for me to make her come two or three times. And I was going to start with my mouth between her legs and we'd go from there.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Candela

THE BATH WATER was nearly scalding. Exactly the way I liked it.

My back rested against Blake's chest and my hips were tucked between his muscular thighs. My body was pliant and loose. I was more relaxed than I'd been in the six months since he proposed, and the wedding planning began in earnest.

Four orgasms before dinner could do that to a woman.

I let my head loll on his shoulder as his hands moved over my body in slow, easy strokes, as if all he wanted to do was touch me.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked when I sighed beneath his ministrations.

"That this is heaven and I never want to leave."

I felt his mouth curve into a smile against my temple. "Great minds."

My mouth curved into a smile as my eyes closed.

After a few moments of silence, I said, "Thank you for doing this, Blake. I'm not sure how you do it, but you always seem to know exactly what I need."

His fingers curled around my waist, giving me a squeeze. "You weren't the only one who needed it."

"I wish I'd stood up to my mom and aunt about this big wedding thing," I continued. "If I had, we could be enjoying the week before our wedding instead of dealing with this hoopla."

I didn't resist when his hands lifted and turned me, so I was facing him. My eyes flickered open to find him staring at me intently.

"We can still enjoy the week of our wedding," he said. "And I should have said something to Aunt Patty as well. I doubt it would have mattered, though. Between the three of them, they're like a category five hurricane."

He wasn't exaggerating there. Our families meant well, but they were all stubborn and convinced they were always right. There was also the fact that both of our families were heavily involved in the supernatural community in Dallas. Everyone knew the Lewis family in the coven. And Patricia Mason was an advisor to the local alpha. He took her advice seriously, which meant that everyone in the pack knew who she was.

"Hey," he said, his hand coming up to cup my cheek. "Other than our families, the flowers, and food, do you care about any of the other stuff?"

I shook my head before I paused and added, "I care about my dress."

The ghost of a smile crossed his mouth. "I have to admit that I'm dying to see what you're wearing when you agree to be mine for life."

My hands curved around the sides of his neck. "I already agreed to that."

A low growl slipped from his chest. "In all the ways that matter, yes, but there's a part of me that wants everyone to see it and know it for themselves."

I had to bite back a smile. Early on in our relationship, Blake explained to me that his wolf was...possessive. And bossy. When his instincts were riding him hardest, well, he could get dominant and even a little rough.

Though I was sure my face was hot pink the entire time we talked about it, I told him that I liked that side of him. Which led to a demonstration of all those qualities but in a way that left me almost as boneless as I was now.

We'd also talked about the mating bite. I'd been ready for it for months, but Blake said we had to wait until we were married and living together because there was no way he'd be able to let me out of his sight after it happened. At least not for a while.

Since we were still living in different cities at the time and we both had responsibilities and jobs, I'd understood.

But I was more than ready for that bite and the bond that would follow.

"Let's make each other a promise," he said.

I blinked at him, refocusing on the here and now. I'd been lost in thought.

"You know I'll promise you anything," I answered.

He pulled me closer until my legs were straddling his hips and my pussy rested against his half-hard cock. "You should watch it, little witch. The big

bad wolf might take you up on it.”

I leaned forward and nipped his bottom lip. “Stay on track. What promise?”

His cock was no longer half-hard after that bite and his grip on my hips ground me against his length.

“Promise me that you’ll remember the only thing that matters this week is that we will be together when it’s over. Whatever happens, whatever seems to go wrong, that the most important thing is you and me and the life we’re starting together.”

Goddess, when he talked like this, my heart swelled. Blake had lost so much in his life. His parents had died in a drunk driving accident around this time a few years ago. Considering they were wolf shifters, it must have been a horrific accident to kill them.

He knew what was important and I hated that I needed that reminder.

But he was right.

All that mattered is that we would be together at the end of this week. The wedding would come and go, but our lives together would go on. That was the most important thing.

“I promise,” I told him. “Though I can’t promise I won’t freak out when something else goes wrong.” I took a deep breath. “And I know it will. It’s the rule of three.”

He cocked his head to one side, the movement more animal than human, which told me his wolf’s curiosity was piqued as well. “The rule of three?”

“It’s more of a superstition than an actual rule, but it seems to be true. Whenever problems arise, they tend to be grouped in threes. My car breaking down was one. The flowers were two. Three is coming and it’s sure to be a doozy since the universe seems to like to save the best for last.”

Blake’s mouth twitched as he stared at me. “The rule of three?” he repeated.

I shrugged one shoulder, refusing to feel self-conscious about this. Superstitions often had their root in magic that was long forgotten.

“Okay, so we know to expect another calamity this week. I think we can handle it together,” he said.

I leaned forward and bit his bottom lip again, which earned me another growl. I liked it when Blake rode that edge between control and wildness, so I tended to push him toward it as often as I could. He claimed it drove him crazy, but I could sense that he liked it. More than that, he loved that *I liked*

it.

He had been worried that part of him would drive me away, but, instead, it drew me in. I couldn't resist that untamed part of him and tried to bring it out of him as often as I could.

"You may have to remind me of that," I said. "Because my first reaction will probably be to freak out."

"Of course, I'll remind you," he said.

I narrowed my eyes at the tone of his voice. It said that his reminders might be annoying.

"I'm turning into a raisin," he continued. "Let's get out and get in bed."

Blake hauled me out of the tub and we both dried off.

"Don't think I didn't notice the change of subject," I said.

He smirked at me, wrapping the towel around his waist. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

I let it go because I was too relaxed and happy. As I dressed in a soft pajama set, I yawned until my jaw cracked.

Blake wrapped his arms around me and herded me out of the bathroom. "You're exhausted, sugar. Do you want to go to sleep?"

I shook my head as I crawled into the bed. Blake took a second to tug on a pair of boxer briefs before he tossed the towel into the bathroom and climbed in next to me. He dragged me back into his arms. His skin was hot, so I plastered myself against him. Now that we were out of the tub, I was chilled.

A low sound rumbled from him, and I knew it was his wolf expressing contentment.

"I don't want to sleep yet," I finally answered his question. "I've barely gotten to see you in the last month, and I don't want to miss out on any time with you while I have you to myself."

"I don't want you to be exhausted for our honeymoon," he replied.

He had a point. I wanted to enjoy our honeymoon, too.

"How about a nap and then we order a midnight snack and I return the favor from earlier?"

"What favor is that?" Blake asked.

I nuzzled my nose against his chest before I gave him another little bite on his pectoral. "I'll let you fuck my mouth."

Blake groaned and fisting his hand in my hair, pulling my head back away from his chest. "Stop teasing me when you're so tired you can barely

keep your eyes open. You need to rest.”

I tried to retort but I yawned again instead.

Blake’s look when I opened my eyes again said it all.

“Fine, fine. I’ll behave,” I agreed. Silently, I added the *for now*.

I meant what I said. I was going to sleep for a couple of hours and then I fully intended to make good on my offer, even if I had to pounce on him while he was sleeping.

CHAPTER

SIX

Blake

I WOKE up with my hard on trapped between Candy's ass and my belly and my right hand cupping her bare breast.

She was still dead to the world, which didn't surprise me. She'd woke me up around one a.m. with her mouth on my dick and her naked ass in the air.

I'd let her have her way for a few minutes before I yanked her off my dick, flipped her around so she straddled my face, and smacked her on the ass.

"Don't stop," I demanded.

When she didn't move immediately, I smacked her again before rubbing my thumb from the drenched opening of her pussy back to her ass.

As I pressed my thumb into her ass, Candy gasped and fell forward over my lower body, her hand wrapping around my cock and lifting it so she could suck the tip into her mouth.

After we'd both come, I'd fucked her until we came again. Then we'd collapsed back into the bed naked, and Candy had fallen asleep in my arms almost immediately.

Candy sighed and arched her back, her ass rubbing against my dick, which only made it harder.

I ran my hand from her breast down to her abdomen and tilted her ass back just a bit more. Then, I lifted her top leg and angled my hips, so I slid inside her.

After last night, my dick should be exhausted, but somehow, I was always hard around Candy when she was naked, even if we'd just had sex.

Candy moaned, reaching an arm back to dig the tips of her fingers into my ass cheek. She pressed back into me as I pulled out and thrust forward.

"I think I like this wake-up call," she said, her voice husky and soft.

I draped her leg over my thigh to free up my hand and slipped my fingers over her clit.

Candy moaned as my mouth landed on the side of her neck.

"Want me to be your alarm clock after we're married, sugar?" I asked.

Her neck arched, offering me more bare skin on her throat. "Sounds good to me."

Our movements were slow, languorous, and the climb to her orgasm was gradual. It wasn't until I felt her pussy fluttering around my dick that I thrust harder and rolled her clit with a firm touch.

A strangled sound escaped Candy's throat as her pussy clamped down on me and she came.

Her body was boneless when I turned her onto her belly, straddling her bare ass, and began thrusting into her pussy in earnest. She moaned again, her body shuddering beneath me as I pounded into her. I tucked my face into her wild red hair and thrust deep into her one last time before I came long and hard.

I collapsed over her, letting most of my weight rest on my arms and knees, and tried to catch my breath. Candy was panting beneath me, her head turned to the side and eyes closed, her long dark red eyelashes fanning her cheeks. A warm pink flush spread from her cheekbones to her neck. I knew from experience that her chest would be flush with pink as well.

"You're the best alarm clock ever," Candy murmured, her eyes never opening.

I couldn't stop the chuckle that escaped me. "So is that my official title?"

"No," she replied, opening one eye, and tilting her head to look up at me. "Your official title is love of my life, but best alarm clock ever could be your nickname."

Fuck, every time I didn't think I could love her more, Candy had to prove me wrong.

I shifted my weight, tangling my left hand in her head and turning her head so I could kiss her lips. "The night I met you was the luckiest night of my life."

“It was the best night of mine,” she answered. “But we can’t say that in front of Fenella. Then, we’ll be stuck listening to her crow about it every time we see her from now until she dies.”

“Don’t forget that my Aunt Patty was involved, too,” I pointed out. “Though she’ll just smile like the Cheshire cat if we mention it rather than rub our faces in it.”

“I can deal with that,” Candy sighed. “But my aunt will be insufferable.”

I grinned as she relaxed back onto the mattress and closed her eyes again. A whimper came from her when I shifted my hips, pulling my cock free from her body.

I walked into the bathroom and grabbed a washcloth, wetting it. I took it to the bed and gently moved her legs further apart, cleaning between them.

Candy sighed again but didn’t move.

“I’m going to shower and then we need to order breakfast so we can eat before we have to check out at eleven,” I said.

“What time is it?” she asked, never moving her head or opening her eyes.

I glanced at my phone on the nightstand, giving it a quick tap. “Nine twenty-three,” I answered.

Her head popped up. “What? We slept that late?”

“Yeah.”

A smile tilted her lips. “I thought the orgasms were what made me feel better, but maybe it’s sleep.”

She yelped when I gave her ass a firm smack. I admired the way her flesh turned bright pink before she rubbed it, giving me the evil eye.

“Okay, so it’s both,” she said, rolling away quickly when I raised my hand again. “Blake, don’t you dare.”

The gleam in her eye told me she meant business, so I let it go.

“Wanna shower with me?” I asked.

Her brilliant blue eyes narrowed as she got to her feet, still rubbing the ass cheek I’d swatted. “Only if you keep your hands to yourself.”

I raised my right hand as though I were taking an oath. “On my honor.”

Candy rolled her eyes, sliding past me around the bed and heading toward the bathroom. “I’d believe you if your dick wasn’t already mostly hard.”

I turned to follow her, enjoying the pink handprint I’d left on her butt. “It’s always that way around you.”

“Yeah, well, he’s cut off for today. I need to be able to walk and I don’t have shifter healing abilities.”

Maybe not, but I knew she could take a healing potion. Based on the look she shot me over her shoulder, she was only jerking me around because I'd swatted her ass and she'd liked it, which also annoyed her.

Candy strutted over to the shower and turned on the water, adjusting it until steam began to rise from the tub before she stepped inside.

I climbed into the shower behind her, slipping my hands around her waist and pulling her into my body. As I suspected, she didn't jerk away but sighed and leaned against me.

"Only four more days until we're officially married," I reminded her.

"Technically, it's three and a half."

I gave her waist a squeeze. "That sounds even better."

"I'm ready to be married to you," she said, her voice soft. She tilted her head back to look up at me. "And not just because I want the wedding to be over with."

I dropped a kiss on her lips. "You're already mine in every way that matters."

Well, except one, but that would be taken care of in three and half days, as soon as I could sneak us away from the wedding reception and to our hotel room. My wolf didn't give a shit about the wedding. As far as he was concerned, she would only be completely ours once she wore my bite on her skin.

We'd already picked out the perfect place to put it, too.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Candela

NOTHING CATASTROPHIC HAPPENED for two days after Blake took me to the hotel for our night of privacy.

The issue with my car was salvageable and not quite as expensive as I'd feared, though it was still a nice chunk of change to have several engine bits and pieces replaced. I decided then and there I was going to add more money to my savings account in the coming months. I didn't need the gift of clairvoyance to see a down payment on another car in my future. It would only be a matter of time before my car gave up the ghost.

The florist had texted me photos of several alternate arrangements for the wedding venue that were absolutely stunning and perfect for a winter wedding. I hated to admit it, but they were even more beautiful than the ones I'd originally approved.

Maybe Blake was right. Maybe this would be the extent of the problems this week.

The wedding was the day after tomorrow. I couldn't wait. I was going over last-minute checklists that Aunt Fennie and Mom had put together for me.

Despite the fact that I hadn't wanted a huge wedding, I was relieved that my mother and aunt had been true to their word and planned almost the entire thing. All I had to do was give them a list of my requirements and approve from selections. They did most of the heavy lifting when it came to

contacting vendors and getting everything scheduled at the venue. They'd also handled sending the invitations and keeping track of the RSVP's and menu selections.

Someone banged on the door of the guest suite, and I jumped from my relaxed position on the bed. Then, I relaxed because I recognized that obnoxious knocking from eighteen years of living in the same house as the person on the other side.

"Come in, Prissy!" I called.

The door opened and my sister stuck her head inside. "Don't call me that," she demanded. Then, she paused and asked, "And how did you know it was me?"

"You knock like the gestapo," I answered. "And what are you doing here?"

My sister came into the guest suite, shutting the door behind her. "I came to see the dress in person."

"I sent you pictures from my final fitting the day before I came here."

"Please?" she asked.

I sighed and put my checklists to the side before I climbed off the bed. "Fine, but no touching."

I went to the closet door and opened it. The dress was still in its garment bag, hooked on top of the door. It was too long to hang on the curtain rod. Priscilla came over and watched as I unzipped it, pushing the garment bag back so she could see the dress.

I adored it. It wasn't completely white, more like a pink so pale that it was merely a hint of blush rather than a true color. The off-the-shoulder neckline made me feel like a princess and the skirt was a swathe of tulle stacked in layers and littered with embroidered flowers and sparkling rhinestones. I felt like a fairy princess when I put it on.

"Wow," my sister said, staring up at it in awe. "It's gorgeous, sis," she breathed.

"I know."

She sent me a sidelong look. "No need for modesty."

I shrugged. The fairytale dress was the only reason I'd gone along with the big wedding idea without a fight. I'd always dreamed of wearing a beautiful dress and my mother insisted it was only right to wear such a thing at a large ceremony. I didn't necessarily agree, but I'd had the illusion that I would have more control over how the wedding was planned.

“What’s this?” my sister asked, dragging me out of my thoughts.

“What’s what?” I asked.

She lifted a hand before pausing to look at me. I sighed but nodded, letting her know she could touch the dress.

“This piece here,” she said, lightly running a finger over a strip of fabric that hadn’t been there when I tried the dress on at my fitting. As I looked at the bodice, I realized that part of the section that served as the off-the-shoulder sleeves had fallen. No, it was torn, judging by the ragged edge on the fabric.

“Oh, fuck,” Priscilla said when she saw the look on my face. “That’s not supposed to be like that, is it?”

My eyes started to water as I shook my head. “No, it’s not. It wasn’t like that when I tried it on a few days ago.”

“Was it like that when you picked it up?”

“No! I have no idea how this happened. I tried it on to make sure the alterations worked and the women in the shop carried it off to put it in the garment bag while I got dressed after.”

The tears in my eyes overflowed to trickle down my face. “I have no idea how we’re going to fix this. None of us can sew!”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Priscilla said, taking my arms in her hands and turning me to face her. “We can fix this. The wedding isn’t until two more days and I’m sure someone in the coven can sew well enough to fix it. Or knows a seamstress or tailor. It’ll be fine.”

Intellectually, I knew she was right. We’d discovered the issue before my wedding day, which meant we had time to fix this. It wasn’t the end of the world.

But the part of me that was overwhelmed by the idea of a huge wedding, a new car payment in my future, and decision fatigue in general didn’t care. A small sob escaped me.

My sister pulled me into her arms, hugging me close. “It’s okay, big sis,” she said. “It’ll be okay.”

I sniffled, squeezing her back. “I know.” I pulled away. “This is the third thing to go wrong since I left Houston, so I guess I should be relieved. The rule of three has been met, which means that this should be the last issue to come up. Either that, or this wedding is cursed.”

“If all that goes wrong is a little tear and some flowers, I think your wedding will be great and definitely not cursed,” Priscilla said. “I mean, think

of all the weddings with drama like nightmare mother-in-laws that come dressed in white, grooms who are screwing around with the bride's friends, and ex's who show up to interrupt the ceremony when the officiant asks for objections."

I gave a watery laugh. "You do have a point there."

She hugged me again. "You don't have to worry about any of that. Blake's aunt thinks the world of you, you don't have any annoying ex-boyfriends, and..." Priscilla stepped back, keeping her hands on my shoulders. "And there is no way in hell that wolf would even glance at another woman. He is completely and totally in love with my gorgeous big sister."

I smiled because I knew she was correct about all of that. "You think?"

"He looks at you like he wants to eat you alive and he's not sure where to nibble first."

I laughed, but Priscilla continued.

"He looks at you like you are the center of the universe. His universe. Like you're everything that he ever wanted or could ever want."

My heart turned over at her words because she wasn't lying.

It was my sister's turn to tear up. "And I'll know I've found the right guy when I meet a man who looks at me like that," she said.

"Stop making me cry!" I exclaimed, wiping at the fresh tears rolling down my cheeks.

"Okay, fine. I'll stop telling you the truth," she said. "Let's get on the phone and find a seamstress or tailor to fix your gorgeous dress."

Priscilla hugged me and I squeezed her back.

Though my sister was right, that my wedding probably wasn't cursed, I decided to cast a spell for protection and calm over the event as soon as we figured out what to do about my dress. I wasn't sure I could deal with something else going wrong.

A witch could never be too careful.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Blake

AS I DROVE to Fenella's house to have dinner with my fiancée and her family, I wondered if I could get away with taking Candy away for another night at a hotel tonight. I knew it wasn't going to be possible because we were both having our pre-wedding bachelor/bachelorette parties. But I wanted to do it all the same.

Tomorrow was the rehearsal and the dinner following. The next day, we would be married, and I could finally fully claim my mate.

My restlessness tonight was due to my wolf. He was impatient for the day to come when Candy would be ours.

The driveway was full of cars when I arrived and I knew that Candy's sister, mother, father, and assorted coven members were likely all there.

I took a deep breath before I climbed out of my truck. The quiet night I'd had with Candy felt like heaven and another before the craziness of the next two days would have been a balm to my soul.

But it wasn't going to be possible.

I knocked on the front door before I tried the knob. I'd learned over time that when Candy's family told me I was now part of their clan, they meant it. If I was coming to their house, I was expected to let myself in, just like everyone else did.

Drusilla insisted I didn't even need to knock, but that was a habit I couldn't break. You never entered a pack member's house without knocking

and waiting for an invitation to enter. Doing otherwise would mean you'd have claws or fangs at your throat within seconds.

I'd adjusted, but only so much.

As soon as I opened the door and entered the house, I could hear Candy's voice ringing through the house. She sounded stressed and on the verge of tears.

My steps quickened as I followed the sound of her voice through the foyer and down a hallway to the formal living room her aunt and uncle used for entertaining.

I found my mate pacing back and forth in front the fireplace, her phone to her ear.

"So, there's no way you can be here tomorrow?" she asked, rubbing her brow. "What about a portal?"

Though her phone wasn't on speaker, I could still hear the woman on the other end answer. "*With all the lightning and wind, it's not safe to cast a portal spell. We'll have to travel the old-fashioned way until we're well away from the storm.*"

"What about the day after? Will you be able to be here for the ceremony?"

My ears sharpened as the woman on the other end answered, "*I don't know.*"

"How is it all three of you ended up in Florida at the same time anyway?" Candy asked, turning on her heel to walk back to the other side of the room.

"*Coven business.*"

Candela sighed. "Keep me updated if you're able to find a way to get here in time."

"*We're thinking about renting a car. If we drive out of the path of the storm, we could portal,*" the other woman answered. "*But everyone else stranded in Miami is trying to rent a vehicle, too. Most of the places here at the airport are out of vehicles already.*"

"It's a twenty-hour drive on a good day," Candy said. "And there's a storm coming. It won't be safe for you even try to drive through it, especially if it curves up the east coast of the state like the meteorologists are predicting."

"*We'll keep trying,*" the woman answered. "*I'm so sorry.*"

"I'll talk to you tomorrow morning," Candy said. "Be safe."

She disconnected the call and turned to face me. My stomach burned at

the tears in her eyes.

“I’m beginning to think our wedding is cursed,” she said.

I moved closer, pulling her into my chest.

“Who were you talking to?” I asked.

I’d been able to hear the woman’s words, but I hadn’t recognized her voice.

“One of my bridesmaids,” Candy answered, rubbing her face against my chest. “All three of them are in Miami for work and a hurricane hit. All the flights are grounded for a couple of days. Even if they could get a car to rent, it won’t be safe to drive through a hurricane to get here. And it would take a lot longer, so they would likely miss the ceremony anyway.”

“I’m sorry, babe,” I said, rubbing her back.

She sniffed against my chest. “Prissy said that I shouldn’t be freaking out over this stuff because it’s not like the wedding is ruined, or our lives will be ruined. I don’t have a shitty mother-in-law to deal with, you’re not a cheater, and no one is going to object at the ceremony unless you have a crazy ex-girlfriend you haven’t mentioned. All that stuff is much worse, but it also feels like nothing has been going right this week.” She paused. “Except for our night alone, that is.”

My arms tensed around her. “Remember what I said that night?” I asked.

Candy lifted her head to look at me. I hated the sight of the tears on her cheeks. “Yes.”

I cupped her face. “All that matters,” I said. “Is you and me. As long as we’re together, that’s it.”

Her lips trembled but curved into the smallest smile. “I know.”

“The rest of this is just window dressing. A tradition, yes, but not the making of us.”

I released her face and took one of her hands, bringing it to the center of my chest. “What’s in here is the making of us.” I lifted my other hand and pressed it to her chest also. “And what’s in here.”

“How do you always know exactly what to say?” she asked. “Are you psychic?”

I shook my head and kissed her. “No. I just love you with everything I am, and I try to never lose sight of it.”

Her arms wrapped around my back as she tucked herself against my abdomen. “I love you, too,” she whispered. “And I’m sorry you had to remind me that’s what’s important.”

“I’m not,” I said, running a hand through her hair. “I want you to always know how important you are to me. I’ll tell you any time you need reminding.”

She sighed against me. “You said the night we met was the luckiest of your life. I’m beginning to think it’s the other way around.”

“We can argue about it for the rest of our lives.”

Candy laughed before she tilted her head back to look at me. “Sounds like an argument to look forward to.”

I leaned down, intent on kissing her again, when Priscilla burst through the door. I’d been so intent on my conversation with Candy that I hadn’t been paying attention.

Candy jumped, whirling to face Priscilla.

“No hanky panky,” Candy’s sister said in a sing-song tone. “You’re getting married the day after tomorrow, you can wait until then.”

“Go away,” Candy said.

“No can do, sis,” Priscilla replied, smirking at us. “Mom, Dad, and Fenella are ready to sit down to dinner.”

“What about Uncle Roger?”

“He’s stuck at work. He’ll be here later.”

“All right,” Candy said. “We’ll be there in a minute.”

Priscilla crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her toe, clearly not planning to leave until we did.

“Prissy, give us a minute. I need to talk to Blake in private.”

“Stop calling me Prissy!” her sister said, now stomping said foot.

Still, she turned on her heel and marched away, yelling, “Mom, Dad, Candela won’t stop calling me Prissy!”

I had to bite back a smile at their byplay. As much as Priscilla bedeviled my mate, I knew they loved each other deeply. Their bond was beautiful, even if they did bicker like children half the time.

Candy turned back toward me, sliding her hands back around my neck and into my hair.

“We can still run away,” I pointed out. “We already have the marriage license. All we have to do is find a justice of the peace willing to perform a civil union.”

Candy smiled up at me. “I’m okay now. I promise. No matter what happens, as long as you’re waiting for me at the end of the aisle the day after tomorrow, that’s all that matters.”

She rose up on her toes and kissed me.

“You sure?” I asked.

Her smile was sweet and a little wicked. “I am.”

“All right. Then, we should go eat because I’m starving, and we both have parties to get to tonight.”

She looked about as excited as I was about the prospect of our parties. Though I figured she wasn’t excited because her bridesmaids were stranded in Florida.

I wasn’t excited because I just didn’t like parties. And I would much rather be alone in a quiet hotel room with my mate.

Judging by her face, she would likely rather be there, too.

Two more days, and she would be mine forever.

CHAPTER
NINE

Candela

INSTEAD OF A BACHELORETTE PARTY, my mother, aunt, and Blake's aunt, Patricia, had set up a spa evening. And because there were three less of us than planned, we were all getting the works—massages, pedicures, manicures, and facials.

It was utter bliss.

But I would still have rather been back at the hotel with Blake, cuddled up in bed to watch television.

My toes and fingers were painted a pearlescent white with hints of pink. My skin was glowing from the facial.

And I was currently face down on a padded massage table, having my back and neck kneaded until my muscles felt like jelly.

Okay, so maybe this was good, too. I needed to relax after dealing with the things that had gone wrong the past few days.

I knew I shouldn't get upset over things that happened beyond my control, especially since I hadn't been keen on a huge wedding to begin with, but now I was invested. We were doing this, and I wanted everything to go well.

This was the only time I would be married in my life, and I wanted it to be special for both of us.

I could hear my sister talking to the other women. The low murmur of their voices was relaxing. Tomorrow and the next day would be a whirlwind.

I knew this was the calm before the storm.

My eyes fluttered closed as I melted into the bed. I wasn't sure what the pack had planned for Blake, but I doubted it was relaxing as this.

That was my last thought before I dozed off.



A GENTLE HAND SHOOK ME, rubbing down my shoulder.

“Candela, honey, you need to wake up.”

I inhaled sharply, my eyes opening. I realized I was still on the massage table, a warm blanket draped over my body.

My mother's face hovered next to me when I lifted my head.

“What is it?” I asked. “Is something wrong?”

“Patricia got a call from one of the pack enforcers. We need to go pick up Blake.”

“What?” My thoughts were sluggish from sleep. I wasn't quite sure what was going on. “What happened? Is he okay?”

Mom nodded. “He's fine, just—uh—”

Patricia appeared behind her. “The bachelor party got a little too rowdy and crowded and there was a bit of a brawl. Blake was trying to calm things down when one of the visiting wolves took his words as a challenge and charged him.”

I propped myself up on my elbows, my eyes growing wide.

“Dear goddess,” I whispered. “Is he hurt?”

Patricia shook her head. “No, he's fine. Unfortunately, the wolf who felt challenged was the nephew of a visiting alpha. Calder decided that all of them could wait in the jail until cooler heads prevailed or their families came to bail them out.”

Calder was the alpha of the pack in Dallas. I'd only met him once, but he seemed like a good guy. His wife, Ricki, was a hoot. And their triplets were adorable and mischievous.

“Let me get dressed and we'll go pick him up,” I said.

Patricia and my mom nodded. “We'll give you some privacy. He's fine, so don't freak out. As soon as you're ready, we'll head out and get him.”

I waited until they left the room before I threw the blanket back and got to my feet. That same intrusive thought, that maybe the wedding was cursed,

tried to force its way into my brain, but I shoved it back viciously.

The wedding wasn't cursed. Life was full of unexpected issues and problems. This was just another one of them.

I scrambled into my clothes but stopped for a moment to take a deep breath. Whatever had happened, I was sure Blake was upset. I needed to be calm when I saw him, because if I was all riled up, he would get riled up again, too.

I hurried into the bathroom to check my hair and use the facilities. The pack compound was nearly an hour outside of the city, I didn't want to be desperate for a bathroom when I got there.

The drive to the compound was quiet and a little tense. Well, at least for me, Mom, Aunt Fennie, and Priscilla. Patricia seemed as unflappable as ever, humming beneath her breath as she drove her SUV down the highway.

"Is Blake in trouble?" I asked when we turned down the small country road that led to the compound.

I turned to face Blake's aunt.

She smiled and shook her head. "No, he's not in trouble. They asked me to come pick him up, and bring you along, because he was too wound up from the brawl. Calder was concerned that Blake might do something he'd regret if they released him before he was fully calm. And keeping him confined in the cell wasn't conducive to Blake taking it down a notch. The alpha figured that having you come out here would help Blake get it together."

I hoped she was right. I really didn't want Blake to spend the next twenty-four hours in the pack jail, especially since our rehearsal and dinner was tomorrow night.

Patricia knew exactly where to go and wound her way through the streets of the compound. Well, really, it was almost like a small town. There were houses spread out around the epicenter of the compound. In the middle was a small grocery store, a laundromat, a meeting hall, and the pack jail. They didn't have any organized law enforcement, per se, but the enforcers took turns occupying the office at the jail so people could come in if they had a complaint or if someone broke pack law by stealing or causing other trouble.

Patricia parked in front of the jail before she turned to the back seat toward my sister, aunt, and mom.

"Y'all need to wait in the car," she said.

My aunt started to argue, but Patricia leveled a stare at her that had her

closing her mouth with a snap.

“This is pack land and, while Calder has a good relationship with the coven due to his wife being close friends with their leader, the pack doesn’t know you very well yet and everyone is on edge. Stay in the car. I’ll bring you back when we have a picnic or barbeque in the spring.”

My mother nodded, nudging my aunt with her elbow as she did. Finally, Fenella nodded as well. From the third row, Priscilla sent her a grin and a thumbs up.

God, my sister was a goofball.

Patricia looked at me. “Ready?”

My answer was to open my door and climb out of the vehicle.

Patricia marched around the SUV and opened the door to the jail, preceding me inside.

My stomach twisted when I entered, and I saw the row of cells along the back wall. There were several men in the first one, a couple of women in the second, and, in the third, Blake was alone, sitting on the cot that was shoved against the back wall, his elbows resting on his knees, hands clasped and dangling between them, and his head bowed.

As soon as I stepped inside, his head came up and his eyes locked on me, a wild gleam in them.

He didn’t seem to have any injuries other than a small bruise on his jaw and some torn skin on his knuckles. I knew both would heal up within an hour or two.

Something inside me relaxed at the sight. I hadn’t even realized how tense I’d been until I saw for myself that he was okay.

Goddess, I couldn’t wait for this week to be over.

I realized I’d stopped just in front of the door when it opened behind me. I scurried over to where Patricia stood in front of the desk, talking to one of Calder’s enforcers. Her voice was calm and authoritative.

“I’m here for Blake Yardley,” she said.

“I can only release him to his mate,” the enforcer replied, his tone curt.

I leaned around Patricia. She was a lot taller than me. “And I’m here,” I said.

The shifter eyed me with brown eyes so dark they almost looked black. He seemed very...intense. His gaze lingered on my neck, but the mock turtleneck covered the skin. I knew what he was looking for, though.

Finally, he nodded and got to his feet. “Wait here.”

Considering “here” was only a few feet from the cell where Blake was now on his feet at the bars, I wasn’t going to move anyway.

The shifter came around the desk, pulling a set of keys from his pocket. His movements were liquid and efficient. Blake moved with a similar grace and strength, but this was...more.

My power shivered within me, and I grabbed hold of it hard. It was reacting to this shifter in a strange way. While shifters did have their own magic, they very rarely could use it. However, they could sense it and it was the height of rudeness to reach out to one with power.

My magic writhed in my mental grip. There was something about the shifter that called to it. Finally, after a brief internal struggle, my magic calmed.

Blake’s eyes were pinned on me when the shifter approached the cell door. His irises glowed briefly when our gaze met, his body flexed and primed, as though he were waiting to pounce.

The man stopped in front of the cell. “Are you good?” he asked.

When Blake’s eyes didn’t waver from me, the shifter asked again, “Are you good, Yardley?”

Blake blinked, his stare shifting to the other man before he gave a single brief nod.

The man opened the cell with the key, stepping back. Blake nodded at him again, saying, “Thanks, Booker.”

The other shifter shrugged and shut the cell as Blake moved toward Patricia and me.

“Why did you bring her?” he asked his aunt.

Patricia’s eyes narrowed, so did mine. “You heard Booker, they weren’t going to release you to anyone but your mate.”

I realized then that Blake was extremely pissed. At Patty. And at *me*.

What in the heck had happened during his bachelor party?

Blake veered around Patty without responding to her words. His hand clamped on my arm, and he dragged me toward the door of the jail. He was firm, but he wasn’t hurting me.

I waited until we were outside before I rounded on him, digging my heels in and refusing to take another step.

“What the hell, Blake?” My voice was low but sharp.

He turned around. “We’re getting in Patty’s car, and she’ll drive us to my truck. We’ll talk on the way home.”

“What is your *problem*?” I asked, waving a hand toward him.

“We will talk about it on. The way. Home.” He all but growled the last word.

He snagged my hand, dragging me towards Patty’s car again. Patty was waiting by the driver’s side.

“We need to go, Patty,” Blake said as he opened the back door and pulled me inside with him.

Patty got behind the wheel, starting up the vehicle as Blake leaned across me and pulled the door shut behind us.

“I parked on the south edge of the compound near the bonfire site,” Blake told her.

His fingers were hot around mine and clamped firmly around my palm, as though he feared I would be yanked away from his grasp.

We were silent on the short drive to Blake’s truck. When Patty parked near it, Blake leaned over the front seat. “Thanks for coming to get me, Patty. We’ll talk in the morning.”

To my utter shock, his aunt, who liked to meddle and was one of the nosiest women I’d ever met beyond my mother and Aunt Fenella, just nodded. She didn’t say a single word.

Blake opened the door and climbed out, never releasing me. He boosted me into the passenger seat of his truck, slammed the door, and walked around to slide behind the wheel.

In less than five minutes, we were on the gravel road away from the compound, Patty’s SUV behind us.

“Blake, you’re freaking me the hell out,” I finally said when we turned onto a paved county road.

His fingers tightened on the steering wheel, and I heard it creak beneath the pressure. “I know.”

“What is going on?” I asked. I’d been angry at first, but now I was worried.

When he didn’t answer, I reached across, laying my hand on his forearm. “Babe, what happened?”

“The alpha of a pack from Arkansas is here to finalize some sort of business deal with Calder,” he said. “He brought his son, his nephews, and a handful of enforcers. They were invited to the bachelor party since Patty insisted it would have been rude not to.”

“Okay,” I said, wondering what this had to do with why he’d been tossed

in jail.

“Apparently, they do things a bit differently there in Arkansas.”

“Okay,” I repeated.

The steering wheel creaked again, and I felt the tension in his forearm beneath my fingers. He was squeezing the hell out of it.

“They’re purists,” he continued. “Shifters only mate with other shifters of their kind. Anyone in their pack who steps outside of that edict, if discovered, can expect to have their mate passed around to any unmated males who want a turn before she’s given back to her male. Whether she survives or not isn’t considered.”

My eyes widened. Holy shit. “Baby,” I whispered.

Blake glanced at me. “I happened to overhear the alpha and his son talking about this particular practice when they discovered my fiancée, my *mate*, was a witch.”

A shudder worked through my body.

“There was some speculation about you and about what our pack would do when they found out who you were. It never occurred to them that my pack already knew and didn’t give a fuck,” he continued. “Then, they talked about the last pack member who left and mated a human and how much *fun* they had with her.” He spat the last few words as though they left a foul taste in his mouth. “I lost my shit because I knew that they would do it again. And again. And maybe even do it to you if they thought they could get away with it. Or someone like your sister.”

My fingers clamped down on his arm at his words.

By the goddess, I wondered how many witches and humans had been harmed by this pack. Male and female.

“Calder didn’t know anything about this,” Blake continued. “When I shared that with him, he ended the business deal then and there. Which led to an even bigger brawl. Now, the alpha, his son, nephews, and enforcers have been escorted off pack property and told not to return, but that doesn’t mean they won’t be lurking and waiting for their opportunity to cause trouble and try to save face. And Patty waltzed you right into the lion’s den.”

I understood then. He wasn’t angry with me. He was terrified of what might happen to me. And angry that he’d been locked up when I arrived and unable to come to my aid if I needed him.

I turned in the passenger seat and placed one hand on his shoulder and the other on the center of his chest. His heart pounded against my palm before he

took one hand off the wheel and pressed it over mine against his chest.

“I’m safe,” I whispered. “You’re here. We’re going home.”

He didn’t say anything else, just pressed my hand harder to his heart.

But his heartbeat slowed and his breathing evened out.

CHAPTER
TEN

Blake

I TOOK Candy back to her Aunt Fenella's home. Mostly because I knew that the entire neighborhood was filled with witches of varying power levels, and they used wards on their properties that could ward off a platoon of soldiers if necessary.

I also took her there because the moving company had come to pick up my stuff that morning and I only had a couple of suitcases and some other odds and ends left there. I had an overnight duffel in my truck because I'd planned to stay at the pack compound tonight. Instead, I pulled it out from behind my seat and carried it inside the house.

No one said a word to me about sleeping apart from Candy, probably because it was obvious that my wolf was hovering just below the surface of my human skin. I was hanging on to humanity by the skin of my teeth. The urge to hunt down the alpha and his son from the Arkansas pack and shred them with claws and fangs was intense and nearly uncontrollable.

I explained what had occurred to Fenella, Drusilla, and Priscilla. I didn't even have to ask before they were gathering materials required to strengthen the wards surrounding the property and the house. Priscilla's eyes, a deeper, darker blue than Candy's, gleamed with anger and power. She mentioned setting some booby traps for anyone who approached with malicious intent.

Candy looked at her briefly before she said, "Non-lethal, sis. We don't need to cause issues with a visiting pack. If we kill one of their pack

members, the coven will have to deal with the fallout.”

Priscilla looked like she wanted to argue, which was similar to how I was feeling, but I also knew that Candela was right.

The coven didn't need issues with Dwight's pack. Calder was already going to have to deal with them after what went down tonight.

After it all had been said and done, I'd offered to skip the honeymoon and remain on pack property for a couple of weeks before officially moving to Austin. After all, it was my actions that had brought about all this chaos.

Calder wouldn't hear of it. He insisted that he would have reacted the same way if he'd overheard Dwight and his son, Jeremy, discussing what they'd done. And he said I'd helped him dodge a bullet with that business deal because he would have had hell disentangling our pack from theirs once the facts came to light.

Candy took my hand and tugged me down the hall to the guest suite as her aunt, mother, and sister went outside with her uncle and father standing guard as they boosted the wards.

She shut the door behind us and faced me, our fingers still laced together. “You need to clean up,” she murmured, her gaze moving over my face.

I didn't argue as she pulled me toward the bathroom and released my hand to go start the shower. Candy returned to stand in front of me and pull my shirt over my head. It wasn't until her hands went to my belt that I began to move.

I brushed her fingers away, unbuckling my belt, unbuttoning and unzipping my pants, and shoving them to my feet. My boots were still on, so I took a moment to unlace them and toe them off. After a few more moments of stripping my socks and underwear from my body, I stood before her naked.

Candy took my hand again, leading me toward the now-steaming shower. Once I stepped into the stall, she started to step back, but I kept my grip on her hand.

“Stay with me,” I said.

Candy nodded and began to undress, kicking off her shoes and removing her pants and top. She took a moment to grab a clip from the counter and pull her hair up on top of her head before she stepped in with me.

“It will be okay, Blake,” she said.

“Maybe.”

She grabbed a bottle of body wash and poured some into her palm. “It

will. I promise.”

Candy rubbed her hands together, creating lather, before she began to stroke them over my chest and shoulders, washing the sweat, bits of blood, and dirt from my skin.

“You can’t promise that,” I finally replied.

Her eyes came back to mine, the blue turning deeper and darker as her magic rose. “Yes, I can.” She continued to wash me, moving around behind me. “I may mainly practice healing magic, Blake, but I’m capable of using my power to fight as well.”

Her hands skimmed from my shoulders down to the small of my back.

“As a healer, I know exactly where to strike to do the most harm,” she said. “I may choose the path of compassion and healing, but that doesn’t mean I’m weak and without a willingness and a way to protect myself and those I love.”

I knew that. I’d never seen her fight with her power before, but I knew she was a strong witch. Her healing power attested to that.

Still, I didn’t want her to be in a position to fight for her life. Or mine. Or the life of anyone else she cared about.

She crouched behind me, rubbing her soapy hands down the back of my legs and around to the front and back up. She even took a moment to quickly wash my feet.

Candy stood and nudged me beneath the spray to wash the soap from my body.

“I want you safe,” I said, my voice taking on the edge of a growl as I turned to face her again.

“I know,” she said. “I want you safe, too. But the world we live in isn’t a safe one, whether we’re shifter, human, or witch. All we can do is be vigilant and do whatever is necessary to survive.”

I knew she was right, but the words still made me angry. Because they were true, which meant that I was powerless to keep her totally and utterly safe.

She raised a hand and tilted my chin back, so my head dipped into the spray, wetting my hair.

“I can bathe myself,” I snarled. “I’m not five fucking years old.”

Candy grabbed my chin, tugging my face back down so I looked into her eyes. Water ran down my scalp and over my eyes and cheeks. “Shut up and let me wash your hair.”

I started to argue, but she was already turning away and picking up a bottle of shampoo. She poured a good amount in her hand and faced me again. “Turn around.”

When I didn’t move, she just stared at me, unmoving. Our standoff lasted a few seconds before I finally sighed and turned my back to her.

Her fingers speared through my hair, massaging my scalp. Her nails lightly scraped my head as she scrubbed. A woman hadn’t washed my hair since I was six years old, and my mother helped me in the bath.

Some of the tension left my muscles as she ran her fingers through my hair.

After a few moments, her hands left my head. “Rinse,” she murmured.

I stuck my head under the spray, rubbing the shampoo from my hair.

By the time I was done, she was already out of the shower, drying off. She grabbed a towel, holding it out to me after I turned off the tap and stepped out.

“Candy—” I started.

“Baby, I can feel your exhaustion. Let’s get ready for bed and lie down. We can talk then.”

I relented because she was right. I was tired down to my bones now that I was clean and smelled like her soap and shampoo.

We dressed and brushed our teeth before climbing into the bed. As soon as we were both under the sheets, I reached out and pulled Candy into my arms. She rested her cheek against my chest, throwing an arm over my waist.

“I’m worried about what Dwight and his dumbass son and nephews might do,” I finally said as she relaxed into me.

“Whatever it is, we’ll handle it,” she said.

She sounded certain.

“What happened to the wedding being cursed?” I asked, unsure how to handle her change in attitude.

“You were right,” she said simply. “All that matters is you and me and starting our life together.”

“Can your family set up wards at the venue?” I asked.

She tilted her head back to look up at me. “Do you really think that will be necessary?”

“I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

Her arm squeezed me tighter. “Then they can do that.”

I held her, letting her warmth and softness soak into me. Her presence

soothed me far more than anything else could have.

This was the blessing of a mate.

I focused on the feeling she evoked. The knowledge that she was mine. The last of the tension in my frame faded.

My cell phone vibrated on the nightstand. I knew by the way Candy inhaled that she was still awake.

I reached out an arm and tagged the phone, lifting it up. It was Calder, the pack alpha. I had to answer.

“Yardley,” I said when I lifted the phone to my ear.

Luckily, my alpha was the kind of shifter that got straight down to business.

“Dwight and his entourage just crossed the state line into Arkansas,” Calder stated, his voice edged with a growl. “We’re going to keep an eye on them for the next week or so to make sure they don’t get any bright ideas about returning, so if it looks like they’re headed this way before the wedding, I’ll give you a head’s up.”

Some of the anger and fear that was still simmering in my belly faded. Not all of it because we still had about forty hours before the wedding, so they could be back if they were determined to stir shit up.

“Thanks, Calder.”

There was a pause before he continued, “This is not on you, Blake.”

“What?”

“I had no idea Dwight’s pack was into that shit and I will be taking this up with other packs around us.” He cleared his throat. “I always thought the vampires were idiots for having a council and expecting compliance from any vamps in their region, but now I’m beginning to see the wisdom. This shit doesn’t fly. We don’t harm humans or witches or even other species of shifters. One, because it’s not fucking right. Two, because it can bring unwanted attention on us, and we are seriously outnumbered when it comes to humans. If we’re under a spotlight then we’ll definitely end up under a microscope, probably after some scientists drain our blood, bone marrow, and dissect us into tiny pieces. So, it’s good that you overheard them bragging about their sickness and it’s even better that you reacted in a way that let them know it wasn’t going to be tolerated by our pack. I imagine there will be plenty of other packs in our state and even in surrounding ones that agree. And the ones who don’t, well, we’ll have to change their fucking minds. Or help them get new leadership in place.”

“Understood,” I answered. Calder had already told me I’d done the right thing, which I believed without his assurance, but listening to him now, I was even more certain.

“I’ll be in touch. Get some rest and focus on marrying your mate in two days.”

“I will.”

Without saying good-bye, Calder disconnected.

I tossed my phone on the nightstand and turned off the lamp.

“What did Calder have to say?”

I gave her the highlights of the conversation.

Candy didn’t say anything for long moment after I finished. “Calder is a good alpha,” she said. “And he’s right. The vampires and witches all have a ruling body of some sort. Shifters should have one as well.”

“I don’t know, sugar. Shifters are territorial and getting us together on neutral turf only does so much to dull those instincts. Throw in different shifter species and it’s one hell of a mess.”

“As much as y’all are ruled by your instincts,” Candy argued. “You’re also intelligent, sentient beings in full control of your actions. I know you are because you don’t run around sniffing people’s butts the way dogs do.”

“What?”

Candy’s body began to shake against mine as she laughed silently.

I tilted my chin down to look at her. “Did you just compare us to *dogs*?” I asked.

“Well, dogs are just domesticated versions of wolves so...” When she saw my expression, her laughter became uncontrollable giggles, and they weren’t silent. “Oh, goddess, if you could only see your face!” she gasped as she tried to speak through her laughter.

I rolled us until she was on her back, and I hovered over her. Her laughter didn’t stop. Her cheeks were pink, and her blue eyes were sparkling with mirth.

“Are you going to hump my leg to demonstrate your dominance?” she asked, giggling even harder.

I couldn’t build any true anger because she was right. The packs would have to figure it out, because we weren’t animals that became human. We were both. An animal lived within me, but I was also a man. I had the instincts of a wolf, but I wasn’t completely ruled by them.

I acted contrary to my instincts all the time. I hadn’t bitten Candy yet and

the urge had been riding me for nearly a year. Basically, since our first night together.

“Are you done?” I asked as her laughter finally began to die down.

Candy took a shaky inhale, a huge smile on her face, but nodded. Then, she burst into giggles again for a few seconds. Another shaky breath.

Finally, she said, “Okay, now I’m done.”

Her cheeks were still glowing, and tears of mirth shimmered at the corners of her eyes.

“Now, you’re going to kiss me and we’re going to sleep,” I said. “And you will never again refer to any wolf shifter as a dog. Especially not in front of anyone other than me.”

She gulped back another giggle and nodded. “I won’t. I promise.”

I stared at her, which made her smile return.

Her hand cupped my cheek, bringing my face closer. “I’m only teasing you, baby. No need to go all Big Bad Wolf on me.”

“Candy,” I said in warning.

She used her hold on my cheek to tug my face down to kiss me. “Let’s go to sleep, babe. No more teasing. I promise.”

I kissed her again, this time a lot more thoroughly, before I rolled over onto my back, dragging her with me so her head rested on my chest.

As Candy settled deeper into my body, her muscles relaxing against me, I realized I was no longer tense or even angry.

My mate knew just how to take my mind off what happened tonight.

Yes, a mate was a blessing, and I was grateful to have found mine a year ago.

My witch was a gift. I would spend my life treasuring her.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Candela

WHEN I GOT the call the following morning, some part of me deep inside wasn't surprised.

I was almost expecting something like this to happen.

"Is this Candela Lewis?" the woman on the other end asked.

"Yes. Who is this?"

"This is Morgan from Cottonwood Farm. I'm so sorry to call you with this news but the venue you booked for your wedding tomorrow flooded last night. A pipe burst sometime after everyone left yesterday and the entire building was flooded this morning. It's not going to be usable for your ceremony. Nor is the room you booked for your reception. I am so, so sorry. I've already called around to see if anyone in the area has an open room because I didn't want to leave you without any other options, but everyone is booked."

Since it was a week before Christmas, I wasn't surprised.

"Thank you for calling," I told her. "I appreciate you taking the time to try and find an alternative for us."

"I've already spoken to my boss. We'll be issuing you a refund within the next thirty business days."

"Thank you, Morgan."

There was a pause. "You seem very calm about all this."

I had to laugh. "Well, let's just say that this isn't even the third thing to

go wrong this week. And this was beyond your or my control. Accidents and messes happen.”

“I hope you’re able to figure something out, Ms. Lewis. Again, my deepest apologies.”

“Thank you, Morgan. I’m sorry you’re dealing with this. I’m sure I’m not the only tough call you have to make today. I hope everything works out.”

“Me, too,” she said, sounding relieved.

“Bye, Morgan.”

After we both hung up, I set the phone down and took a deep breath. Then, I left the guest room to find my aunt and my mother. They were both around here somewhere and we had some serious planning to do before tomorrow.



IF THERE WAS one thing I loved about my family, it was their ability to adapt. When I announced to my mother and Aunt Fenella that the venue was flooded and we wouldn’t be able to have the ceremony or reception there, they hadn’t freaked out or yelled or cried.

No, instead they got down to the business of figuring out what our next step would be.

Like Morgan, they called around, but no one had an available room in the next twenty-four hours.

And when my mother said something about postponing, I’d refused. Blake and I were getting married tomorrow. I hadn’t done everything I’d done the last month to postpone.

When we left for our honeymoon the day after tomorrow, we were going to do that as newlyweds and mates.

Mom and Fenella fell into a deep discussion, but I interrupted.

“Aunt Fennie, I want to have the ceremony here,” I stated.

Fenella blinked at me before she said, “Honey, I would love nothing more than for you to get married here, but we can’t fit everyone in my house or even my backyard.”

I nodded. “I know. We’re going to have to make calls and make the guest list much, much shorter in order to make this happen.”

My mom and aunt blinked at me without speaking.

“But, honey...” Mom began.

I lifted a hand. “Everyone will understand and, if someone gets offended, that’s on them. We’ll call everyone. Close friends and family only will be attending since we don’t have space for more. Also, we have to call the florist, the caterer, and the bakery to let them know what’s going on and make adjustments.”

“But we’ll lose a fortune on the food and flowers!” my mother argued.

I stared at her. “Mom, we’re going to anyway if we postpone. Whatever leftovers we have can be donated to a shelter or food pantry or somewhere else. The flowers can be donated to a hospital or nursing home or both,” I continued.

When they both still stared at me without moving, I sighed. “I’m getting married tomorrow if Blake and I have to do it alone with only Priscilla and his aunt as witnesses. It’s your choice.”

They must have realized that I was entirely serious because they both sprang into action, picking up their cell phones.

“I’ll get my laptop. I put all the RSVP’s in a spreadsheet,” Fenella said. “I have everyone’s phone numbers.” She glanced at me. “Some people are traveling for the ceremony today. I’d like to make sure they’re still coming and keep their invitation on the list.”

I nodded. I didn’t want anyone to be out money if they were already here or on their way. “That’s fine. You know how many people you can fit in your house, so I’ll trust you to decide who to invite beyond close friends and family.”

“I’ll call the caterer, florist, and bakery,” Mom said. “Since the caterer was supplying plates and glassware for the reception already, it won’t be difficult to adjust that.” She cocked her head. “We may have to set up a buffet rather than a sit-down dinner.”

That was what I wanted originally, anyway.

“That’s fine,” I said.

Priscilla came into the kitchen a few moments later, her eyes widening when she took in the three of us and our facial expressions.

“Oh, goddess, don’t tell me you canceled the wedding!” she exclaimed.

I scowled at her. “Why would you think that?” I asked.

“Because you all look like your cat just died!”

“The venue flooded last night and can’t be used tomorrow,” Mom said. “We’re going to have the wedding here at Fenella’s house.”

Priscilla's eyes widened, but like my aunt and my mother, she rolled with the punches. "Damn. Okay, what can I do to help make that happen?"

After Fenella and Mom explained what we needed to do, Priscilla offered to call the guests who were going to be politely disinvited, but Mom glanced at the clock on the wall.

"I appreciate that, honey, but you need to take Candela to the seamstress to pick up her dress. They called yesterday afternoon to say that the repair was complete, but it was too late for us to get there and pick it up before the bachelorette celebration."

I glanced down. I'd taken a shower that morning but put on lounge clothes and done the minimum to get ready. I hadn't put on make-up or done anything to my hair except dry it and put it in a ponytail.

"Let me get ready and we'll go," I said.

"Hurry up, Candela," Mom said. "You have to be there in a half hour."

I didn't roll my eyes, but I really wanted to. If I'd known I had to be there, I would have already been ready.

Then, I remembered that Mom was going to be the one to go pick it up but now she was dealing with the latest emergency, so I should probably be more appreciative.

"I will," I said, heading toward the guest room.

When I entered, I found Blake coming out of the bathroom, a towel slung around his hips.

"There you are," he said. "I went out for a run and when I got back you were in the kitchen with your mom and aunt."

He stopped speaking and studied my face for a second. "What happened?"

I walked over to him, putting my hands on his waist just above the towel. "I got some bad news while you were out," I said. "The venue flooded, and we can't have our ceremony or reception there. We're going to have it here at Aunt Fenella's."

Blake frowned. "Fenella's house is too small for everyone."

"I know. She and mom are cutting the guest list as we speak. Priscilla is about to take me to the seamstress to pick up my dress."

His hands came to my hips. "Are you okay?" he asked.

I didn't have to force my smile. "Actually, yeah, I'm good."

"Really?"

He didn't sound as though he believed me.

“Definitely. I’m actually going to get the wedding I want. Smaller, intimate, just our close friends and family. You and me. That’s what I wanted in the first place before Mom and Aunt Fenella turned it into the event of the Yule season.”

He studied me. “You mean that, don’t you?”

I squeezed his waist. “It’s a blessing in disguise, Blake. I’m going to enjoy it.”

A smile tugged at his mouth. “That’s good, sugar.”

I moved my hands to his shoulders. “Now, how are you doing this morning after everything that happened yesterday? Are you still worried about the Arkansas pack?”

“Calder checked in during my run, said that Dwight’s pack had called everyone into their compound. They’re squatting there right now. No guarantees it won’t change before tomorrow afternoon when we get married, but it seems that one of your coven members is helping them listen in. It sounds as though Dwight and the others are trying to figure out a game plan to hit Calder and the pack here. They’re pissed at me, but they really want the compound here and to take over the shifter population in the DFW area. It’s bigger, there’s more money here, and Calder has a rep for being a badass among wolf shifters. If Dwight and his pack can take him down, it’s a huge coup and it’ll give their reputation a boost. Maybe even make other packs think twice before they insult Dwight or start shit with his people.”

I digested what he was saying. “Do we need to cancel our honeymoon?” I asked.

Blake squeezed my hips. “No, sugar. Calder insisted that we go. He said I’m not technically part of his pack any longer. That as far as he’s concerned, my obligations here have been fulfilled.”

“What do you want to do?” I asked.

Blake stared down at me, his expression dark.

“I’m going to do what Calder wants me to do,” he finally answered. “He said they’re covered, and it sounds like the coven is going to take their back. And the vamps. Apparently, Calder’s mate is really close with the head of the coven, who’s mated to one of the most powerful vamps here. And she’s friends with mates of several other vamps in that group. They’re powerful enough to help Calder take on Dwight’s pack and maybe even a few others. Calder assures me that Dwight has no hope.”

“Okay,” I agreed. I wasn’t going to argue with him. If he wanted to do

what Calder suggested, that's what we'd do.

I patted his shoulders. "Now, I have five minutes to finish getting ready before Priscilla will be banging on this door, insisting that we have to leave right now, or we'll be late."

Blake leaned down, touching his lips to mine. "I'll be here. I'll see if there's anything I can do to help the Terrible Twosome with the changes to the wedding."

I had to bite back a laugh. The Terrible Twosome was a great way to describe my mother and Aunt Fenella when they got together. Drusilla and Fenella Byers were known far and wide to be two sisters you did not mess with. Or go out on the town with because they could find trouble faster than just about anyone I'd ever met.

Priscilla was just like them, and it drove her nuts that I had a tendency to play it safe.

"I'm sure they'll appreciate it before they shoo you right out of the way," I said, laughing a little.

"Yeah, well, it would be less of an insult if I'm the one to call the pack members to tell them they're uninvited because of a change in venue rather than the witches. The pack and the coven are finally getting along. We need to keep it that way."

"They'll let you help if you put it like that," I said.

Two sharp knocks came from the door. "Five minute warning, sis. Quit making out with your fiancé and get your ass in gear," Priscilla called.

"We're not making out, we're talking!" I yelled back.

"Yeah, well, talking leads to spooning and spooning leads to forking and we don't have time to go through the silverware before we leave!"

Blake chuckled and released my hips. "Your sister's right. You need to get going. In two days, it'll be just the two of us with no interruptions."

I sighed and moved around him into the bathroom. "I can't wait."

"Me either," he growled beneath his breath as he headed toward his duffel.

I glanced over my shoulder and couldn't resist watching as he dropped the towel and dug a pair of boxer briefs out of his bag. Damn, in two days I'd have him all to myself.

I really couldn't wait.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Blake

IT HADN'T TAKEN TOO MUCH ARGUING to convince Fenella and Drusilla to let me help make phone calls. With the three of us working, we had it knocked out by a little after lunch time.

Which was good because the wedding rehearsal was at four-thirty followed by a dinner at six at Candy's favorite Italian restaurant for the wedding party, her parents, and my aunt.

Candy and Priscilla had returned after picking up her wedding dress and disappeared.

Now that I was finished with calls, I went in search of my fiancée. I wasn't sure she'd even eaten lunch and she needed to keep her strength up since today and tomorrow were both going to be very long days.

I wanted her to have enough energy to make it through the wedding...and the night that would follow.

I followed her scent through the house and up the stairs until I made it to one of Fenella's guest rooms. I could hear her breathing as I approached the door silently.

When I leaned around the jamb, I saw that she was seated at a small desk in front of the window, her red hair shining like a fiery halo in the sunlight that poured through. She was looking down at a notebook on the desk, then she picked up a small envelope and started writing something on it.

"I can feel you staring at me," she murmured without looking over at me.

Grinning, I entered the room and looked around at the wrapped presents stacked all around the room, on the bed. Basically everywhere.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

She sighed, her pen still scratching on the envelope. “Addressing envelopes for thank you cards. We have tons of presents and, since half the guests have been uninvited, Mom assured me it’s doubly important I get the thank you cards out in a timely manner. Fenella was nice enough to make a list of who sent gifts and their addresses, so I’m taking care of addressing and stamping the envelopes now. Mom, Dad, and Priscilla are going to load up the wedding gifts and carry them to Austin while we’re on our honeymoon. This way, all we’ll have to do is open the gifts, write a note of appreciation, stick it in the envelope, and send them all at the same time.” She sighed again. “I half wish I’d thought to purchase blank printable labels so I could just copy-paste the names and addresses in a template and print them out, but Fenella insisted that was too impersonal and people would be insulted.”

I thought it was a great idea, but Fenella knew most of the guests better than we did. She knew who would be insulted and who wouldn’t.

“I can help,” I said, moving over to the desk.

Candy looked up at me then, a smile playing around her mouth. “That’s sweet, but your handwriting is atrocious, which means the notes probably won’t end up going where they’re supposed to.”

I shrugged. “I can’t help it. Penmanship was never one of my strengths.” I ran a hand over her wavy hair. “Have you had lunch yet?” I asked.

Her eyes widened. “It’s lunch time?”

I glanced at my watch. “Sugar, it’s nearly two.”

“Oh, my goddess,” she gasped. “I have to finish up so I can start getting ready for the rehearsal and dinner!”

I noticed she didn’t say anything about finding time to eat.

“How many more do you have to do?” I asked.

She looked down at her list. “About twenty more envelopes. I should have enough time to finish and get ready if I hurry.”

“You need to eat something, Candy.”

Her head came up and her mouth opened as though she was going to argue with me.

I shook my head at her. “No arguments. The next two days will be hectic. You need to stay fed and hydrated. Especially tomorrow.”

Her face softened a little. “Okay, I’ll grab a snack when I’m done here.”

I shook my head again, which led to her frowning at me.

Until I said, "I'll go make you a sandwich and bring it upstairs. You can eat while you finish this."

The soft expression returned. "Thank you, baby." Her stomach growled, which made her laugh. "And my stomach wants to thank you, too."

Candy reached out, took my hand, and tugged on it until I bent over. Her other hand came up to curl around the back of my neck and bring my lips to hers.

"In twenty-four hours, we'll be facing each other and vowing to love each other forever," she whispered after she kissed me.

"And in twenty-eight hours, I'll mark you as mine."

Our faces were still close, and I saw her pupils expand. Her fingers dug into my neck briefly before they relaxed. "Um, babe, the reception is supposed to last until eight or nine p.m."

"I know, but we don't have to be there the entire time," I pointed out.

Her eyes widened and she released a short laugh. "Please let me be there when you say that to my aunt and mother."

I shook my head. "I can promise you they won't argue when we leave. Hell, they won't even know when we leave."

She tilted her head as she studied me. "Okay, but you're doing the talking when my mom calls me all irritated that we left."

"No problem. Your mom loves me."

Candy released my neck and shook her head. "You're way too arrogant."

It was my turn to grab her, tugging her closer for one last kiss. "It's called confidence, not arrogance."

Her lips curved against mine just before her stomach growled again.

I straightened. "Okay, I'm going to make your sandwich. Get those envelopes done, sugar, so you can eat."

Candy scowled at me. "Don't tell me what to do."

"Then, do what I tell you."

She swatted my forearm. "Don't make me zap you the day before our wedding."

I laughed but didn't continue bickering. My mate was hungry, and it was my job to make sure she was fed.



THE REHEARSAL WAS TURNING into a shitshow.

With the venue changing from a big hall to Fenella's home, furniture had to be moved, chairs brought in, and the caterer was, at the moment, attempting to figure out how they were going to set up the tables in the formal living room in order for people to sit down to eat their dinner at the reception to follow the ceremony. I had no idea why it was called the formal living room. That's just what Fenella called it.

What we weren't doing, however, was practicing for the ceremony, which was the entire point of the evening.

I stood in the arched doorway between the formal living room, watching as Fenella bossed the catering staff around and made them move the tables further apart. Then, closer together. Then, further apart again. Just not as far as last time.

The woman in charge of the crew looked as though she were wishing she'd chosen a different career path, and I couldn't blame her at all. Fenella was being too damn picky.

I didn't want to overstep my boundaries since Fenella was kind enough to let us invade her home for the wedding and reception at the last minute, but I also wanted to get this show on the road. We only have forty-five minutes until our party reservation at the Italian restaurant and I didn't want to lose that reservation.

Fortunately, my fiancée saved me from possibly angering her aunt.

Candy marched over to Fenella and the catering manager.

"Aunt Fennie, I love you, but Margaret knows what she's doing. Let her do it. We have other things we need to take care of. Mainly, the rehearsal itself. And dinner because I'm starving and exhausted and I'd like to have a nice meal with my family before I can't keep my eyes open any longer and pass out in a plate of my favorite pasta."

Fenella opened her mouth, but Priscilla appeared next to them.

"Aunt Fennie, everything will be beautiful. You've seen what Margaret, and her people can do. That's why you hired her. Let her do her job."

Fenella's mouth snapped shut before she finally said, "I just want your wedding to be everything you ever dreamed." Her eyes were locked on Candy, glittering with emotion.

And that right there was why I hadn't waded in. Because Fenella's actions were based in her love for her niece, not a need for perfection or to remain in control.

Candy took her aunt's hand. "Fennie, it's already everything I've ever dreamed of. I'm marrying the love of my life and I'll be surrounded by you, Mom and Dad, Priscilla, and everyone who means something to me. That's all I wanted. I don't need perfection. Just all of you."

Fenella's mouth tightened and her eyes watered. She sniffed and cleared her throat before she answered.

"Okay, sweet girl." She glanced at Margaret. "My nieces are right. I know you do beautiful work. I'll let you get on with it."

The woman relaxed then and nodded.

With that, Candy led Fenella toward me with Priscilla following just behind them.

Candy shot me a sweet smile and Fenella patted my crossed arms as they passed.

Priscilla paused in front of me, saying, "You rethinking your decision to marry into the family?"

I shook my head, grinning at her.

"Good, because it's too late now. You're marrying my sister if I have to cast a spell to force your ass down the aisle."

I uncrossed my arms, slinging one of them around her shoulder as I pulled her down the hall toward the library, where they were setting up the chairs for the ceremony itself.

"You couldn't cast a spell to stop me from marrying my mate tomorrow," I muttered.

My soon-to-be sister-in-law smiled up at me. "It's gonna be good to have you in the family, Blake."

I squeezed her shoulders with my arm. "I'm glad you feel that way. And I'm glad you think of me as family already."

"As long as you keep loving my sister the way you do, you will *always* be family. No matter what."

Ah, shit. My throat was tight now.

It had been a long time since I'd had anyone other than my aunt. Candy was my mate, so my allegiance would always be to her. But what Priscilla was talking about was different. Candy's parents, her sister, her aunt and uncle, her cousins—they were part of my pack now. We would always have each other's back, the way a pack would.

My only reply to Priscilla was to put her in a headlock and mess up her hair. She screeched and tried to wiggle out of my hold, alternately laughing

and cursing at me.

Just like a little sister would.

When I looked up, I saw Candy had stopped in the hallway to look back at us, a brilliant smile on her face.

Then, she mouthed, *I love you*.

I let Priscilla go as we got closer and grabbed my mate, leaning over to put my lips next to her ear.

“I love you too, mate.”

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

Candela

“SUGAR, WE’RE HERE.”

A warm hand cupped my cheek. I sighed and leaned into the familiar touch.

“Candy.”

I cracked one eye open and stared up at Blake. He chuckled when my eye closed again.

“Tired.”

Rather than try to rouse me again, I felt strong arms surround me and lift me out of the passenger seat of his truck.

“C’mon, baby, you need to get to bed.”

I curled deeper into him, wrapping my arms around his neck, and sticking my face into the skin of his throat.

His hold on me tightened as he carried me toward the house. I heard my mother’s voice murmur something, but it was hazy and on the edge of my consciousness.

Blake’s voice rumbled out in response, but I paid no attention to his words, only the sound.

I was just about to fall back asleep when he stopped and turned us sideways to walk through a doorway.

“Candy, you need to get ready for bed.”

I grunted, which made him chuckle again. With my side pressed against

his chest, I could feel the vibrations in my abdomen. It was nice.

“Candela, if I have to strip you down and put you in the bed, I won’t be leaving this room tonight and then your mother and aunt will have a conniption fit.”

“Ugh,” I grunted again, which made Blake’s chest shake against my side. “Drop my feet, please.”

Still chuckling, Blake lowered my feet but kept his hold on my waist until he was sure I had my feet under me. I leaned heavily against him, blinking my eyes open.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have split three bottles of wine with your sister and mom,” he said.

His voice sounded choked. When I looked up at him, his eyes were sparkling with mirth and his mouth was twitching.

He was probably right. After the rehearsal, we were fifteen minutes late to the restaurant, but they hadn’t given away our table. As soon as we sat down, Priscilla and I put our heads together over the wine list and picked a bottle of wine to drink. Mom insisted on joining in, saying we always picked the best wines.

Over the next two hours, we went through three bottles. I wasn’t wasted, but I was very relaxed. I was also full because I’d eaten a four course meal of stuffed mushrooms, a crisp salad with tomato vinaigrette, a house made pasta in a light cream sauce with a chicken cutlet that had been pounded thin, rolled in breadcrumbs, and fried. There were mushrooms, onions, garlic, and olives in the mix as well. For dessert, I’d eaten the best cannoli I’d ever had. That cannoli was the reason I begged to have our rehearsal dinner at this restaurant.

As a result of all the wine and the food, I’d fallen asleep in Blake’s truck on the way back to Fenella’s house. But now, I was getting irritated and awake.

“Okay, I can take it from here,” I said.

He smirked. “You sure?”

I straightened and took a small step back. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

Blake released my waist. “I’ll wait in here while you get ready for bed. Tuck you in.”

I squinted at him, which made him grin again.

“I’m not sure what’s so funny, but I’m beginning to get annoyed,” I muttered, skirting around him toward the bathroom. I took a moment to

snatch my pajamas off the end of the bed, where I'd left them that morning when I got up.

I washed and moisturized my face, brushed my teeth and hair, and changed into my PJ's. When I came out of the bathroom, the only light in the guest room was the lamp on the nightstand.

Blake sat on the side of the bed, his blue eyes on me. He was leaning over so his elbows rested on his knees and his hands dangled between them.

Looking at him, I wasn't annoyed anymore.

I walked over to the bed, crowding against him until he sat up, his hands moving to rest on the mattress next to his hips. I perched my ass on one of his thighs and put my arms around his neck.

"Thanks for carrying me inside."

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "That's not what you were saying earlier."

"I know, but I'd just woken up earlier. I was grumpy."

He chuckled again. I'd noticed as the night progressed, that he seemed more relaxed with each passing hour.

"I'm still not sure what's funny," I said.

"You're cute when you're grumpy," he answered. "Like a cranky kitten."

I scowled at him. "I am not."

His smile widened. "If you say so, sugar."

I dropped the subject. I was more awake now, but still tired.

"Let's get you to bed," Blake said. "I need to get upstairs to the guest room before your mom decides to provide me with an escort."

I sighed. "I'll miss you tonight."

He kissed me. It was tender and gentle, not much more than a brush. "It's the last night we have to sleep apart," he said when he lifted his mouth.

I sighed again. "I know, but I'm tired of sleeping apart, too."

His forehead rested against mine. "Just one night."

I wasn't sure if he was talking to me or himself.

After a moment, Blake's hands grasped my waist as he got to his feet, bringing my body with his. "Time for bed," he said.

He released me long enough to tug the comforter and top sheet back with one hand, before guiding me to the mattress.

I laughed lightly as he pressed me down so my head was on the pillow. He swept the covers over me, tucking them around my shoulders. He was literally tucking me into bed.

He leaned over and kissed me one more time.

“Tomorrow, Candela.”

“Good night, Blake. I can’t wait.”

His blue eyes grew hot, but he didn’t kiss me again. He shut off the lamp and walked out the door, shutting it softly behind him.

After sleeping in his arms the last two nights, I felt lonelier than ever in the bed. I rolled over, tucked my hands under my cheek, and closed my eyes.

“One more night,” I whispered to myself.



I WOKE up the next morning when Priscilla burst through my door, a lap tray in her hands. Before my eyes were completely open, I was sitting bolt upright on the mattress, one hand cupped to gather a ball of power to throw at the invader.

“Rise and shine, Sleeping Beauty!” she cried. When she saw my position and the small clump of power I was cradling in my palm, she rolled her eyes. “Jeez, sis, dramatic much?”

In that moment, I was sorely tempted to lob that bit of power at her, but I restrained myself.

Besides, if I did, she would drop the tray and there was coffee on that tray. Coffee I really, really needed.

I grabbed my pillow, turning it so I could use it as a cushion when I leaned back against the headboard. Priscilla brought the tray over and set it over my lap.

I noticed the door was open behind her and my eyes widened. “Priscilla, you need to close the door. Blake can’t see me.”

Priscilla scoffed. “He’s gone,” she said, waving a hand. “Aunt Fennie sent him over to Mom and Dad’s for the day.”

“Mom and Dad’s?” I asked.

Priscilla laughed. “Yeah. You should be grateful though because, if he stayed here, Aunt Fennie would have put him to work. On his wedding day.”

“Shit. But Mom will drive him up a wall with her lists of things he needs to do after we get married,” I said.

“Chill, sis. Patty’s there, too. Mom will rein it in with her around. She doesn’t want Patty knowing she’s nuts until it’s too late.”

I had to bite back a snort. Priscilla wasn't wrong. Mom never went full throttle around people unless they were family, either by blood or marriage. She was a handful. Priscilla and I weren't even to her level.

Maybe someday we would be, but right now, there was only room for one nutcase in the family.

Well, two if you counted my aunt.

Priscilla picked up the insulated carafe and poured coffee into the cup on the tray. The scent hit me, and I had to bite back a moan. I wasn't exactly hung over, but I was still tired. I hadn't slept as well last night as I did when Blake was in the bed with me.

"Thanks, Prissy," I said, adding sugar and milk to the cup. "I needed this."

There was another cup on the tray, so Priscilla poured her own cup of coffee, adding a spoonful of sugar to the liquid before she grabbed it herself.

"I made you a little bit of breakfast. I kept it light because I wasn't sure how you would be feeling this morning."

She removed the cover from the plate, and I laughed at the sight of four pieces of toast in the center. After she'd toasted the bread, she cut the crusts off, leaving them in the shape of a heart. There were two fried eggs on the plate, also in the shape of a heart.

"How on earth did you do this?" I asked.

"I found a huge heart-shaped cookie cutter in Fennie's kitchen and decided it was the perfect time to use it."

We both giggled.

When I picked up a piece of toast, I asked, "What, no heart shaped fruit, too?"

Priscilla leveled an arch look at me, which made me laugh even harder.

"Are you ever satisfied?" she asked.

I knew she was teasing, so I answered, "Nope. If you're going to do something like this, you should go all the way."

Priscilla rolled her eyes. "Now you sound like Mom."

I gasped. "Take that back."

She giggled, but the sound was evil. Then, she said nothing as she took another sip of coffee.

I let it drop. "What time is it anyway?" I asked.

"Ten-thirty."

My eyes widened. "Ten-thirty?!"

“Yep. The cake should be here any minute. The caterers, too. Hair and make-up will be here at noon, along with the photographer to take candid shots.”

I couldn't believe I'd slept so late. Then, again, I hadn't slept well, so that explained it.

I set about eating the breakfast my sister had thoughtfully prepared for me and drinking my coffee. I still had to shower and get everything packed in preparation for leaving to go to the hotel after the ceremony tonight.

Before I was done with the food, Aunt Fenella appeared in the doorway, a strange expression on her face.

“The cake's here,” she said, but she didn't sound happy about it.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

“Just...throw on a robe and come into the kitchen,” she said. “Bring your phone. We're going to need to take pictures.”

Priscilla and I looked at each other and jumped off the bed.

A few minutes later, I stood in front of the wedding cake, my eyes wide. The bakery assistant had delivered it and disappeared when Aunt Fennie came to get me. And no one was answering the phone at the bakery.

It was clear that something had happened to the cake on its trip from the bakery to Fennie's house. And they weren't even going to try to make it right.

The gorgeous red and white flowers I'd requested were fine on the bottom tier, but the top two tiers had little more than red smears on them. The green leaves that should have been created by frosting were nothing but crumbs at the base of the cake. The smooth white buttercream base was scraped nearly completely off the top layer, leaving only a naked white cake.

It looked nothing like what I'd chosen from the book of photographs the baker had provided when we'd chosen it.

Fenella was near tears and Priscilla was pissed as hell, stomping around the formal living room with her phone jammed against her ear. She was trying to track down the baker or the baker's assistant or even another employee of the bakery.

I took a deep breath and picked up my phone.

“Honey, I'm so sorry,” my aunt began.

I shook my head. “It's okay. I have an idea.”

She blinked at me. “What?”

I scrolled through my contacts until I found my cousin, Ava's, number.

Ava owned a coffee shop-slash-bakery-slash-supply shop for witches. If anyone could help, it would be her. There was also the bonus of the fact that she was one of the most powerful witches I knew.

She was also here for my wedding and still one of the guests attending.

I hit her name in my contacts list and lifted the phone to my ear.

As though she was waiting for my call, Ava answered on the first ring, “Good morning, Candela.”

“Hi, Ava,” I replied. My aunt’s eyes grew wide and excited when she heard me say my cousin’s name. She immediately understood what I was doing. “I hate to bother you since you probably need to get ready for the wedding, but there’s a problem with my wedding cake and I was hoping you could help.”

Again, as though she were reading my mind, my cousin said, “Well, I’m no artist with decorating, but I can manage. What’s the problem?”

I explained what had happened and that it didn’t have to look perfect, just not as ugly as it was now and to keep with the color theme.

When I was done, Ava said, “I’ll bring my dress and make-up and get ready there after I’m done with the cake.”

I heard the murmur of a man’s voice in the background. Ava tried to cover the phone but I still heard her words clearly.

“I can take an Uber, Macgrath.”

She was talking to her man. Er, her vampire, Ewan Macgrath. I wasn’t sure how I felt about him, but I did know he adored my cousin. That was enough for me.

More rumblings.

“Fine, I’ll take the car and you take an Uber,” she snapped.

I bit back a laugh. It sounded as though he was as protective of Ava as Blake was of me.

Ava’s hand brushed the phone as she moved it. “I’ll head that way as soon as I can get my things together.”

“Thank you, Ava,” I said.

When we disconnected, Aunt Fennie was watching me. She looked amazed.

“That was a good idea,” she said.

Priscilla clapped her hands, having finally gotten off the phone. “Well, the bakery people are MIA. It seems you have a solution, so you need to get in the shower and get ready to primp for the next few hours.”

I looked at both of them. “Whatever happens over the next few hours, I don’t want either of you to worry. If anything goes wrong, if something isn’t quite right, it’s okay. I meant what I said last night. The only thing that matters is that I’m marrying the man I love today and that my friends and family are with me.”

“Okay, Candy,” Priscilla answered.

I looked to Fenella. “Aunt Fennie?”

Finally, she answered, “Yes, Candela.”

I smiled at them both. “Let’s get ready to enjoy my wedding.”

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

Blake

WHEN I WALKED BACK into Fenella's house an hour before the wedding was supposed to start, I couldn't believe the changes that had occurred after I left that morning. Flowers in white and red were clustered with deep green foliage in vases, pots, and baskets throughout the entrance. Wreaths with fresh greenery hung along the hallway leading back to the library, giving the house a crisp, evergreen scent. White candles burned in the sconces hung on the walls around the foyer and hallway and on nearly every available flat surface throughout the house.

I hadn't really given a thought to flower arrangements or candles or any of the trappings that Fenella and Drusilla had presented to Candela and me. I deferred to Candela's opinion on all of it because I didn't care.

But now, seeing what the florist had done, I was in awe. The effect was magical.

I glanced into the formal living room when I came in and was surprised at how elegant and simple each table was. The centerpieces were small groupings of flowers and greenery at the base of two squat pillar candles. The place settings were white with gold trim. It was exactly what Candy said she wanted, a nice table for people to gather around and enjoy the food and each other's company. Nothing over the top. Nothing crazy. Just simplicity.

"Goddess, there you are, Blake!"

I turned when I heard Fenella's frantic voice. "What's wrong? Did

something happen to Candy?”

Fenella shook her head. “No, no, she’s fine. Getting ready for the ceremony, but...”

Candela’s aunt trailed off, her eyes darting all around the room, practically screaming at her internal panicked state.

“Take a breath,” I said, getting closer.

Fenella inhaled slowly and released it on a hiss.

“Better?” I asked.

She nodded, taking one more deep breath, and releasing it.

“Okay, so what’s wrong?” I asked.

“The officiant was in a car accident on his way over. He wasn’t severely injured but he did break his wrist. He’s at the hospital now and there’s less than an hour until the ceremony!” By the time she finished explaining, Fenella’s voice was high and strained.

Okay, so that was a big problem.

“You haven’t mentioned it to Candy yet, right?” I asked.

Fenella shook her head.

“Have you called Patty?” I asked.

She shook her head again.

“Okay, I’ll call Patty. There’s probably someone in the pack who’s ordained or certified or whatever it is we need in order to have them marry us in the eyes of the law.”

At my final words, a blonde woman stuck her head around the corner. “Fenella?” she asked.

I realized it was Ava when I saw her and wondered why I hadn’t smelled or heard her approach. It must have been all the greenery covering her scent. And the hustle and bustle of the caterers and others who were moving around the house.

She smiled when she saw me. “Blake! You look so handsome!” Her gaze dropped to the open collar of my shirt, and she released a light laugh. “No tie?”

That had been the one thing Candela and I argued over. I hadn’t wanted to wear one because I hated the feeling but compromised and agreed to wear it for the ceremony and pictures and take it off immediately after.

“I’ll put it on later,” I answered.

Ava nodded before she turned to Fenella. “Fennie, did I overhear you say the officiant won’t be able to make it?”

Fenella nodded in answer, still looking frantic.

Ava smiled even wider, which made Candy's aunt stare at her like she was nuts. "That's not a problem. Harrison, the manager of my bakery, received an invitation to the wedding and he's here in town. He's a licensed officiant here in Texas and performs ceremonies for the pack in Austin. I can call Macgrath and have them head over right now."

"Oh, my goddess, really?" Fenella exclaimed. "Please, please do that. But also tell them to be careful. Another car accident and this wedding will be canceled."

I didn't know Harrison personally because he didn't spend much time with the pack when he lived in Dallas, but Aunt Patty knew him. She was likely the one who added him to the guest list. Something I was grateful she'd done now. It also seemed I was going to get to know him better since he worked at Ava's shop and Candela would be working there as well.

I decided then and there that even if the wedding wasn't going to happen, if Harrison couldn't perform the ceremony, Candy and I would do whatever it took to find a justice of the peace or judge to officiate today. We had the marriage license. We were getting it done.

Ava shot her a gentle smile. "All will be well, Fennie. I promise."

I felt the undercurrent of magic in her words. It ruffled over my skin and would have raised my hackles if I'd been in wolf form. But I felt no threat from her. Only peace.

Candy's cousin was a strange witch. Sometimes, I sensed a great deal of power within her. Others, I felt nothing.

Even with that, I felt no threat from her. No danger. She truly seemed to love Candela and her family as though they were her own. And, from what I understood from Candy, she'd been close to the family for several generations, having never aged a day.

As though she sensed the direction of my thoughts, Ava turned her eyes to me. They were a deep lavender and strangely piercing. Her face softened when she looked at me. She reached out and patted my arm.

"Only a little while longer until your mate is wholly yours, wolf," she whispered.

With that, she released me and left the room, lifting her cell phone to her ear.

Yes, definitely a strange witch. Yet I was looking forward to getting to know her when Candy and I headed to Austin after our honeymoon.

“Okay!” Fenella cried, clapping her hands together. “It’s time to get everyone out of here. Guests will be arriving soon.”

The staff that was still fussing with place settings and floral arrangements began to file out at her words.

She looked back at me. “Why don’t you go relax in the den with a drink for the next thirty minutes or so? You seem tense.”

Shit. I hated that it was so obvious to her. And clearly Ava had noticed as well, based on her earlier comment.

“That sounds good.”

Fenella’s hands landed on my shoulders, and she gave me a kiss on the cheek. “You’re a good man, Blake. Perfect for Candela.” Her hands gave me another squeeze before she released me. “Now, go relax for a little while before the ceremony.”

“Yes, Aunt Fennie,” I replied.

She grinned and swatted me before she left the room.

I glanced around at the formal dining room before I wandered toward the back of the house and the library. The room was just as beautiful as the other parts of the house, filled with flowers, candles, and chairs festooned with swags of sparkling cream fabric and more flowers.

From there, I went into the den across the hall, shutting the door behind me. The desk from the library was in the far corner next to the piano and two club chairs were wedged in another corner. They’d been settled in front of the fireplace in the library before it was cleared out for the wedding.

I wandered over to the small bar cart and poured myself a little bit of whiskey.

Then, I settled on the couch to wait until it was time to make Candela my bride. Then, after that, I would mark her as my mate.

Only a little longer and I would have everything I ever wanted.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Candela

“READY?” Priscilla asked me as she fluffed the back of my wedding gown and arranged my veil.

“Yes,” I answered.

And it was true. I was ready. I was beyond ready.

I turned to face the full-length mirror in the corner. My breath caught in my chest because I barely recognized the woman looking back at me. Not just because of the dress and veil, but the incandescent happiness shining from my face.

“You look beautiful,” my mother whispered from her spot on the edge of the bed. “Absolutely stunning.” Tears filled her eyes, but she managed to hold them back.

“You clean up good, sis,” Priscilla said. Then, she sniffled.

I looked at her in the mirror and saw her swipe discreetly at the corner of her eye.

My own eyes were dry and sparkling.

I didn’t feel tears of joy threatening, only the desire to laugh and run as fast as I could toward the man I was about to marry.

There was a short knock on the door before it opened to show Aunt Fennie.

“It’s time,” she said.

She stopped for a moment and took me in from head to toe. “You’re a

gorgeous bride, Candela.”

“Thanks, Aunt Fennie,” I replied.

“Oh, here’s your bouquet,” she said, reaching through the door to hand me a cluster of red roses and ranunculus and white calla lilies. It was perfect.

“We need to get moving or that wolf of yours is going to come searching for you,” Fenella said.

I nodded and maneuvered my dress out the door. Fenella and Priscilla walked to my right, standing between me and the island as we passed through the busy kitchen, protecting my dress from any possible food accidents.

I took in the foyer as we walked past the stairs and toward the hall leading to the back of the house. It was so beautiful that it didn’t seem real.

Candlelight danced in the sconces in the hallway as the four of us made our way toward the library. My father was waiting in the hall, looking sharp in his suit, but his eyes were fixed to the floor.

When he looked up, I was certain he was about to cry. He blinked several times and came forward, clearing his throat as he did.

“Candela,” he murmured. “I have no words. You’re beautiful, sweetheart.”

I smiled at him, taking the hand he offered me. “Thanks, Dad.”

“We’re going to sit down,” Mom said, coming over to kiss my cheek. Then, she kissed Prissy and Dad. “As soon as we’re settled, the music will start and Priscilla, you should come through the door.”

“Okay,” she answered.

Mom and Fenella disappeared into the library and Dad stepped up beside me, tucking my hand in the crook of his arm. “I’m not sure I can do this, sweetie,” he whispered.

“Do what?”

“Give you away.”

For the first time today, tears threatened but I took a deep breath and fought them back.

I squeezed his arm with mine. “You’re not giving me away, Dad. I’m not going to disappear after this. Our family is just growing by one. And eventually, Blake and I will add more to the family.”

Dad’s hand rested on mine, but he shook his head. “I understand what you’re saying, but my heart says I’m giving you away.”

I leaned over and kissed his cheek, hearing the first strains of music coming through the library doors. “You’ll always be my dad. No matter if

I'm married, a mother, or old and gray."

"Shit," he whispered, blinking rapidly.

"We have to go," Priscilla murmured.

Dad took a second to gather his composure and nodded at her. My sister winked at me, turned around, and stepped through the open door.

Dad and I waited until the music changed and then we followed.

The people that stood when I entered may as well have been invisible. My eyes moved to the front of the room and locked on Blake.

He was all that existed in that moment.

As Dad and I made our way down the aisle between the chairs, Blake's eyes never left mine and they glowed.

We stopped a couple of feet from Blake. I didn't recognize the man standing behind him, but Aunt Fennie told me what had happened to the officiant we originally hired and explained that a shifter who had once belonged to the Dallas pack, but now worked for Ava in Austin, was here and able to perform the wedding. When she said his name was Harrison, I recognized it. Ava had mentioned him to me when she offered me the job as her assistant manager. So, essentially, my new boss was officiating my wedding. I'd laughed when I realized that.

Harrison stepped forward. "Who gives this woman to be married?"

My father cleared his throat. "She gives herself with our blessing."

Harrison blinked. He must not have been involved with the wedding of a witch before. Though my father was "giving me away" as he'd said, every witch belonged only to themselves and the goddess. The tradition wasn't the same as the Christian tradition of a father giving a bride to her new husband, as though she were a broodmare to be bought and sold.

It was symbolic and more about addition of the groom to the family and the willingness of the bride to bind her life to his.

Harrison did a good job of rolling with it though.

I kissed my dad's cheek and released his arm, reaching my other hand out to Blake. He clasped my fingers, tugging me closer. I felt my father leave my side, but I couldn't take my eyes off Blake.

"Hey," I said to him as I faced him in front of Harrison.

The intensity in his gaze didn't fade, but he did smile. "Hey."

I could hear Harrison speaking but I wasn't really paying attention until he said my name.

When we'd done the rehearsal, I made it clear to the officiant we'd hired

that I wanted a simple ceremony with simple vows. No poetry recitations. No song performances. Just Blake and I promising to love each other for eternity.

Blake and I had discussed it before and agreed, so that's what we were doing.

I was grateful that Harrison seemed to be following that format.

"Candela, please speak your vows."

Blake took my other hand.

"I, Candela Selene Lewis, take you Blake Evers Yardley, as my heart and my mate. I promise to love, respect, and stand beside you until my last breath. I will shield you when you are vulnerable, seek joy with you as often as possible, and lean on you in my hour of need."

As I spoke, Harrison draped a braided length of leather over our joined hands, wrapping it securely around each.

When I was done, Harrison looked at Blake.

"Blake, please speak your vows."

For the second time, tears threatened to well in my eyes. I blinked them back. I wanted to see him clearly when he made his oaths to me. I didn't want to miss a moment.

"I, Blake Evers Yardley, take you Candela Selene Lewis, as my heart and my mate. I promise to love, respect, and stand beside you until my last breath. I will shield you when you are vulnerable, seek joy with you as often as possible, and lean on you in my hour of need."

Harrison laid his hands over our bound ones. "With these vows, you are bound for eternity. As you will it, so shall it be."

Together, Blake and I spoke. "As I will it, so shall it be."

The air around us condensed, the magic wrapped in the words we'd spoken growing and swelling. The candles flared and the room seemed to shimmer as the spell cast by our vows surrounded us, settling into the leather that bound our hands.

The power flowed from the braided leather to our hands, travelling up our arms, down from our shoulders, and gathering over our hearts. I could see the glowing light in the center of Blake's chest and knew there was a light in the middle of my own.

Time itself seemed to pause as the magic built. Finally, the spell burst in a rush, washing throughout my body in waves.

I knew everyone in the room could feel it—witch, shifter, or human. It was the magic of love and sincere vows made to a soul mate.

At once, everyone in the room burst into cheers. The shimmer in the air became sparkles, exploding like fireworks and floating throughout the library. Silver and gold glittered on the bookshelves, the floral arrangements, even on the heads and shoulders of the guests. The entire room was filled with the visual proof that our love and the vows we'd just given to one another were pure magic.

Harrison gently unwound the leather from our hands, folding it several times. "Seal your oaths with a kiss."

I smiled up at Blake, my blood still fizzing in my veins from the power of the vows we'd just spoken.

His eyes were glowing so brightly that it nearly hurt to look in them. He used his hold on my hands to draw me closer before winding one arm around my waist and burying the other hand in the curls at the base of my neck.

I rose on my toes as he leaned down and our lips touched. A spark of magic leapt from my mouth to his and what began as a gentle caress of his mouth became so much more. He pulled me deeper into his body, wringing a gasp from me, before his tongue slid into my mouth. I lifted my hands to cup the back of his neck and fell into the kiss.

It was only when one of the shifters from his pack howled that we broke the kiss.

At once, the rest of the shifters from his pack joined in, including his aunt and Harrison at our side. They all howled their approval.

My friends and family clapped and whooped, joining in the din.

When the noise finally died down, Harrison gestured for us to turn toward the guests.

"Go forth and celebrate the beginning of your lives together with those you love."

Blake released me, his right hand clasping my left. Though witches didn't always wear wedding rings, Blake and I had bought them for each other, but we'd chosen to exclude them from the ceremony, focusing more on the old-fashioned hand fasting rather than an exchange of rings to symbolize our commitment.

We would exchange rings tonight in our hotel room, just the two of us. I couldn't wait for him to read what I'd had etched on the inside of his ring. The jeweler argued with me several times, saying the words wouldn't fit, but he'd figured it out in the end. It helped that Blake's ring size was larger.

When I'd run away after our first night together, I hadn't realized that

Blake felt as much for me as I did for him. I hadn't wanted to believe him when he found me again. He'd convinced me by saying that all it took was one night or one person to change everything.

So, I'd had a version his words engraved inside his wedding ring.

You changed everything.

That night, and Blake, had altered the course of my future in the best way possible.

Blake's hold on my hand was firm as we walked back down the aisle and out of the library. And into our future.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

Blake

THE MAGIC CREATED during our vows to each other had settled my wolf. For a little while.

But by the time the photographer had taken all the pictures of us and our families and we entered the formal living room to begin the reception dinner, he was shifting restlessly within me.

I tried to keep a firm hold on the claiming instinct rising within me, but after being denied for so long, my wolf was fighting for control.

As we ate and spoke with people, the urge to drag my mate out of the house and into my den, not that I had one, grew stronger.

I managed to make it until we cut the cake, ate it, and toasts were finished. The toasts were the last thing that Candela and I needed to participate in.

As soon as everyone was heading back toward the library, where the chairs had been cleared and the DJ was set up, I grabbed Candela's hand and dragged her through the foyer and back toward the kitchen.

She didn't argue. Instead, she paused for a moment to kick off her shoes and pick them up, and then, she was hurrying even faster toward the guest suite where her suitcases were stored. Mine were in my truck, ready for the drive to our hotel for the night.

I paused in the hall between the kitchen and the guest suite and said, "Please tell me you're ready to leave."

She grinned and used her grip on my hand to drag me through the door.

“Give me two minutes to change,” she said as soon as we were in the guest room. “And we can leave.”

She disappeared into the bathroom with clothes. I glanced at my watch. It was just late enough for us to check into the hotel.

It took her three minutes instead of two, but Candela came out of the bathroom in a pair of tweed pants, a cream sweater, and a pair of boots on her feet. She took a moment to drape her wedding dress on the end of the bed.

I stared at it for a moment, wondering why she was leaving it here.

“Mom, Dad, and Priscilla are going to bring my wedding dress with the gifts when they head to Austin to set the house up.”

With that question answered, I walked over to Candy’s two suitcases and asked, “Is there anything else you need?”

She was in the process of swinging her purse over her shoulder. With that done, she grabbed her phone off the nightstand. “Nope. That’s everything.”

I picked up the suitcases and walked out of the guest suite. Candy grabbed my arm when we walked into the kitchen. “Hey, let’s go out the back of the house. Otherwise, we’re going to have to run the gauntlet.”

My wolf and I were in agreement with her suggestion.

Candy used her hold on my elbow to drag me through the kitchen and down another short hall that led to the side door of the house, leading out to the driveway.

I’d parked in front of the house when I arrived, knowing that we would likely leave before everyone else. I didn’t want to be blocked into the driveway when it was time to go and wait for everyone to move their vehicles.

Tension grew between us on the drive to the hotel. I could see the tightness in her muscles and sense the anticipation growing.

My mate knew what was coming and she wanted it just as badly as my wolf did.

I bit back the insanely strong urge to howl at the moon and pulled into the hotel parking garage. To keep myself from grabbing her and dragging her into the back seats of my quad cab, I climbed out of the truck and got my bags and hers out of the rear.

Candy’s steps were just as quick as mine as we walked into the hotel and checked in. She insisted on carrying her own bags once we got our room keys.

I was both relieved and exasperated our room was on the top floor. Aunt Patty had arranged for us to have one of penthouse suites, her treat, for our wedding night. It meant we were the only ones on that floor, which also meant privacy.

Unfortunately, the elevator ride to the top floor seemed to take forever. The elevator was nearly full when we stepped in on the ground floor. It was probably my own impatience, or my wolf's, that made it seem as though the car stopped on every damn floor between the lobby and the penthouse.

Finally, we reached the top floor and were the only two left in the elevator. Candy stepped off first and rushed toward the door of our suite. She already had the key card in her hand and the door open by the time I reached it.

As soon as it slammed shut behind us, I took a split second to flip the privacy lock so no one could open the door from the outside and I *moved*.

Candy was ready for me. Her hands went to my shoulders when I grasped her waist and jerked her off her feet.

She wrapped her legs around my waist, grinding her pussy against me. I had no idea where the bed was, but I did see a couch less than ten feet away.

Candy's mouth crashed against mine, her tongue drawing a wet line across my bottom lip. I nearly tripped over my feet, but managed to keep my balance as I made my way around the couch and collapsed on the cushions.

Candy rearranged her legs until she was straddling my lap, then she leaned back, breaking away from the kiss, and jerked her sweater over her head. A moment later, her bra followed.

It seemed my wolf wasn't the only one impatient to solidify the mate bond.

"Should have worn a skirt," she murmured, her hands cupping my cheeks.

Her face was flushed pink, and her eyes burned brilliant blue fire. Her nipples were hard, and I wanted them in my mouth.

"Why?" I asked, sliding my hands from her waist to cup her breast.

She gasped, her hips jerking against my lap when my lips closed around her nipple. "Because you would already be inside me."

Her body undulated on my lap, pressing her pussy against my cock and grinding.

"We should slow down," I murmured against her chest, moving my mouth to her other nipple and giving it a long lick.

“Fuck that,” she said, her hands fisting in my hair, tugging my mouth away from her.

When I released her breast, she shot to her feet, her hands jerking down the zipper of her pants and shoving them down her legs, dragging her panties with them. She kicked off her flats as she did, leaving her completely bare.

“Take your shirt off,” she panted, dropping to her knees in front of me.

“Candy, I need to stay in control, or I might hurt you.”

She unbuttoned my suit pants and lowered the zipper. Then, she took a moment to run her hands down my thighs, squeezing my knees, before she attacked the laces of my dress shoes.

“You would never hurt me, Blake,” she said. “Never.”

“My wolf is too close—” I said.

She yanked off my shoes and socks before her fingers returned to the waistband of my pants. “Lift up your hips,” she demanded.

“Candy—”

Her eyes flashed up to me and, for a moment, she looked like a female shifter, ready to claim her mate, ready to bite and scratch if she had to. Anything to get her teeth into the male she wanted as her own.

“Your wolf will never hurt me either, Blake,” she all but snarled. “He loves me as much as you do.”

I knew she was right as soon as the words left her lips.

“Lift your hips,” she commanded.

I complied, a low growl escaping my chest. My canines lengthened as my wolf rose to the surface, hovering just beneath my human skin. For the first time since I recognized that Candela Lewis was my mate, my trust in my wolf was complete.

She tossed my pants and boxer briefs to the side and leaned forward, opening her mouth. I growled again when her hot, wet tongue licked a line from the base of my cock to the tip. I groaned when she reached the top of my dick and sucked the head between her lips.

I struggled to be gentle as I fisted my hands in her hair and tugged, lifting her mouth off me.

“Blake—”

Her lips were wet and red, but I didn’t want her mouth on me. Not right now while I was so close to feral.

I leaned forward, releasing her hair, and lifted her in my arms. “Bed. Now.”

The little witch leaned forward and sank her teeth into my shoulder.
Fuck.

I hauled her through the suite, somehow finding the bedroom without really looking where I was going. I dropped her on the bed, rolled onto my back next to her, and lifted her by her hips until she was astride my face.

“Blake!” she cried. “I wanted—”

She choked on the words when I sucked her clit into my mouth. Hard.

My mate was already wet for me, ready to take my cock and my bite.

I released her clit from between my lips, rolling my tongue over it.

Candy’s head lifted, her back arching, and she moaned, rocking her hips against my mouth.

I used my grip on her hips to grind her deeper into my mouth, ready to devour her until she was screaming.

Her hands came to my hair, yanking it hard. “I don’t want to come unless you’re inside me,” she gasped, trying to pull away.

I lifted her slightly, nipping her inner thigh and biting back another growl at her yelp.

Candy rolled away, coming back up on her knees next to me, reaching for my cock. I snarled and she stopped.

“Hands and knees in front of me,” I growled.

I worried that she would push me, trying to make me lose control the way she liked to do, but, for once, she did exactly what I said. I knelt behind her, lining my cock up with her entrance, and pressed inside.

She tried to push back into me when I stopped moving, but I gripped her hips, holding her still.

“Blake,” she said.

“Hold still, sugar.”

“I want—”

My palm cracked against her ass. “I’ll give you what you want. Patience.”

She growled at me. Any other time, I would laugh, but now, with the wolf riding me hard, it took every ounce of restraint I had to stop from thrusting deep inside her and riding her until she came before I sank my teeth into her.

“I’m going to fuck you hard, Candy,” I said. “Then, I’m going to bite you. Is that what you want?”

Her head came around so she could look at me over her shoulder. “Yes,” she hissed.

I smacked her ass again. “Say please,” I said.

Her eyes narrowed. “Now, Blake.”

Good enough.

I jerked her hips back into me as I thrust forward, impaling her on my dick.

“Yes,” she hissed again. “Don’t stop.”

I moved then, taking her hard and deep. Her pussy clutched at me as she lowered her upper body, resting her weight on her elbows.

I leaned forward, curving my body over her back, and reached around her hip to her clit. She pushed back into my dick, taking me deeper, as I circled her clit with my finger, pressing and rolling until she moaned again.

“I’m so close,” she whimpered.

I pressed harder, pushing her closer to the edge.

Her pussy clasped me, growing tighter and wetter, until she broke for me. Her head fell forward, and her body shuddered beneath mine.

It was what I was waiting for. I moved my hand from her clit to the hair that tumbled over her shoulders, shoving it out of the way and tugging her head back.

Then, I bit her, sinking my teeth into the muscle at the base of her neck. That was when she screamed for me, her body arching beneath mine. I felt the bond between us burst into existence and rush through me.

I could feel the pleasure that swamped her at my bite, her joy at being completely mine, and I crashed into her a final time before I came hard.

Candy went limp beneath me, and I followed her body down to the mattress, pinning her in place with my weight. She sighed when I released her shoulder from my bite and ran the flat of my tongue over the imprint of my teeth. The tang of her blood touched my tongue and I hated that I’d had to draw it in order to mark her.

But I also relished in the sight of my bite on her skin. It looked deep enough to scar, but it would heal cleanly.

I ran a hand over her hair, brushing it back from her face. I saw her smile in profile before she reached back for my hand and brought it to her lips.

“I love you,” she whispered against my knuckles.

“I love you, too.”

I withdrew from her body slowly and rolled onto my back. Candy turned, curling into me, and resting her head on my shoulder. She threw her arm across my abdomen and cuddled as close as she could.

“So, this is what it feels like to be yours,” she murmured, rubbing her

cheek against my chest.

I knew exactly what she meant. The bond that now existed between us ran deep and true.

Still, that wasn't completely accurate.

"You've been mine since the first night I had you," I said.

I kissed the top of her head before she tilted it back to look into my eyes. "You realize I wouldn't have left the next morning if you'd bothered to tell me that, right?"

"You're not a shifter. I figured if I told you that I wasn't going to let you go, you'd freak out and run for your life."

Candy grinned at me. "You knew I was a witch. I wouldn't have done that. Now, I might not have dropped to my knees and begged you to mate me that morning, but I wouldn't have snuck out either."

"I'm not sure I believe you."

I yelped when she pinched my nipple, grabbing her hand to remove it.

"If you understood how smitten I was with you after that first night, you'd believe me," she said.

I waited for a moment, letting the bond flow between us. Candela shivered as I prodded the link.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Checking to see if you're telling me the truth."

This time she didn't pinch me, she bit my other nipple.

I yelped again and this time flipped our positions so she was beneath me. I leaned my weight back and pressed my torso down on her hips, keeping my nipples away from her mouth. Then, I pinned her hands to the mattress beside her head.

"I see weddings make you vicious," I said.

Candy's eyes sparkled up at me with amusement. "No, you treating our mate bond as a lie detector makes me vicious."

I leaned down and nipped her bottom lip in retaliation, wringing a gasp from her.

"You can do it, too," I said.

She lifted her brows. "That may be, but I respect your right to lie to me."

I had to laugh.

When Candy tried to move her hands, I pressed them back into the mattress.

"Nope. My nipples are still recovering."

She smirked at me. “Good to know you have a weakness.”

I leaned down until my nose touched the tip of hers, looking into her gorgeous eyes. “Only when it comes to you, mate.”

Her body melted beneath mine and I knew she was done teasing me. I released her wrists and slid my palm beneath her neck, my fingers spearing through her hair.

Candy’s hands ran over my shoulders and down my sides, her nails grazing my skin. It felt good.

“I can’t believe you’re mine,” she whispered, her gaze moving over my face.

“You should. I’ve been yours since that first night, too.”

She smiled up at me. “I’m glad.”

Candy lifted her head and kissed the base of my throat. “Do I get to put my mark on you?” she asked before her tongue flicked against my pulse.

It took me a moment to answer her because I was distracted by the thought of Candy sinking her teeth into my shoulder the way I’d put mine in hers.

“You could mark me every fucking day if you wanted to,” I said. “Or every time your bite fades. I would be honored to wear it.”

“Shit,” she whispered, her eyes filling up with tears. “I haven’t cried all day, yet here I am, about to bawl my eyes out over you telling me I can bite you every day.”

As suddenly as the tears came, they vanished, and she started giggling. “Oh, my goddess,” she gasped. “That sounded absolutely insane when I said it out loud.”

“Only because you’re not a shifter,” I pointed out.

She cocked her head to the side and asked, “You won’t scar like I do. What about a tattoo? Would that fade?”

“Not spelled ink. It would last forever.”

“Would you—”

I lowered my head and kissed her. When I released her mouth, her legs were wrapped around my hips and she was rubbing her wet pussy against my dick.

“As soon as we’re in Austin, I’ll ask around and find a place that will do it. There has to be someone.”

Candy smiled at me again, the grin spreading across her face until she was nearly glowing.

“We can never tell our aunts, but I will forever be grateful they made sure we met each other last year,” she said. “It was the second-best day of my life.”

“And what’s the first best day?” I asked.

Her hands moved from my shoulders to my face, her thumb brushing across my bottom lip.

“Today.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Texas, C.C. Wood writes saucy paranormal and contemporary romances featuring strong, sassy women and the men that love them. If you ever meet C.C. in person, keep in mind that many of her characters are inspired by people she knows, so anything you say or do is likely to end up in a book one day.

A self-professed hermit, C.C. loves to stay home, where she reads, writes, cooks, and watches TV. She can usually be found drinking coffee or a cocktail as she spends time with her hubby and daughter.



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