



*Unlikely
Mate*

BRIDES FOR BEASTS
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CANDACE AYERS

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Contents

1. [Silas](#)
2. [Cait](#)
3. [Silas](#)
4. [Cait](#)
5. [Silas](#)
6. [Silas](#)
7. [Cait](#)
8. [Silas](#)
9. [Cait](#)
10. [Silas](#)
11. [Cait](#)
12. [Silas](#)
13. [Cait](#)
14. [Silas](#)
15. [Cait](#)

[Epilogue: Silas](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Off-Limits Mate](#)

(Sneak Peek)

1. [Baylin](#)

Chapter 1

Silas



I can hardly believe what I'm reading.

I've read it three times already, but it doesn't get any less surreal the fourth time.

Glancing out my office window, I catch the sun sinking low over my town—Mystic Hollow, a quaint haven for bear shifters nestled comfortably in the bosom of Mother Nature herself. We've got the towering evergreens, houses as charming as gingerbread cottages, rolling green hills, snow-capped mountains, and a crystal-clear river flowing languidly through town. The town square is a hub of community activity, hosting the local farmer's market and annual festivals. It would be absolutely idyllic if it weren't for the curse...or plague...or just plain old bad luck, depending on how one looks at it.

No one really knows why the growth of the female population suddenly came to an abrupt standstill, but the Shifter Council, in its infinite wisdom, has decided that humans are the answer to a problem that has been plaguing our bear shifter clan—and several other species of shifters, if rumors are to be believed—for decades.

I don't know much about other shifter species, but I do know that for forty years—forty long, dry, dismal years—not a single female shifter has been born in our clan. And now, there are no single female shifters left. Not one.

The world isn't exactly short on surprises, though, and today, as I sit at my desk in my humble, yet commanding office, I'm holding one such surprise in

my hand.

Again I glance down at the parchment, a direct edict from the council, and my door swings open with a thud, disrupting my contemplation as my four officers, who also happen to be my closest friends, step inside.

I greet them with a deadpan look. "No need to knock. Just come right on in."

"Alpha." Waylon, always with a joke on his lips and a twinkle in his eye, sports his usual carefree grin as he flops onto the leather couch. "You called, we came."

There's no point beating around the bush here, so I clear my throat and hold up the parchment like a white flag before handing it over to await their reactions.

Xandros, my second in command—the bear would take a bullet for me, no lie—reads aloud. "It is henceforth decreed by the shifter council...blah, blah, blah...longstanding traditions...blah, blah, blah...Brides for Beasts (BfB) program!"

A variety of emotions sweep over the men's faces and Xandros continues, "Among the select few chosen for the first experimental group...significant responsibility...keeping our shifter identities hidden until such time as a matrimonial bond is agreed upon... future survival of our clan."

For several seconds, you could hear a pin drop. Then, as expected, chaos ensues.

"No freaking way!" Hernon almost topples over. His face is flushed and his usual easygoing demeanor has been replaced with an expression of shock and excitement.

"*Human* females?" Lake adjusts his glasses and peers at the parchment thoughtfully. "It's an unconventional solution, but it could work. We must maintain our lineage, after all."

"Seriously?" Xandros's eyes are wide and his jaw hangs loose. "Is this for real?"

"Well, boys, looks like we might be heading for some interesting times

indeed." Waylon rubs his palms together as though he's about to devour a juicy steak.

I cross my arms over my chest, meeting each of their gazes. "I know this is a lot to take in—introducing humans into a world they know nothing about. It's going to be a challenge."

"But it's a challenge we're willing to face, amiright?" HERNON'S voice is hopeful as his eyes flit from one of his fellow shifters to the next.

I know exactly where HERNON is coming from; we all do. None of us has been with a woman in years. Sure, the men of our clan have responsibilities—jobs and duties to keep us busy and bring us a modicum of fulfillment—but I think I can speak for us all when I say there's an emptiness that echoes deep within, and the last decade or so has been especially lonely. If this fledgling program works out, it could continue and be expanded to bring joy to a lot of male bear shifters, not to mention revive our dying species.

"I know I am." Waylon's chest puffs out in determination.

XANDROS nods, his firm agreement lending an air of finality. "The only time we get to be with a female is when we travel to human communities, and even then it's usually only for an hour or so. I don't know about you guys, but my palm could use a break."

"I agree." LAKE'S usually analytical gaze is softer. "The intellectual and social aspects of adapting humans into our world may prove challenging, but it's certainly worth attempting."

XANDROS, ever the stoic, raises a brow at that. "Just remember, we're supposed to be marrying these women, not just meeting them."

Marrying. The word echoes in my ears. We're all bruisers, fighters, protectors. We're not exactly versed in the art of courting.

"You think they'll have us?" LAKE muses, a hint of worry creasing his brow. "I mean, we're not exactly 'suit and tie' kind of guys."

"We clean up pretty nice, though, don't we?" Waylon strikes a pose and a round of snorts and cough-laughs behind cupped hands makes its way around the room, but Waylon is undeterred. "Think I should buy a tux?"

Sarcasm, my loyal companion, rears its biting head. "Go for it. Nothing screams, '*welcome, unsuspecting human females*' like a bear in a tuxedo."

Lake looks thoughtful, his gaze distant. "It'll be a big change, for us and for them." He's clearly considering the potential pitfalls and I figure it's time to put this to a vote.

"Okay, I want to make it clear that no one here is obligated to participate. This will be volunteer only. What do you say? Yay, or nay?"

There's a chorus of yays from every man in the room. The vote is unanimous.

I nod. "The yays have it. We'll be the guinea pigs for this new BfB program. Gentlemen, we're getting hitched."

Chapter 2

Cait



The fluorescent lights in this stark room are making my head throb. I rub my temples, stifling a yawn as the overly-peppy blonde with the cute Georgian accent drawls on about her quest for "true love" and a "soul mate." As if.

I've had to listen to speeches like this probably a hundred times this week.

As the new recruitment officer for an organization going by the mysterious acronym BfB, the appeal of this job is undeniable. In this desolate job market, I can't afford to nitpick. They pay generously, and this job keeps me from bunking in a homeless shelter.

The ethics of the program, well, not gonna lie, they eat at me. The idea of recruiting women for arranged marriages seems so archaic, doesn't it? Or is that just my privilege speaking? I'm not sure.

What I do know is these women are delusional if they think they'll find anything other than a convenient arrangement with any of the men they'll be introduced to.

Do they honestly think they'll meet men who aren't dull, old, ugly, and probably undesirable in many other ways? Why else would these guys form an agency to recruit potential wives? Any decent man could find his own wife.

"So you see, I'm really looking to find my one and only," the woman gushes, clasping her hands together gleefully. "My forever spouse."

I plaster a smile on my face. "Fabulous." In reality, I'd bet money that the

only thing dreamy about any of these men is the size of their bank accounts. "Well, you seem like an ideal candidate for our program."

After shaking her hand and seeing her out, I lean back in my chair with a sigh. Another one bites the dust.

This BfB program is absurd. The whole idea of arranged marriages makes me queasy, even if the job itself is straightforward. All I need to do is persuade these hopeless romantics that they're destined to live happily ever after with a stranger, and my paychecks will keep rolling in. And by "persuade," I mean interview.

Who knew there were so many needy single women looking for a Disney-princess fantasy?

My principles duel with my practicality, but ultimately, the latter prevails. I might not believe in love or soul mates, but I have a firm belief in paying my rent. With a resigned sigh, I open the door to admit my next interviewee. The show must go on.

The next candidate is a bubbly brunette named Daisy who seems to share the IQ of her namesake flower. But she's enthusiastic, and really, intelligence isn't a prerequisite for the program.

"You understand that if selected, you'll be relocated to a secluded mountain town to live with your new husband?" I run through the details—yet again.

Daisy nods eagerly. "It'll be so romantic! Like a fairy tale come to life."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "And you're aware that, although not a love match, a contract will be in place requiring the marriage be consummated and a good faith effort made by both parties to procreate. In exchange, you will receive a hefty monthly allowance to spend as you see fit as well as room and board and medical and dental insurance."

Daisy claps her hands in excitement. "Fate will guide me to my one true love," she says dreamily. "I know I'm meant to be a wife and mother. I've felt it since I was a little girl!"

Fan-freaking-tastic. Another one who drank the Kool-Aid.

"Wonderful." I struggle not to retch. "If there are no further questions, we'll process your application and get back to you soon."

"This is so exciting!" Daisy squeals with delight, throwing her arms around me in a hug. As she squeezes, I awkwardly pat her on the back while mentally ticking off the seconds until she's out of the building.

When Daisy finally skips out the door, humming The Wedding March, I momentarily slump onto my desk with a groan. Recruiting these women is leaving a bad taste in my mouth.

You have bills to pay, Cait.

Straightening my spine, I shake off the unpleasant encounter.

At least I make damn sure that the women who sign up for this program enter into it with their eyes wide open and make an informed decision. It's not my job to protect people from their own foolish choices.

Still, I promise myself I'll keep a close eye on the recruits throughout the entire process, and ensure their safety. I may not believe in love, fairy tales, or happily-ever-after endings, but that doesn't mean I'll stand by and let these starry-eyed romantic fools be taken advantage of. BfB is paying me to find candidates, not recruit victims. I'll make certain that the distinction remains crystal clear.

So far, nothing about the program really seems nefarious. Still, I can't seem to shake the feeling there's something *odd* about this whole operation. Something that causes the tiny hairs on the back of my neck to stand on end.

Chapter 3

Silas



Mystic Hollow roars to life as the charter bus enters town limits and rolls its way down Main Street. Leaning against my office building, I watch it approach, a thrum of anticipation beating in my chest.

Showtime.

The bus seems to heave a sigh of relief as it halts directly in front of me. Its doors swing open, and something resembling a fireball tumbles down the stairs and out into the sunlight.

Time freezes as I take in the sight before me. A woman—a tiny sprite of a woman.

"Hello, I'm Cait Callahan, BfB's female program coordinator. I take it you're Silas Orso?" She extends a hand, firm and determined, her gaze unwavering.

I'm so entranced by this petite woman that I forget to breathe. A fiery halo of curls frame her animated face. Her sapphire eyes sparkle with a mix of curiosity and apprehension.

She's a sight to behold, and an unexpected jolt of excitement electrifies me. Her voice alone makes my dick strain to break through my zipper. I get the impression that I'm not merely meeting a BfB coordinator, I'm meeting a force of nature.

"Cait," her name rolls off my tongue. It tastes sweet, like honey. "Yes, I'm Silas." My bear, usually a docile creature, awakens from his slumber, thoroughly enchanted. "Hello. Nice to meet you." Understatement.

I try not to dwarf her petite frame with my towering stature, but I have a sense that she's not at all intimidated by my size. In fact, I doubt much intimidates this woman.

When I take her outstretched hand in mine, the sizzle of electricity that shoots up my arm and straight to my groin almost makes me groan aloud.

Does she feel it too?

Cait's eyes widen, and our gazes lock for several seconds before she jerks her hand from mine.

Oh yeah, she feels it.

"Welcome to Mystic Hollow." My voice is smooth but noticeably tense. My bear is experiencing a powerful reaction not only to her touch, but also to her scent—a mix of wildflowers and something uniquely her. "I'll show you and the other ladies to your accommodations for the week."

A group of excitedly chattering women disembarks from the bus, claiming luggage as the driver unloads it.

"I'll grab this." I swoop down and lift Cait's suitcase before she has a chance to respond. Our gazes collide, and again something passes between us that piques my bear's interest.

Leading the group to a cluster of one-room cabins that once served as a campground, I find myself barely noticing the other women. The unexpected spark between Cait and me has thrown me off balance.

"The town of Mystic Hollow has a zero percent crime rate. You couldn't be safer." As I explain the layout of the camp to the women, Cait's scent is like a lure, reeling me in with each step.

The others listen to my words as I brag about the tranquil lifestyle of Mystic Hollow, but all I can focus on is Cait. She stands with her hands tucked in her pockets as she takes it all in. My bear stirs beneath the surface, desperate to get closer to her, stupid animal. I don't have much experience with women—there hasn't been much of an opportunity—but I'm not usually this shaken. Something about this woman throws me completely off my game.

“There's a communal fire pit and an ample supply of firewood.” I point to the recently split logs stacked under a lean-to.

“You'll each be assigned your own cabin, and each cabin is equipped with a bathroom including a shower.” I try to distract myself by pointing out various features of the cabins but Cait's scent is intoxicating. “Mama's Den is the local diner and all your meals there will be covered by the BfB program.”

Everything about Cait is intriguing. Every comment, every hand gesture, every sweep of her sapphire gaze pulls me in. She's like a storm, wild and untamed, challenging nature with her power and ferocity.

But she isn't one of the program candidates, dipshit.

We travel as a group dropping each woman off, one by one, at her assigned lodging. When we reach the last one, Cait's, she lingers in the doorway watching me. “The women and I will get settled and then tomorrow, we're planning to have breakfast in town and do a bit of sightseeing in the area. In the evening, I've scheduled a cocktail party—our first formal meet and greet of the potential brides and the potential grooms.”

“Sounds good.” I nod. “In the meantime, my direct number is inside your cabin by the phone. Please call if you need anything.” *Anything at all.*

As alpha, this is my territory, yet something in me—my bear, no doubt—wants Cait to feel as though this is her home too.

“I will. Thank you, Silas.” The way she purrs my name is sin incarnate. My jaw clenches as I summon my last shreds of control.

"Goodnight," I manage to say, my voice a gruff whisper.

"Goodnight." And with that, the cabin door closes between us.

Her scent lingers on my senses, stirring a mix of restlessness and anticipation within me. My bear is unusually active, as if he's trying to tell me something.

With a growl of frustration, I head for the woods to shift. Maybe a hunt will clear my mind of its sudden and troublesome fixation on Ms. Cait Callahan.

After several hours, it's evident that not even hunting or foraging in the woods can keep my thoughts from straying back to the fiery redhead who's

invaded not only my territory but my mind.

At home, my usually quiet place feels too silent. I recline in my chair in front of a blazing fire crackling in the hearth and wrestle with thoughts of the spitfire city girl who, in one afternoon, seems to have spun my world off its axis. I can still hear the sweet notes of Cait's laughter in the air.

I can't explain why, but along with thoughts of Cait comes a surge of fierce possessiveness unlike anything I've ever felt before.

Only time will tell, but I have a feeling Mystic Hollow has just welcomed a tempest, and that life here will never be the same again.

Chapter 4

Cait



I'm gaping. I know I'm gaping. My eyes are bugged out of my head and my mouth is opening and closing like a carp, but I can't seem to quash my reaction to the potential grooms here at the meet-and-greet cocktail party. They're all very tall, very muscular, and sinfully good-looking.

Especially Silas—I need to stay away from that man!

The moment Silas touched me, it felt as though all my nerve endings sparked and crackled to life like I stuck my finger in an electric wall outlet. I had to pull my hand away. And his scent—ugh! I could bathe in his masculine, woody scent.

You have no business lusting after that man, Cait. Cool your vag.

I thought maybe Silas was a one-off. But, no. Every man here tonight is hot. What gives?

The fact that these hunky men live in this quaint little town that we *oohed* and *ahhed* over this morning and have the financial means to support a family, but feel the need to enter into arranged marriages baffles me on so many levels.

The room buzzes with chatter, laughter, and an air of anticipation.

The women I brought to Mystic Hollow are dressed to the nines and flirting shamelessly with the men in their casual attire. Not gonna lie, it's like watching piranhas devour their prey while tinkling notes of soft jazz waft from the sound system.

I scan the venue, making sure the lavish spread of hors d'oeuvres is replenished, the bar remains staffed and stocked, and there are no issues.

And, of course, my eyes betray me and stray to the far corner of the room where Silas stands surrounded by spray tans, fake tits, and smokey eyes.

He's mouthwatering. He has blonde hair, a jawline that could cut glass, and his long-sleeved henley clings to his back and shoulders showcasing a physique that would put a professional bodybuilder to shame. With a single glance, a tingling starts up low in my belly. Frowning, I press a hand to my midsection. What is this?

Then his deep laugh rings out and my panties instantly dampen. I suck in a sharp breath. *That* has certainly never happened to me before.

And why does the sight of women flirting with Silas trigger such an irrational flare of annoyance when that's what they're supposed to do?

I couldn't care less who Silas spends his time with. Our relationship is purely professional. Even if I do have this sudden overwhelming urge to march over there and go all cavewoman on those bitches.

Ridiculous. I give myself a mental smackdown and busy myself by checking the floral arrangements. There's too much at stake for me to get distracted by a handsome face—like rent and bills.

“Everything running smoothly?”

Speak of the devil.

I whirl around at the sound of his deep voice behind me, my heart leaping into my throat. I envision removing his shirt with my teeth, but force a polite smile instead.

“So far, so good.”

When Silas peers down at me, his golden eyes seem to glow. Like, really glow. “You look stunning tonight.”

Heat floods my cheeks and I glance away, fussing with a stray curl. “Flattery will get you everywhere, Mr. Orso.”

He shrugs. “It’s the truth.” And then he leans in close, his woodsy scent enveloping me. “But I’m open to wherever flattery might lead.”

A delicious shiver runs down my spine at his suggestive tone.

No business, remember? No business at all.

Clearing my throat, I take a hasty step back. “If you’ll excuse me, I should check on the catering staff.”

Before he can reply, I hurry off, confusion and frustration warring within me. What is Silas doing to me? I’ve never been this lust-fueled about any man before. Silas’s physical presence beckons me every time he’s near. Scratch that. He doesn’t need to be near—every time I think about him.

How am I going to survive an entire week with him underfoot, looking sinfully sexy and saying things like that with a voice like his?

Sheesh, I should’ve brought some extra panties. If this continues I might need to change them several times a day.

For the rest of the evening, I do my best to avoid Silas, but he seems to continually materialize out of nowhere—handing me a glass of white wine, complementing my organizational skills, fetching another bag of ice from the freezer, asking if I need any assistance.

His attentiveness only adds to my flustered state, which in turn seems to amuse him. By the time the last guest leaves, I’m an unnerved mess.

“Let me walk you back to your cabin.” Again, Silas’s eyes are glowing. What is that?

“That’s not necessary, I—”

“I insist.” When he stares at me like this, his gaze never leaving mine, everything else fades into oblivion as if no one else exists at this moment except the two of us. Fuck those flirty women, all that matters is us—the intensity of our connection, how we look at each other like we’ve known each other forever even though we’ve just met.

Cool your lady bits, Cait. He’s hot, but you don’t do relationships. EVER.

As we walk, a charged silence stretches between us. I'm desperate to escape this churning vortex of emotions he stirs within me.

"I thought tonight went very well. Thank you for planning and executing such a lovely evening."

My cheeks warm hearing I impressed him. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"I enjoyed being near you."

He didn't just say that. Did he just say that? I look into his eyes.

He did just say that.

Fortunately, we're steps from my cabin. When we reach it, I'm about to dart inside, slam the door in his face, and dump a tray of ice cubes down my pants when he reaches out and cups my cheek. The golden glow of the porch light caresses the sharp planes of his face. His touch is gentle yet possessive.

"What are you so afraid of, Cait?"

My breath catches in my throat. I'm transfixed by the tenderness in his eyes.

"I won't hurt you." His voice is a gruff whisper. "I would never hurt you."

I want to believe him. Against all reason, some deep part of me does. But I know better. I won't hand any man the power to shatter me.

Stepping back, I break the spell. "Good night, Mr. Orso."

Silas drops his hand with a sigh. "Good night, Ms. Callahan."

Sliding into the cabin, I close the door, wait a few seconds, then peer through the crack between the curtains and watch him walk off. The man is smoking hot. I can't decide which is his best feature—his square jaw, his straight nose, his broad chest, or the tight ass I'm currently staring at.

I need to stop wanting things I can't have.

Be professional, I remind myself. I have a job to do, and I can't afford distractions.

No matter how tight his ass is.

Chapter 5

Silas



"Alpha, you ready man? We're supposed to be there in, like, ten minutes." Xandros shouts up the stairs to me from the first floor of my home startling me awake.

Groaning, I scrub a hand over my face, trying to erase the remnants of my dream, the vivid images of Cait—her fiery curls tumbling over her bare shoulders, her lips parted in gasps of pleasure—that keep swimming through my mind. But the dream clings, stoked by the memory of her scent, her plump lips as she sipped wine, and the lush curves of her figure.

An unfamiliar ache twists in my chest. I did my duty last night. I mingled with the women, but none held a sliver of my interest. In fact, today I'm hard-pressed to even recall names or faces. They all blur into insignificance. Yet Cait... beautiful, curvy, vibrant Cait is as vivid as a freshly painted portrait. Her every gesture, every word is imprinted in my mind, etched in my senses.

Cait Callahan is trouble. Big trouble. With a capital T.

And yet I can't wait to see her again.

"I'll be right down." My bear rumbles with anticipation at the thought of today's picnic by the river.

It's not the picnic he's looking forward to either. It's Cait.

It might be hard to fight the pull I feel toward Cait, but I have to. My duty to my clan comes first. Besides, there are many attractive women participating

in the BfB program. Cait did a good job recruiting.

I climb out of bed and make my way to the shower, but the cool spray does little to extinguish the heat in my veins or to quiet the turmoil in my mind, and by the time we reach the picnic site, I'm thirsting for her.

My eyes instantly find her.

She's arranging sandwiches and fruit on a picnic table, sunlight glinting off her hair like shimmery red-gold flames. Our eyes meet and her lips pull into a slow, devastating smile.

Heat suffuses my body as if I'd shifted into bear form, and realization slaps me upside the head—I'm utterly and completely hers.

I cross the park to her in swift strides, barely noticing the others milling around the picnic site.

"Need a hand?" I try to keep my voice casual as my eyes hungrily devour her.

"Hello, Silas." She regards me steadily, but I notice a touch of color stains her cheeks.

"What can I do to help?" Anything to be near her, to breathe the same air as her.

"Thanks, but I think I've got this." A hint of a dimple appears in her cheek, and her lips pucker for a moment as she unscrews the lid from a jar of dill pickles. "But you're welcome to stick around in case I need a strong, heavily-muscled man to open any other jars." Her gaze slides down my body, then back up to meet my eyes.

Heat flashes through me at the thought of those slender, capable fingers wrapped around...a certain part of my anatomy. I clear my throat. "I'd be happy to—"

Before I can finish my sentence, a trio of women descends on me, all smiles and giggles and fluttering eyelashes.

"There you are, Silas. We've been waiting to talk to you." One of the women wraps her talons around my bicep.

“You have to join us for a game of volleyball.” Another of the women slings an arm through mine and presses her body to my side.

“And after that, we’ll sunbathe down by the river. I’m dying to try on my new bikini.” The third woman winks suggestively, and I feel the bile rise in the back of my throat.

I have zero interest in any of them. The only woman I’m interested in talking to, playing volleyball with, or seeing in a bikini, is Cait.

But as Alpha, I can't dismiss them, so with a quick, apologetic look at Cait, I let them lead me away.

The rest of the picnic passes in a haze. Laughter echoes through the park, the scent of freshly mowed grass wafts in the air, but everything fades into the background for me. No matter how hard I try to focus on whatever woman is vying for my attention at any given moment, my gaze keeps wandering to Cait. I force mechanical smiles and try to feign interest, but my senses are saturated with the woman whose vibrant energy, fiery spirit, and wildflower fragrance captivate me.

I want more of Cait. More of her wit, more of her fire, more of her infectious laughter, and more of her delicious scent.

I watch her laugh and chat with the other guests, seemingly at ease, but I noticed the way she rubs her arm or fidgets with the hem of her shirt when she thinks no one is looking— little tells that speak of nerves and discomfort. My bear rumbles in displeasure at the idea of Cait being uncomfortable. I want nothing more than to go to her and wrap her in my arms. I’ll give her comfort. I’ll give her all the comfort she can possibly handle.

When the festivities taper off and the last guest finally leaves, I breathe a sigh of relief. I remain behind to talk to Cait, but as she gathers the remnants of the picnic with brisk, efficient movements, she avoids my gaze.

I step to her side. "You don't have to do that. My staff can handle the cleanup."

"I don't mind." She still doesn’t meet my eyes.

“Talk to me, Cait.” I keep my tone gentle, trying to soothe her obvious

distress. “Did something upset you?”

“Of course not.” Her curls bounce as she shakes her head a bit too emphatically. “And I would think you are all talked out what with all the female vipers you had sinking their fangs into you today.”

Is that jealousy? I stifle a grin.

“I was watching you. You seemed a little tense. You still do.”

“You were watching me?” Her jaw drops in surprise.

“I was, and I noticed your discomfort. What made you uncomfortable?” Was it the “vipers”? Please say it was the vipers.

She begins playing with the hem of her shirt again. Then she huffs an exhale and waves a hand through the air. “I’m being silly. Just ignore me.”

I turn her to face me, tipping her chin up with one finger. “I couldn’t ignore you if I tried.” I know this for a fact because I *had* tried. “You’re clearly unhappy. Tell me what’s wrong so I can fix it.”

She worries her lower lip between her teeth before admitting in a rush, “I didn’t like seeing you with those other women.”

My heart swells at her confession, but the moment the words leave her lips, a crimson blush creeps up her cheeks. Her breath catches, her eyes widen, and she drops the handful of napkins and plastic cutlery she’s holding.

“I...uhh... You know, on second thought, I think I’ll take you up on that offer to have your staff handle the cleanup. I just remembered I gotta...see about...a thing.”

Before I can respond, she takes off running.

For a moment, I consider chasing her. I want to, but what would I say?

*Those women mean nothing to me...? There’s only one woman I want...?
You’re the only woman who haunts my thoughts and stirs my blood...?*

I’m very aware that what I feel for Cait is more than superficial attraction. What I feel is far deeper. It’s a yearning.

Yeah, a deep yearning.

So deep, it stirs a primal part of me.

Chapter 6

Silas



"I don't know what's happening to me. I can't stop thinking of her." The guys and I are in the woods for our nightly shift when I decide to share my predicament. "She's not like any other woman. I want her so bad that every time I'm near her my dick is rock hard, and the mere thought of fucking another woman turns it soft again."

Hoping my closest friends might dole out some advice for me, I pour my heart out like a teenage girl. "I even dreamt of her last night."

Xandros gazes at me thoughtfully. "Maybe she's your fated mate."

Laughter erupts from Hernon, and his eyes glint with goading. "Yeah, that's it. Fated mate. Riiiiight. She's your one true love."

Everyone laughs.

Fated mate. *Pfft.*

I roll my eyes. "Come on man, don't tell me you actually believe in that nonsense?"

The idea of fated mates is folklore. Stories the older generations tell and try to pass off as real to the younger ones, the shifters still naïve enough to believe in them.

"Quit fucking around. What do I do?" I'm eager for any advice.

"Hmm..." Waylon, ever the smartass, cocks a brow. "Maybe try wooing her

with your charm and charisma."

Xandros coughs a laugh. "I don't know about charm or charisma, but he's got about five hundred pounds of animal magnetism."

Why'd I ask these assholes?

Lake strokes his chin. "How about you surprise her with a gift like flowers or a cute little stuffed animal?"

Hernon snort-laughs. "Yeah, slip her your cute little teddy bear."

"You dickheads don't know anything about women. Forget I asked and just shut the fuck up."

They don't though. They keep ribbing me.

"Seriously. With friends like you who needs enemies?" I grumble.

Deep down, I'm stumped. Cait seems interested in me but also seems to shun anything remotely romantic. I've made an attempt, but for some reason, she insists on shutting me down.

I'll find a way, though. I have to.

As we each shift into our beast and take off running through the trees, I find myself considering some possibilities.

What if fated mates *are* real?

What if Cait is my fated mate?

What if what I'm feeling with her is the mate bond?

Folklore or not, the thought of Cait being my fated mate comforts me.

As the night grows darker, and the stars twinkle brighter, I know one thing for sure—whatever this thing is between Cait and me, it's beyond normal attraction.

Chapter 7

Cait



Why does the man invade my dreams? Isn't it enough he monopolizes my every waking thought? Why do I have to wake up breathless, my skin tingling with unfulfilled desire?

Sunlight filters through the curtains, and I rub the sleep from my eyes.

Shaking my head, I throw off the covers. "Get a grip, Callahan. He's just a man."

A very large, very hot, very powerful man, with kind eyes, and a gentle smile. And a tight ass.

I head to the bathroom and splash cold water on my face then stare at my reflection in the mirror. "You're here to do your job. Focus."

Easier said than done. Every time Silas is around, my traitorous libido kicks into overdrive. His scent—all woody and spice—lingers long after he's gone, and his deep, rumbling voice causes my vagina to clench.

Huffing out a breath, I pull my rebellious curls into a ponytail. My behavior is bordering on ridiculous. Silas is just being friendly, a gracious host welcoming me to his hometown and helping to ease the introduction process between the men and women.

Yes, he's maybe a little flirty. But this is the 21st century. Flirtatiousness means nothing. They teach it on TikTok.

And yet, the thought of seeing him again kicks up a swarm of butterflies in

my stomach. My attraction to Silas could turn out to be a problem. I need to remain impartial as I work pairing potential brides with prospective grooms.

A pang of jealousy causes my chest to seize at the thought of Silas marrying one of the women in the group, perhaps starry-eyed Daisy...or the blonde with the Georgian accent, Luann.

How am I supposed to do my job with my heart and body betraying me at every turn? This is going to be more complicated than I imagined.

I finish getting ready for the day, vowing I will do my job no matter the challenges. Even if those challenges come in the form of a sexy, 6'4" mountain of a man named Silas Orso.

Later that evening, I'm putting the finishing touches on our movie night under the stars. I have blankets scattered around the lawn along with inflatable sofas and chaise lounges.

After ensuring everyone has everything they need, I settle down on a blanket with a bowl of popcorn, determined to ignore the towering man milling about making my pulse race and my knees weak.

My resolution lasts all of about five minutes.

Silas settles down beside me, his thigh nearly brushing mine. "Everything okay?" His voice is deep and resonant and, as he stares at me, I swear his nostrils flare. Is he *smelling* me?

Scooting away a few inches, I squeeze my thighs together and busy myself with the popcorn while my attempt to ignore the lust rocketing through me proves futile. "Fine. Just enjoying the movie."

"Hmm." Silas's gaze burns into my profile. "You seem...distracted."

Making an effort to appear nonchalant, I laugh, but it sounds forced and a little psychotic—more like a high-pitched cackle. "Don't be ridiculous. I'm focused on the—oh!"

Silas pulls the bowl from my fingers. Why does that barbaric move turn me on? I'm not attracted to barbarians. Am I? A flash of heat rushes through me, making me want to fan myself.

"You were saying?" His voice contains a trace of amusement.

"I, um—" I struggle for a response, my cheeks flaming. I avoid looking at him, but I'm all too aware of his large form next to me. "The movie. I'm enjoying the movie."

"Are you?" Silas sets the popcorn aside and leans in close enough for me to feel his warm breath against my neck. "Because you seem more focused on trying to ignore me." Busted.

I stiffen. This is all wrong. Getting involved with him is stupid and wrong. Very wrong. Alarm bells clang in my head—wrongety-wrongety-wrong-wrong.

"Like I said, don't be ridiculous." I scoot away until several feet separate us. "I'm here to do a job, and that job is to make sure that every one of these women is happy, not..."

"Not what?" His gaze is intense enough to scorch my skin. "Not make yourself happy?"

My mouth is suddenly a parched, barren desert. "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to." He chuckles dryly and runs a hand through his hair. "Cait, I tried my best to mingle with the other women, but no matter how hard I try, the only woman I see, the only woman who interests me, the only woman I want, is you."

My heart melts...

And panic sets in, strangling my breath. This can't be happening. No. I have a life, a career—okay, not much of a life or a career, but I made a vow to myself when I was still a girl that I would never allow a man to derail me. I'd never allow a man into my heart. Men ruin women. I certainly have never before had trouble flat-out rejecting any man. Until now.

This man...this man threatens that vow. Silas seems to be the only man on earth I have trouble resisting.

"I won't pressure you." Silas's voice is gentle and full of promise. "But I want you to know...ah, hell, I'm gonna pressure you. I am."

My heart pounds as Silas leans closer, his gaze dropping to my lips. Every nerve in my body tingles with anticipation. Softly cupping my cheek, Silas tenderly brushes his lips against mine in a tentative caress. My eyes flutter closed, and I fall. Like Alice falling down the rabbit hole into Wonderland, I lose myself in his kiss.

It doesn't end. Silas grips my head when he slides his tongue into my mouth and I revel in the sensation, in the taste of him.

My hands find their way to his broad shoulders, as my nipples respond to his kiss by puckering so tightly they nearly shred holes in my blouse. One arm wraps around my waist to pull me flush up against his hard-muscled body and I moan into his mouth when his rock-hard erection digs against my core.

I can't seem to think straight as I arch my back and move against him. *What the hell am I doing?* He presses me firmly to him and rocks me back and forth, stimulating me.

I moan again, throwing caution to the wind. *What is happening?*

Waves of desire course through me.

I dreamt of this kiss, but in this case, reality far surpasses imagination.

All too soon, Silas pulls away, resting his forehead against mine. His kiss-swollen lips are curved into a smile that steals my breath. "I don't want to stop, but we might steal an audience from the movie."

I'm still dazed.

And then reality comes crashing down around me like a meteor shower—little meteorites bonk me in the head.

"I can't do this." I blink back tears. "I won't give up everything— give up my very identity—for any man."

"What?" Silas's expression sobers. "I would never ask you to. But Cait," he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, "you deserve to be happy, to find love. I only want a chance to prove that I can be the man to give it to you."

My chest tightens with an equal measure of longing and abject terror. My attraction to Silas is undeniable, but am I willing to take the risk?

I want to say no, but I can't seem to force the word past my lips. And that terrifies me more than anything.

Chapter 8

Silas



Most days I find sanctuary in the sun-dappled forest, but today it offers no peace. My bear is clawing beneath my skin, eager to break free and claim what is his.

Cait.

Now I know who she really is to me. She has to be. My fated mate—there's no other explanation for the woman who tempts me beyond reason.

Leaning against the rough bark of an oak, my hands clench into fists. The memory of Cait's soft curves and teasing smile haunt me, as do the memories of her lips pressed to mine and her taste exploding on my tongue.

“Dammit.” I slam a fist into the tree, bark splintering under my knuckles.

Cait's sent me nothing but mixed signals. One moment she's in my arms kissing me with a fervor that shakes me to the core, the next she's an ice queen.

Does she feel the connection between us as strongly as I do? Or am I just a diversion while she's in town to do her job?

I drag a hand through my hair gritting my teeth against the annoying ache in my gut. Okay, the ache is a little farther south than that.

I have to find a way to convince her.

I also want to tell her the truth about myself before this progresses any

further.

It goes against the edict. None of us are supposed to reveal our shifter nature to any of the human women unless and until they agree to a signed commitment.

But in this case, it has to be done, doesn't it?

What if she recoils from you?

What if she looks at you with fear, disgust, and revulsion in those beautiful sapphire eyes?

"I can't lose her," I whisper to the silent woods as I head toward a stream to the east.

Suddenly I pick up a strange scent—earthy with a hint of musk. The scent is faint but unmistakable. Foreign, yet familiar. My eyes narrow. My muscles tense. A wolf shifter.

I'm clearly in bear clan territory. What is a wolf doing in these parts? Is it random? Maybe a pup wandered off and got lost. The scent is so faint it's hard to say.

A twig snaps behind me, and I whirl around, surprised that I allowed anyone to sneak up on me.

Cait steps from the shadows, her cheeks flushed. "Did I interrupt something?" Her gaze flicks to my bleeding knuckles and her brow creases in concern.

I clasp my hands behind my back, hiding the wounds. I'm grateful I hadn't already stripped off my clothes to shift. I'm having a hard enough time convincing her to give me a chance. Trying to explain why I'm walking around the woods naked probably wouldn't help my cause any.

"Just talking to myself."

A corner of her mouth quirks up. "Bad habit." She takes a step closer, close enough for me to catch a whiff of her sweetness. "I was looking for you."

"Were you?" Hope flares as our eyes meet.

“I was thinking...” She wets her lips, and my gaze follows the movement like a starving man. I can scent her arousal in the air and it drives me wild. “We have some unfinished business.”

She smiles seductively.

“Are you saying what I think you are?” What changed her mind? Does it matter right now?

I prowl closer to her until she’s backed against a tree, my hands planted on either side of her head. Her chest rises and falls rapidly, but she doesn’t pull away.

My bear is roaring like a feral beast, and I’m not far behind him.

I want nothing more than to strip her clothes off and pleasure her until she screams, but even though I can scent her arousal, it doesn’t mean she’s ready to accept me into her body.

“I need to hear you say it. Are you saying you want me to—”

She lifts onto her tiptoes and brushes her lips over mine. Then she says the most glorious words I’ve ever heard, “Yes, Silas, I want you to fuck me.”

The last of my restraint shatters.

I capture her mouth in a searing kiss, pouring all my pent-up need and desire into it. She responds instantly, her hands tangling in my hair as she opens for me. Our tongues dance and duel, tasting and teasing.

I grow low in my throat and slide my hands down to cup her ass, lifting her off her feet. Her legs wrap around my waist, the apex of her thighs pressed tight against my erection.

“Too many clothes.” Her hands grip my shirt and she tries to tear it off. Laughing, I help her.

Cait rakes her nails down my back. The sting only fuels my hunger for her. I need to be inside of her, lay claim to her as irrevocably as she’s claimed me.

In between greedy kisses, I work my belt loose from its buckle then shove my pants down.

She's not wearing a bra, so when I grip the bottom of her shirt in one fist and yank it over her head, she's naked from the waist up. Her gorgeous breasts are a sight to behold and they take my breath away. My cock aches.

I kiss, lick, and nibble down her throat and chest until I take one of her plump nipples into my mouth. Her breasts are large and soft, and after her head rolls back and a moan escapes her lips, I kiss across to the other nipple running my tongue over it the same way, taking note of what she likes.

I have to put her on her feet so she can remove her pants, but as soon as she hurriedly slides her jeans and panties down and kicks them off, her eyes trail down my body and stop on my dick. When her pupils dilate and she licks her lips, my chest puffs in pride that I can elicit such a reaction from her.

I lift her again so her legs are wrapped around my waist.

Her lips are red from our kisses.

She rotates her hips under me so my dick rests right against her pussy.

"Silas, please." She guides me to her entrance, slick and ready. "I want you so bad right now."

Her wet heat calls to me and, although I tell myself to go slow, to let her adjust to my length and girth, I can't hold back. In one powerful thrust, I seat myself deep inside her.

We both cry out at the exquisite sensation. She's heaven. I hold still for a moment, savoring the feel of her wrapped around me like a warm sheath. Her legs lock behind my back.

"Move." She rolls her hips. Her demand brings a grin to my lips. My feisty little mate. I like that.

I pull out slowly and drive back in. Her eyes roll back in her head, and I want nothing more than to please her. She's mine. She might not know it yet, but she is.

She sucks my tongue into her mouth, and I nearly explode. Thrusting into her harder, I do everything I can to make it last longer. She's so tight, though. So perfect. Her body squeezes me exquisitely.

When her head tilts back exposing her neck to me, and I rake my teeth down it, I'm overcome by an overwhelming urge to sink my canines into her tender flesh. To mark her.

My bear demands I claim her as our own.

Realization slams into me. Our kind marks our mates, sure. My parents wore claiming marks, as do other mated couples, but this... this is... I didn't know it was like this—an irresistible urge.

Is this the mate bond? I never believed in it before, but I sure do now.

My control is hanging by a thread as she starts to orgasm. I turn my face away so she doesn't see my eyes glow as my bear gets closer to the surface.

“Silassss!” The sound of my name on her lips sends me over the edge. With a roar, I spill my seed inside her, my hips jerking erratically until I'm spent.

It's the strongest orgasm of my life, and my heart is trying to beat its way out of my chest.

Breathless, sated, and still intimately joined, I take her to the ground with me. Cait curls into my side, her head pillowed on my chest.

“That was... Incredible.” She releases a contented sigh.

I press a kiss to the top of her head, unable to stop the smile that spreads across my face. Whatever else happens, in this perfect moment, I have her. And for now, that's enough.

Cait stretches with a satisfied groan and moves to stand, but I tighten my arms around her. “Not yet,” I murmur. “Stay.”

She nestles closer for a moment but gently extricates herself from my embrace. “As much as I'd love to stay wrapped up like this all day, I need to get back before one of the potential brides-to-be comes looking for me.”

With an exaggerated sigh, I sit up. I watch Cait dress with open admiration, committing every curve and hollow to memory.

She straightens her clothes, finger combs her hair, and when she has herself in some semblance of order, turns back to me with a raised brow.

“Well? Are you going to get dressed or simply lounge there in all your glory all day?”

I grin, unrepentant, and slowly rise to my feet. “Just enjoying the view.”

Rolling her eyes, she tosses me my clothes. “Get dressed, you ridiculous man.” But her lips twitch, and I sense her barely suppressed smile.

As we walk back together, hands tangled and shoulders brushing, an easy silence falls between us, broken only by the crunch of leaves under our feet and the chirp of birds in the branches overhead.

When the cabins come into view, Cait gently pulls her hand from mine. The loss of contact is like a physical blow, but not nearly as crushing as what she says next.

“That, what we just did, was only to tame the sexual tension between us. Now that it’s over, it can never happen again.” Her eyes are somewhat apologetic but determined.

That’s what she thinks.

I force myself not to react. I don’t even respond.

Whatever this is between us, a quick fuck in the woods didn’t tame it. Not in the least. If anything, it’s wilder than ever.

Cait clearly isn’t ready to share what we have with the rest of the world yet, but I’m a patient man. I’ll wait.

Chapter 9

Cait



Guilt twists my stomach into knots as memories of the previous night come flooding back.

I bury my face in my hands with a groan, even as my body aches deliciously in places I didn't even know could ache. Silas's scent still clings to me, woody and masculine, reminding me of our shared passion.

I shouldn't have given in to temptation. I thought it was the best remedy. I thought we would have sex, get it out of our system, and I would stop thinking about him every freaking minute of every freaking day. Wrong.

Sitting up, I clutch the sheet to my chest. The way I behaved last night was completely inappropriate. Silas is intent on finding a bride, not having a fling with the bride recruiter.

I swallow hard as flashes of memory assault me: Silas shirtless, his muscular torso covered in dark hair trailing down to the long, thick cock jutting out below... Silas's hands and mouth hungrily exploring every inch of my body...pleasure exploding through me over and over again.

I flop back against the pillows, once more craving his touch.

You are in so deep.

As I glance out the window of my cabin, the sunlight bouncing off the mountain peaks bathes the entire valley in golden hues. A group hiking trip is on today's agenda. It will be a chance to explore the scenic wilderness surrounding Mystic Hollow, and for the bride and groom candidates to get

closer to their potential significant others.

I shower and dress, pushing my guilt-riddled thoughts aside as I assume my professional demeanor.

We all meet for breakfast at Mama's Den before the hike. I make it a point to sandwich myself between Baylin and Alice so there's no available chair anywhere near me.

A frantic woman with her hair wrapped in a silk scarf bustles over to our table looking frazzled and overwhelmed. She pulls an order pad from a pocket in her apron. "Hello, what can I get you ladies?"

I open my mouth to order pancakes with extra butter and syrup when her order pad slips from her fingers and falls to the floor.

She lets out a harried sigh. "Oh, lordy, it's been one of those mornings. One of those weeks, really. I can't seem to get anything right."

"New job?" Baylin smiles sympathetically.

"Something like that." The woman swipes the back of her hand over her forehead. "I just bought this place, and I'm trying to learn the ropes."

"Oh, are you Mama?" We all stare at Alice questioningly. Realizing all eyes are on her, Alice slinks a little lower in her seat. "Well the place is called Mama's Den, I just thought...maybe..."

"I'm Louise." The woman smiles sweetly at Alice.

Just as Louise bends over to retrieve her order pad, ass in the air, a loud crack rings out above the murmur of conversation and clatter of silverware.

We all look over to see a red-faced Hernon holding a broken chunk of Formica tabletop in his hand.

Louise scowls and points at Hernan with her ballpoint pen. "You're paying for that."

They stare at one another for several seconds. Not sure what's going on between the two of them, but something certainly is.

As we eat, I do my best to avoid Silas but feel my cheeks flame every time I

catch him gazing at me with those smoldering eyes.

Why does he have to be so blasted hot? And why do I find his overbearing possessiveness oddly endearing?

During breakfast, and later as we hike up the ridge, I'm pleased to see that it looks as though many of the men and women have paired off into couples.

Good. Happy pairings equate to job success.

I lag behind the others, needing a little space to clear my head. In the midst of my brooding, a large hand curls around my upper arm. I stiffen, and my heart leaps at the familiar touch.

“We need to talk,” Silas says.

I wiggle out of his grip. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

He cocks a brow and steps in front of me, blocking the trail. “Yes, there is. You’re ignoring me again. You won't talk to me. You won't even look at me. And I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“Sounds like a *you* problem.” I try to push past him, but he refuses to budge. “Move, Silas.”

“Not until you admit that this thing between us is real.” He cups my chin, lifting my face and forcing me to meet his gaze. “I don't know what has you so scared, but I'd like to know. There’s no way you don’t feel this with the same intensity I do. No way.”

His words liquefy my knees, turning my legs to Jell-O. I grip his forearms to remain standing. “It doesn’t matter what I feel or what you feel. You’re looking for a commitment—marriage, wife, kids, the whole nine yards, and I don’t do relationships.”

“At this point, Cait, the only thing I’m looking for is you.” He brushes his thumb over my lower lip. “You’re my person, Cait. My fate, my destiny, and I won’t let you go without a fight.”

Fate? Destiny? Holy exploding ovaries, Batman.

My breath hitches at the conviction in this tone, and a fragile tendril of hope

tries to unfurl in my chest.

Just then, Silas comes in for the kill, crushing his mouth to mine. Desire and possession in every stroke of his tongue. I'm powerless to resist, and I melt against him, my fingers entwining in his hair as I give myself over to this man.

When we finally break apart, we're both panting.

"We should get back to the others," I say hoarsely, but my actions contradict my words. Rather than release him, I nibble his lower lip. "In just a minute."

"Cait," he murmurs. The way he says my name, like a sacred whisper, only heightens my desire. "Woman, you're going to be the death of me."

I slide my hands under his shirt, splaying my fingers over his ridged abs and the soft furring of hair below his navel.

With a growl, he grabs my wrists and pins them above my head and against the rockface. "Behave, or I'll have to punish you."

Excitement ripples through me. "Is that a promise?"

"Minx." His tongue licks up the curve of my neck and he takes my earlobe between his teeth. "I'll spank your cute little ass red."

"Promises, promises." I wriggle against him, my nipples aching with need and desire drenching my core.

I briefly consider putting a stop to this, but Silas's hold on my wrists is almost as arousing as his erection pressing insistently against my belly.

I arch into him, thrilling at the evidence of his need, and Silas sucks in a sharp breath.

"Kiss me again," I beg. "Please?"

"One more," he bites out. "Then we'll talk."

"One kiss," I agree softly.

He takes my mouth in a searing kiss that obliterates my senses. By the time he raises his head, we are again gasping for breath.

“That wasn’t just one kiss,” I accuse.

“You drive me to madness, woman.” Silas releases my wrists, only to sweep me into his arms. In three quick moves, he carries me into a copse of trees where we are somewhat hidden behind a cascade of vibrant green leaves and has me pressed against the nearest cypress with my shorts and panties on the ground next to me.

I gasp. “What are you doing?”

“Taking what’s mine.” His voice is low and gravelly.

He unfastens his jeans, releases his cock, and seconds later, he’s thrusting into me, stretching me, and filling me so exquisitely that I see stars.

My fingernails dig into his shoulders as he pumps. His thrusts are rough and primal. I meet each powerful stroke, clinging to him as the familiar tingle shoots through me like sparklers on the Fourth of July.

Silas growls against my neck, his rhythm faltering. I throw my head back with a barely stifled cry, shattering around him as he finds his own release.

For a long moment, the only sound is that of our ragged breathing. I stroke his hair, my heart thundering.

Silas lifts his head, a smile curving his lips. “I got a bit carried away there. I honestly just wanted to talk.”

With weak limbs, I step into my panties and shorts. “I’m not complaining.”

“Good. Because there’s more where that came from.”

I grin, but the worry that has been gnawing at me only intensifies. As casual sex goes, Silas is fantastic. Amazing. The best sex of my life.

But I told myself I was going to stay away from him, and this doesn't feel casual. Not at all.

As we hastily straighten ourselves and catch up with the group, I can’t help but feel something profound stirring within me. A connection that is frighteningly real, a feeling that I never anticipated experiencing at all ever, much less here in the small town of Mystic Hollow.

Silas is like a wrecking ball. If I don't stop him, he'll swing into my life and smash it to smithereens.

Maybe...I should let him.

Chapter 10

Silas



“And I smelled it again when we were out on the ridge. The scent was faint. He knew enough to keep downwind, but the odor was unmistakable.”

The others stare at me grimly.

Sprawled out on chairs and the leather sofa in my office, my officers are gathered to discuss the wolf shifter (shifters?) hanging around our territory.

“There was a report of another sighting near town again today,” Xandros informs us.

The neighboring wolf pack isn’t exactly a sworn enemy of our clan, but our bear clan and their wolf pack aren’t friendly by any means.

My protective instincts rear to life. Continued sightings—and scentings—of members of a rival pack, means a potential threat to my clan, my town...and my woman.

Hernon leans forward. “Do you think the wolf pack is planning something? An attack, maybe? Do you think we’re in danger?”

“I don’t know.” I rub my brow. “But we can’t take any chances, especially not with human females in town.”

“They’re soft and weak.” Lake nods. “We have to protect the females.”

Waylon frowns “The council won’t be happy if anything goes wrong with their fledgling program, either.”

“Agreed.” I sigh, meeting each of their eyes. “Stay alert and report any suspicious activity ASAP.”

The uninvited presence feels like a bad omen. Is the wolf pack intent on sabotaging the BfB program? Perhaps they’re trying to spy on our activities and events to replicate the program for their pack.

Is the wolf pack suffering the same lack of female offspring as our clan is? Maybe I need to put out some feelers and find out.

The discussion spreads unrest among us. Each of us wears an expression of determination, our inherent duty to protect our clan evident in our tense postures.

As the others leave my office, Xandros holds back.

“Something on your mind, Xandros?” I ask my second in command.

He shrugs, picks up a paperweight, tosses it back and forth from his left to his right hand, and plops himself in the chair facing my desk. “I was gonna ask you the same thing.”

My closest friend, Xandros always did seem to be able to sense when something was bothering me.

I let out a labored sigh and hand Xandros the parchment that was delivered by messenger to my office this morning.

Xandros shakes his head as he unrolls the piece of parchment. “I can never understand why they don’t just pick up a cell phone and make a call. Or better yet, text.”

My jaw ticks as he reads the message.

“Oh, shit.” He looks up to meet my eyes.

“My sentiments exactly.”

I rub my chest attempting to soothe the tightening behind my breastbone.

“They are demanding that I be the first to marry.” My teeth clench.

“On the bright side, they’re giving you a deadline of, what, two days?”

Xandros mutters sarcastically. Then his eyes soften. “Well, there are a lot of

fine prospects to choose from.”

I shake my head emphatically. “Only one matters.”

Xandros nods knowingly. “Cait.”

“My heart chooses her. My bear chooses her. I choose her.” I slam my fist on the desk before meeting my friend’s eyes. “I know we all used to think the elders were pulling our legs when they talked about fated mates. We thought it was bullshit. But I swear to you, Cait is my fated mate. I know she is.”

“Well, you have two days to convince her of that.” Xandros stands and I spot sorrow in his eyes...and something else...regret, maybe? He clasps my shoulder. “My advice? Fight for her. If she’s truly your fated mate, fight brother.”

I want to ask what’s causing his melancholy but I know him as well as he knows me, and my second is clearly not ready to talk about it.

“I understand why, as Alpha, they expect me to be the first to choose a mate. But I can’t fathom choosing any other woman. Cait is mine.”

The intense attraction between us is clear, why the hell is she so guarded?

I nod and straighten my spine in steely determination. “I’ll fight for Cait.” I’ll win her over somehow. I have to.

My fated mate is within reach. I just need to work harder to convince her of our connection.

Fuck.

I told myself I’d be patient. I said I’d wait.

That was before.

My timeline has just significantly sped up.

Chapter 11

Cait



“B-14. That’s B-14.”

Laughter and chatter echo through Mystic Hollow Community Center as the bride and groom candidates enjoy game night.

“I-25. I repeat, I-25.” As I call out bingo numbers, from the corner of my eye I keep track of Silas. He’s engaged in a competitive bout of Pictionary.

Something about his demeanor is different tonight. His smile doesn't quite reach his eyes, and he seems lost in thought.

Unlike the previous few days, he's given no indication today of harboring any feelings for me. He’s acting as though our intimate encounters were nothing more than casual diversions.

Why does my heart ache at that? It's what I asked for, isn't it?

Earlier, during a round of charades when Waylon enacted a bear by walking on all fours and roaring, all the rest of us laughed hysterically. I watched Silas, though. His face was expressionless, but his eyes focused on his friend with sharp intensity.

There’s a shadow of worry in his eyes that wasn’t there yesterday.

“Bingo!” Andie, a tall brunette, waves her hands in the air excitedly.

I’m only half paying attention as Andie brings her card up for confirmation of a win. I’m still preoccupied with Silas.

That's when something bizarre happens.

One of the bride candidates trips and her hip slams against the edge of a table. I watch the table wobble, some of the game pieces fall off onto the floor, and a mug of cider nearly spill. *Nearly* spill.

Silas moves faster than lightning—faster than any man should be able to. His hand shoots out and catches the mug before its contents spill onto Herson's lap.

My mouth hangs open in surprise and I gasp. How did he move so quickly?

Normally, a move like that might be attributed to fast reflexes. Normally.

But Silas's movement is *too* quick, *too* precise, *too*...unnatural.

That's not the bizarre part, though.

For a moment, just a moment, I swear I see Silas's hand and forearm covered in soft brown fur before it returns to normal.

I blink, rub my eyes, and tell myself it's just a trick of the light.

Everyone laughs off the incident, praising Silas for his quick reflexes, but they weren't watching him like I was. They didn't see what I saw, and I can't shake the feeling that I witnessed something...something...not quite human.

Silas shrugs his shoulders like it was nothing, and sets the mug on the table.

Everyone is still laughing at Herson's reaction to the near-disaster, but then Andie speaks up.

"That was amazing Silas," she gushes. "If you hadn't caught that cup it would have been an enormous mess." I swear her damn eyelashes flutter and she juts her lip out so it's all pouty.

Bitch.

She looks at him like he's Zeus himself, god of thunder, descended from his throne on Olympus to hobnob with us mere mortals, and I feel my stomach twist in jealousy when her hand rests on his arm.

Until Silas brushes it off without sparing her so much as a glance.

Instead, he looks over at me with a furrowed brow. Does he know what I'm thinking? Does he wonder if I saw what I think saw?

Hell, *I* wonder if I saw what I think I saw.

The rest of the evening passes in a blur. I find myself stealing glances at Silas, studying his movements, his reactions. After the *incident*, every so often, I catch him watching me, his eyes holding a look of intensity, almost as though he's struggling with some inner turmoil.

The laughter and joy around me seem distant, and I feel a knot of unease tighten my stomach. Am I just being paranoid, letting my imagination run wild? Or is there something more here?

Later, I lay awake in my bed staring at the cabin's wooden ceiling. Thoughts whirl around in my mind, refusing to quiet. Silas is at the heart of them. His handsome face, his charismatic charm, and now this...strangeness that I can't explain.

Images of Silas's hand and arm, momentarily covered in fur flash in my mind again and again. It can't be real. It must have been an optical illusion, maybe a shadow. Yet, a tiny voice in the back of my mind nags me, whispering doubts and uncertainties.

Torn between my insane attraction to Silas and my mounting suspicion, I toss and turn for hours.

Did I see what I think I saw?

Should I follow my heart or listen to my head where Silas is concerned?

And more importantly, can I trust my heart when my mind screams danger?

Chapter 12

Silas



I straighten the bowtie of my tux as I cross the darkened street toward the community center. It's been transformed into a grand ballroom for tonight's formal dance and the glow from inside spills out onto the sidewalk, illuminating the area in a warm, inviting light.

I step through the doors and into a world of glamor and sophistication. Sparkling lights are strung across the ceiling, casting a soft, twinkling glow over the room and a live band is playing creating an enchanting ambiance.

I am immediately surrounded by females. My eyes search for Cait but I don't see her amid the throng of women, and the realization is like a punch to the gut.

Fingers rake down my chest. "Oh, Silas, is this Armani you're wearing? It looks sooo sexy." The blonde eyes me up and down like I'm a mannequin in a shop window.

I shrug her off.

A petite brunette steps firmly between us. "Silas, come dance with me." Her emerald eyes sparkle with mischief.

Cait is nowhere to be found and the council's decree looms over me, a reminder of the choice I have to make. The thought of choosing a woman other than Cait feels vile and repugnant.

"Excuse me, ladies. You're barking up the wrong tree here. I'm already taken." Curt? Maybe, but I see no reason to give anyone false hope.

I have to find Cait. Tonight I'm going to finally have that talk with her. I rehearsed it in the mirror at least twenty times, so I should be good.

I think. Maybe.

As I sidestep the growing circle of women, I hear grumbles of disappointment. I don't care.

I scan the venue trying to catch sight of Cait...even a whiff of her scent, anything.

My fists clench as my eyes scan the dance floor. Seeing her in the arms of another man is not a thought I can bear. It's as foul to me as the concept of me being with another woman. Where is she? The silent longing for her becomes a deafening roar in my mind, overwhelming my senses.

Where is my mate?!

Finally, through the glass doors near the rear of the room, I catch a glimpse of red hair. She's outside.

My feet move in her direction, and I cut through the crowd like a determined predator.

The fairy light-strewn garden is a picture of serenity. And Cait stands alone under the stars, her gown shimmering in the soft light. The scent of night air and damp earth fills my nostrils, but it's overpowered by her wildflower aroma that I've come to crave. I'm drawn to her as inevitably as a moth to a flame.

Feeling my hand on her arm, she spins and her surprised eyes meet mine.

"Cait, we need to talk." My voice is low and surprisingly steady.

She hesitates. Her eyes study me warily. "About what?"

"About us." I meet her gaze.

She lets out a sigh. "Okay, we'll talk, but only on one condition."

"Anything, name it."

"I want you to answer a question first, and I want you to be one hundred

percent honest.”

I nod. “Go ahead, ask.”

“What are you?”

I know what she's asking, and I don't know what raised her suspicions about my shifter side, but I'm prepared to give her the truth. To hell with the council's edict. My mate comes first, and she deserves to know everything about me.

As I open my mouth to tell her, with my heart pounding in my chest, I catch, out of the corner of my eye, a dark shape emerging from the treeline. At that exact moment, an earthy, musky scent drifts on the breeze. My hackles rise.

Wolf.

He's in human form, but the scent is undeniable. He's a wolf shifter. *The* wolf shifter. Time slows. My instinct to protect my mate, to shield her, grips me. My bear roars with a bloodthirsty, savage ferocity.

Protect our mate!

Before I can think rationally, my bear seizes control. One second I'm a man dressed in formal wear, the next, a huge grizzly bursts from my skin, shredding my tuxedo to ribbons.

A murderous warcry erupts from my lungs, reverberating through the night air as I launch my half-ton self toward the intruder.

The wolf's yellow eyes glow ominously under the moon, a snarl twisting his snout. He's not backing down. Well, neither am I.

As I near, the wolf doesn't hesitate. He lunges for me, gnashing his razor-sharp teeth. My size and strength surpass his, and I meet his charge with fangs bared and claws extended.

We collide with an earth-shattering impact—a whirl of fur and fangs and claws. The wolf goes for my throat, but I use my superior bulk to roll us over, pinning him to the ground. He squirms beneath me, snapping his jaws in a desperate attempt to land a bite.

I let out a guttural growl, warning the fucker to back off, but it continues to struggle, twisting beneath me in a frenzy of fur and fangs until he breaks free.

With a powerful swipe of my paw, I send the wolf skidding across the ground. He springs back to his feet, the snarl never leaving his maw.

He lunges again, but this time I'm ready. I swipe a massive paw again, catching him mid-leap, but as I do, he clamps down on my paw and his fangs sink into my flesh. It takes me a few tries, but I shake him off.

He yelps and tumbles away, quickly scrambling again to his feet.

Ignoring the throbbing of my bloodied paw, I charge. The wolf barely has time to react before I slam into him and my jaws clamp down on his throat. But the wolf twists away again, the wily fucker, and my teeth end up only grazing him.

He retaliates, aiming for my jugular, but I dodge just in time and he ends up with a mouthful of fur.

It's a dangerous dance, a brutal ballet under the moonlight. The garden, once an oasis of peace, echoes with our snarls and growls. We circle each other, raw, primal energy crackling in the air.

With a final howl, the wolf charges me and we collide again in a clash of teeth and claws, but this time, I manage to get a solid grip on its shoulder. I sink my teeth in, a roar vibrating through me. The wolf whimpers, squirming in my grasp, but I hold firm until it finally breaks free, darting into the woods dripping blood.

I briefly consider chasing him, but on the off chance he was a diversion to draw me away and others of his pack are lurking nearby, I remain in place, chest heaving, as I watch him disappear into the treeline.

The night gradually regains its tranquillity and the echoes of our battle fade. Only then, do my tense muscles relax. Only then, on an exhale, do I glance over my shoulder.

My eyes find Cait's, and a rush of panic floods me when I see the expression of horror, of utter devastation, on her face.

Fuuuuck.

I almost shift back. I want to. I want to go to her, to explain, but my tattered tuxedo won't offer any decency.

I watch, helpless, as tears fill my mate's eyes before she turns and runs.

The stabbing anguish hurts far more than the wounds from the fight.

Chapter 13

Cait



My hands tremble as I toss my belongings into the open suitcase on my bed. Thoughts swarm my brain like humming locusts.

Tonight was a parade of inconceivable truths—men turning into bears, into wolves. It's as if the lines between reality and make-believe have blurred.

The image of Silas bursting out of his tuxedo and transforming into an actual, honest-to-god grizzly bear still sends shivers of dread through me. I mean I suspected, but the reality of seeing what I saw right in front of my eyes is altogether something else.

Not to mention the fight with the wolf. It was raw, dangerous, like a scene ripped straight from a blockbuster movie.

I don't even know what to think.

My emotions are chaos.

All I know is I can't stay here. Not now, not when the boundaries of my world have been brutally ripped apart. I've already telephoned a taxi service from the city and a cab is on the way. It should arrive in a few hours. It's somewhat irresponsible of me to leave my job without notice, but at this point, I'm pretty sure I don't want the job anymore. Screw the reference.

I latch my suitcase shut, leave my cabin, and make my way to Baylin's. She opted out of the formal ball tonight for reasons of her own and offered to let me sit with her on the off chance Silas comes looking for me before the taxi gets here. I can't face him. What would I even say? What would he say to

me? Where would we even start?

Baylin is sweet, smart, and has a great sense of humor. We hit it off from the get-go. I have no idea why someone like Baylin is in this program. When I interviewed her, she claimed she was tired of the big city, tired of being single, and fed up with the dating scene in LA. Her answers sounded a bit off, a little too rehearsed, but I took her at her word. We all have our secrets. And, as I learned this evening, some of us have bigger secrets than others. Some of us have huge secrets. Gigantic.

Tonight, Baylin's a nice distraction, but I can't help but notice something is bothering her. She seems sad. Maybe she's changed her mind about an arranged marriage. Hopefully.

I toss around the idea of telling her about the man-beast thing, but she'll probably call me crazy. Maybe I am. But this time, I *know* I saw what I saw. I honestly don't think any of the women are in danger from the men, or I'd say something. Besides, ignorance is bliss.

Baylin agrees to take over for me here in Mystic Hollow just until the BfB can hire a replacement.

My heart is heavy, stubbornly clinging to the past few days I've shared with Silas. Stupid heart.

Then I hear it.

The deep, rumbling voice that can give me delicious goosebumps is calling my name.

"Cait!"

Baylin and I exchange glances.

The sound squeezes my heart in a vice. It's wrought with pain, torment, and despair.

I peer through the curtains at Silas's broad back as he pounds on my cabin door. It rattles so hard with every strike of his fist, it looks like he's going to break it down.

Profound sadness sinks into my bones, taking me by surprise. I'm gripped by

the sorrow of loss and longing. An intense, gut-wrenching sense of loss. I never expected to feel so strongly for Silas, and now, I'm such a coward. I can't even face him.

I need space. I need to think. I need space to think.

Just before dawn arrives, I see the taxi pull into the campground. Baylin is asleep, so I quietly drag my suitcase outside, glancing at my cabin as I make my way to the car. The sight that greets me is a punch to the gut.

Silas, the strong, confident man—or whatever he is—who has my insides in knots is slumped on my porch, asleep. Next to him is the front door that's propped against the outside of the cabin, torn off its hinges.

I can't even explain how much I want to go to him. When I think of the anguish he must be suffering to do this, I ache.

But my thoughts are too jumbled. I need to get out of here. I need to clear my head. I need...

I don't know what I need. Something.

Taking a deep breath, I walk quietly to the taxi that's waiting for me.

As we drive off, I stare through the rear window, watching as Mystic Hollow grows smaller. Goodbye, Silas.

Chapter 14

Silas



The heavy, dense energy of the city is an assault on my senses. Gone is the fresh pine air. The familiar scents and sounds of the wilderness are replaced by exhaust fumes, honking car horns, shouts of strangers, and a police siren wailing a few blocks over. But none of that matters. All that matters is getting her back. Cait.

Even the council's decree has faded into insignificance. Cait is all I care about now.

This might be the wrong move, showing up on Cait's doorstep unannounced, but I have to shoot my shot at least.

As I make my way to the address Lake provided after hacking into the council database, my bear is restless and anxious.

It's quite possible she'll slam the door in my face. If she answers it at all.

I knock on the door and hear rustling on the other side. I clench and unclench my fists in a poor attempt at preserving some form of control.

When the door opens, and Cait stands in front of me bathed in the soft light of her apartment, my breath catches. She's a vision, her crimson curls falling in loose waves around her shoulders, her sapphire eyes widening at the sight of me.

I smile. "I wasn't sure you'd open the door."

My heart does a backflip in my chest when she smiles back. "I wasn't either."

“Can we talk?” My voice sounds rough, desperate even, but I don't care.

I'm relieved when she doesn't hesitate to step aside and usher me in. Does that mean she's not terrified of me? So far so good.

Her apartment is warm and inviting, much like the woman herself.

She closes the door behind us, and I take a deep breath, steadying myself.

“About what you saw—”

She doesn't let me finish. “What the hell are you? Just tell me. I mean I saw you turn into a bear. One second you were a man,” she snaps her fingers in the air, “the next second you were this huge-ass grizzly.”

“Yeah. That's what I'm here to explain. About me, about my clan... about us.” She gives me a puzzled look but motions for us to sit on the sofa. After we do, she remains silent, waiting.

I lean forward detecting curiosity mixed with a hint of uncertainty in her expression.

“We call ourselves shifters. There are different types— different animals. Those of us in Mystic Hollow are bear shifters, meaning we can shift into bears...but I guess you know that.”

There's a long moment of silence during which she stares at me, her lips parted and her eyes wide.

“Can you understand why we keep the secret guarded? Can you forgive me?” I'm on pins and needles. Her answer to that second question holds the power to make or break me.

For a long moment, her eyes search mine. Then, finally, she releases a breath. “So, you're saying that the *whole town* of Mystic Hollow—everyone in the town—is a bear shifter?”

“Yes, everyone.”

“Why did we see so few women in town? Aren't there any women bear shifters?”

“There are female bear shifters, but they're all over forty and they're all

married. There are even children born to many of them, but all the children born in the past forty years have been male."

"Huh. Well, that explains the whole BfB program."

"There's something else I need to explain to you, something about my...our kind."

She blinks, a small frown creasing her forehead. "There's more?!"

"There's more." I run my fingers through my hair praying she'll understand, that she'll accept what I'm about to say. That she'll accept me. "Apparently, each of us has a life partner, a significant other designated by the hand of fate. A fated mate. We all grew up with stories but we... I used to assume fated mates were one of those tall tales the old folks like to weave, you know like when they say Santa Claus will slide down the chimney on Christmas Eve and leave gifts under the tree."

She nods. "Used to? You *used to* assume."

"Until I met you. Now I believe... I *know*, you're mine."

Her eyes widen further, surprise and confusion flashing across her features. But she doesn't pull away, she doesn't shut me out, so that's something.

"Cait, I felt it the moment I saw you. A connection, an irresistible pull. It's more than just attraction, more than just a simple desire. It's like my very soul recognizing its other half in you."

Her breath hitches, and tears fill her eyes. What are the tears for? I see a spark of something. Interest? Fascination? Confirmation? I can only hope.

"I want you to feel the same, to accept not just me, but the bear within me. There are no divorces for shifters. No walking away. I won't force this connection on you. I just... I needed to come here. To explain. I need you to understand."

She stays silent for a while, her mind visibly processing my revelation. Finally, she exhales, a tiny smile tugging at her lips. It's soft, uncertain, but it's there.

"I... I'll be honest here," her voice cracks as she speaks, "the past six hours

have been the longest six hours of my life. The farther away from Mystic Hollow I got, the more everything in me was telling me to turn around and go back. It physically hurt to have so much distance between us."

I breathe a huge sigh of relief as a wave of pure elation sweeps over me.

Without thinking, I tug her into my arms, burying my face in her hair. Our bodies melt into each other, two halves of a whole finding one another again.

"So you understand why I didn't tell you right away? You feel the mate bond too? Does this mean you'll come back to Mystic Hollow with me, this time to stay? "

She nuzzles my chest, her scent and warmth enveloping me. "Yes, yes... and yes."

I chuckle and lift her chin, gazing into her eyes. "We'll never put so much distance between us ever again. Not for anything or anyone."

"It's a deal. You're stuck with me now, Silas Orso."

"Sounds perfect. Now, how about we seal this deal with a kiss?"

Her lips curl in a smile. "I thought you'd never ask."

My mouth captures hers, kissing her with an all-consuming passion as my bear rumbles with contentment at having our mate back where she belongs.

Chapter 15

Cait



When I come awake, Silas's arm is wrapped securely around my waist and his familiar woodsy-spice scent fills the room. I'm nestled against his broad chest, the strong beat of his heart echoing in my ears. It's the most comforting sound I've ever heard.

Silas stirs and his eyes open to meet mine. "Morning." His arm tightens.

"Morning," I echo, tilting my head up to meet his gaze. Those warm, glowing eyes are soft with sleep and something else—possession.

I've never had a man look at me like this, as if I'm his whole world.

Suddenly, a realization crashes over me. Where is it?!

Where's the fear? Where's the anxiety? Where's the panic and dread I usually associate with relationships?

It's...

Not there.

Silas kisses the top of my head. "What are you thinking?"

All I feel is a sense of calm, peace, and joyous anticipation for the future.

"Cait?" His thumb strokes my cheek. "Are you okay?"

"I'm...um... yeah." I stare at him, my heart pounding with excitement.

"Better than okay. I feel...loved." The word tumbles out unscripted and I

want to take it back as soon as it does. *What kind of lovesick fool says the L word after knowing someone for a week?*

A slow, beautiful smile spreads over his face.

“Oh, shit. I said that last part out loud, didn’t I?”

A low chuckle rumbles from his belly. “You did, and you *are* loved, Cait.” He pulls me closer and kisses me—a slow, languid exploration that leaves me breathless and aching for more. “When we get back to Mystic Hollow, I want you to marry me.”

“You’re... proposing?”

Cue the fear, anxiety, panic, and dread...

...nope, nothing.

All I feel is happiness.

No divorces for shifters. No walking away.

Silas lets out a sigh and runs a hand through his hair. “How about I try this again? Cait, *I’m* the lovesick fool. Last week, next week, yesterday, and today. Forever. You’re the one for me. Will you make me the happiest man in the world and agree to not only be my mate but my wife as well?” His eyes shine with sincerity.

The thought of marrying Silas, of committing to him in every possible way feels like the most natural thing in the world.

I nod, too overwhelmed to trust my voice. And in that moment, I’m exactly where I’m meant to be.

Swallowing, I clear my throat. “Yes. Yes to mating; yes to marriage.”

Silas’s calloused palm skims up my thigh, igniting a trail of goosebumps in its wake. “You’re sure?” He nibbles my neck. “There’s no going back. Mating is forever.”

I swallow hard, nodding. “Mm-hmm.” Because really, what choice do I have at this point? My mind says I’m his, my heart says I’m his, and my body says I’m his.

His hand slides higher, fingers slipping between my thighs, teasing, spreading my slickness over the little bundle of nerves in slow circles, lighting me on fire from the inside out.

A low growl rumbles in his chest as I arch into him.

“Mine,” he rasps, nipping at my earlobe.

“Yours,” I whisper back, clutching at his shoulders.

Just when I don't think I can stand it another second, he moves over my body, kissing my neck, my collarbone, and down to my breasts. His fingers and mouth tease my nipples until I'm writhing under him.

“I need to be in you.”

I open my legs to him, surprised when he flips me onto my stomach. I look back at him over my shoulder and feel the weight of his erection rest between my thighs. My core clenches and I bite my lip.

His eyes glow brighter than I've ever seen them. His bear must be right at the surface.

“I want to mark you.” His voice is barely human and I feel a gush of moisture leak between my thighs.

I know what he means. We discussed shifter claiming marks last night. I lift my hips and adjust my position so I can reach under me and line our bodies up. “Do it. Mark me. Claim me.”

A soft growl rumbles in his chest.

He surges forward, flattening my hips, pushing them into the bed as he fills me.

Ahh...perfect angle.

I slide the pillow under my pelvis as he starts up an unforgiving pace. His fingers dig into my hips. His thrusts are punishing as he slams into me again and again.

Just when I think I can't take anymore, he sinks his teeth into the curve where my neck meets my shoulder. A sharp sting, and then bliss. My whole body

shakes with an earth-shattering orgasm.

I'm still riding the waves of my climax when Silas shoots his seed into me and white hot pleasure scorches every nerve ending I possess.

I'm not even sure how long it goes on. I lose track of time. I hear a ringing somewhere, I think.

Gently, Silas runs his tongue over the angry, raw flesh on my neck—his mark. Each time he does, a ripple of pleasure moves through me.

His phone on the nightstand rings. Silas ignores it, too focused on me, and after a few rings, it goes to voicemail, then starts ringing again immediately.

With a sigh, Silas reaches for it and glances at the screen. "Sorry, I have to take this."

He answers, and a frown creases his brow. "Slow down, Xandros. What's going on?"

I study Silas's face, watching his expression morph from confusion to concern. His fingers tighten on my hip. "Right."

He sits up and swings his legs off the bed. "Hold down the fort, I'll be there as soon as I can." Silas hangs up the phone and looks over his shoulder at me, eyes troubled.

"What is it, Silas?"

"Please tell me you didn't resign from BfB."

"No, thank god. I was planning to, but now I don't want to."

"Good. We need to get back to Mystic Hollow right away. "

I sit up, clutching the sheet around me. "What's going on exactly? When I left yesterday it seemed as though everything was going smoothly. I thought a few of the groom candidates had even narrowed down their choices."

"According to Xandros, nothing's going smoothly and we've got a big mess to clean up."

"I never unpacked my suitcase." I slide out of bed, cross to the dresser, and

throw on a T-shirt and yoga pants. "Is it the brides? The grooms? What?"

"Both." He picks my suitcase up from the floor at the end of the bed and heads toward the front door. "You take the brides, I'll handle the grooms."

"Deal." I slip on my shoes and follow him. "Now let's go see what the hell is up with the BfB participants, shall we?"

Epilogue: Silas



A year later

THE HUSHED MURMURS of Mystic Hollow filter through my open office window, punctuated by the occasional rustle of wind as the crisp mountain air passes through the towering pines. Today, for some reason, everything seems brighter, more vibrant. As though nature carries a new promise, a hopeful hum.

I look up from my desk as Cait enters, her sapphire eyes sparkling. There's a happiness in her gaze, a warm familiarity that says she's fallen in love with this place just as much as she has with me. And that makes my heart swell.

"There's a new batch of bride-wannabes coming in today. Maybe the shifters in town can find some fated mates among them." I stand when she rounds my desk, and pull her into my arms.

Cait has continued to oversee the BfB program, which has already made several true mate matches, although admittedly not all have gone smoothly right off the bat. Okay, none of them have gone smoothly right off the bat. Not one.

Cait, however, loves her job and goes at it with the gusto of a woman who

knows firsthand what it's like to be truly loved by a shifter.

Her head tips and her eyes meet mine.

I smooth a few strands of her red hair back and tuck them behind her ear, my fingers lingering on her soft skin. Her lips part slightly as she turns to me, her eyes clouded with desire. The mark on her neck, my claiming mark, calls to me and I lean down, pressing a kiss on the spot. She shivers, and her arms wind around my waist as she responds to my touch.

We're drawn to each other like magnets, and every encounter sparks a deeper bond. She makes me feel invincible, yet vulnerable—powerful, yet so incredibly tender.

"Silas?" She pulls back suddenly, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip. I raise a brow at her, urging her to continue. "Tell me about shifter babies."

I laugh at the unexpected question, not missing the tint of color creeping up her cheeks. "Well, they are like any other babies, just cuter and fluffier." I wink and she pouts adorably.

"No, Silas." Cait slaps my chest. "I mean... Tell me about the gestation. Are they born in skin or fur, single birth or multiples, things like that. And has a human woman ever had a shifter baby before?"

The question hangs between us, the air suddenly electrically charged. I search her face, my heart pounding in my chest. "Cait, are you..." I can't finish the sentence, the possibility is overwhelming.

Her cheeks are crimson now and she's biting her lip again, a surefire sign of her nervousness. "I think... I think I might be pregnant, Silas."

The world seems to freeze for a moment, before restarting at a faster pace. It takes me a moment to process her words, and then I'm whooping for joy, pulling her to me and spinning us around.

"I'm going to be a dad?" I can barely contain the excitement bubbling within me. The love I feel for Cait, our newfound bond, and now a baby. It's all too much, all too perfect.

She giggles, nodding at me, her eyes filled with tears and her face flushed

with radiance. "Yep, we're gonna be parents of a...cute, fluffy bear cub...?"

I pull her to me, kissing her with all the love and passion I feel for this woman.

My wife, my mate, my world.



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Off-Limits Mate

Candace Ayers & Kym Dillon
(Sneak Peek)

Chapter 1

Baylin



The sleek black dress is elegant in its simplicity. Couple it with a pair of silver earrings, and it might just do the trick. I slip into it, arrange the fabric over my curves, and catch my reflection.

Hmm...I chew my lip in contemplation.

"Not bad, Baylin. You could almost pass for a discount drugstore Audrey Hepburn."

I twirl, once, twice, before the grim reality hits me. It's not a 1960s-themed cocktail party. I'm trying to compete with a group of virtual supermodels. One more spin for Audrey, then it's off with the dress.

You know what they say about trying on clothes. It's fun, until it's not. And right now, surrounded by a textile tornado, the vote is leaning toward 'not'.

I stare down my opponent—a full-length mirror with too much honesty and not enough tact.

The silence in the rustic log cabin is only broken by the occasional sound of a discarded hanger hitting the floor.

Confidence, that's the key.

Yet, there I am again, second-guessing my outfit. But honestly, some of these women in the program look like they walked right off the cover of *Vogue*. Against them, I'm like an adorable penguin stranded in the Sahara. I mean, a little bit of wardrobe warfare can't hurt.

Next contender, a casual jeans and blouse combo. Hmm... I add a scarf thinking maybe I'll look artsy. The mirror doesn't agree—too soccer mom.

"Okay, okay." I wave a flag of surrender to my reflection. "We need a different approach."

With a renewed sense of determination, I rifle through my suitcase for another dress—something that screams potential bride, not 'help, I've lost my way to the zoo'.

I find a deep red dress and pair it with delicate gold accessories. It's loose, but somehow alluring. It hides what needs hiding, shows what needs showing—it's the perfect middle-ground.

Except...I catch my reflection again, and there's a niggling doubt at the back of my mind. "Am I too..." My gaze drops to my midsection. "Fat."

Nope, don't go there, Baylin.

But seriously, here I am like some desperate, chubby Cinderella frantically hoping to land myself a hubby before the clock strikes midnight.

It's a crazy plan. Marrying a stranger, and well, consummating said marriage as soon as possible. Yeah, yeah, I know, not the best of ideas, but sometimes, the best ideas are just that—ideas. This is survival.

A tendril of guilt slithers through me. If I'm successful, this won't be fair to the guy.

"If you're successful," I say to my mirror self. "That's a big *if*."

But succeed I must. Because fair or unfair, a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do, right?

I take one final look, smoothing out the fabric of the red dress over my hips, tilting my head in contemplation. Yes, this is it. This dress and I, we're about to take the BfB grooms by storm. I lock eyes with my reflection, but what I see looking back is worry and unease.

"Forget him. He didn't deserve you and he can't touch you if he can't find you."

A sigh escapes me as I think about LA. The city of angels, where I fell from grace. I've got nothing left there—no job, no second chances, nothing. But what I long for isn't a city of angels, it's stability and safety. A place to call home.

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. I've got to believe that everything is going to work out.

Hopes high, I step out of the cabin. This is it.

"Let's do this, Baylin. Let's go find a husband."

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